

TOO GOOD TO BE DAMNED?

The Religious Pluralism and Creedless Faith of the Unitarian Universalists

by Derek R. Keefe



Although unitarianism — the belief that there is only one person in the Godhead — and universalism — the belief that all ultimately will be saved — can be traced to the first few centuries of the Church, the two specific movements that converged to form the Unitarian Universalist Association¹ were born in 18th century America. Unitarianism, in its American manifestation, developed largely in response to key theological underpinnings of the First and Second Great Awakenings. As revival fervor spread, some in the local churches of New England and the Mid-Atlantic states took exception to notions of radical and universal human sinfulness and a wrathful God angered by sin.²

With their more optimistic and “rational” views of God and human nature, Unitarians formed their own congregations, with the designation “Unitarian” indicating their conviction that the doctrine of the Trinity, among other Christian doctrines, was illogical. Early leaders of the American movement were the British Unitarian minister Joseph Priestly and Episcopal minister James Freeman Clarke, but Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing of Boston was the movement’s most important exponent.³ His 1819 sermon, “Unitarian Christianity,” gave the movement its definitive intellectual and theological shape and inspired the formation of American Unitarian Association in 1825.⁴

At roughly the same time that the Unitarian movement was taking shape in America, churches that identified themselves as Universalist were springing up in the South, the Mid-Atlantic, and New England, with the first being the Independent Christian Church of Gloucester, Mass., organized as a Universalist Church under the direction of Methodist excommunicant John Murray in 1779.⁵ Murray, who immigrated to America in 1770, and George de Benneville, who immigrated in 1741, were two of the earliest champions of Universalism in America.⁶ However, the emergence of Universalist preacher and scholar Hosea Ballou in 1800, and the adoption of the *Winchester Profession* in 1803, gave the movement its greatest momentum after it was officially organized in 1793.⁷ The Universalists, who tended to be more evangelistic than Unitarians, labored to spread their message throughout the eastern United States and Canada.⁸

Like Unitarians, early Universalists were bothered by prevailing theological views, which they perceived as painting a rather unflattering view of God and an undesirable future for humanity. In an effort to counter these views, they too put forth more optimistic views of God and humanity, but with a slightly different emphasis than Unitarians, one that is succinctly summarized by later Universalist minister Thomas Starr King: “Universalists believe that God is too

good to damn people, and the Unitarians believe that people are too good to be damned by God.”⁹ In addition, the aforementioned *Winchester Profession*, the standard expression of early American Universalism, promoted Jesus as moral exemplar and leader, and trumpeted “salvation by character.”¹⁰

Throughout the 19th century, adherents of these two movements repeatedly aligned themselves on the same side of theological questions, ethical concerns, and social causes, but showed little enthusiasm for merger.¹¹ By the 20th century, both groups cared less about retaining “Christian” as a self-designation and the narrower theological debates that gave impetus to the movement in its earliest years seemed a thing of the past. Both groups, perhaps because of their theological starting points, had grown increasingly inclusive and pluralistic. However, what had remained constant in both groups from their inception was a profound humanistic orientation that manifested itself in concern for human rights and liberties, political and religious tolerance, social justice, and a general interest in the religious and “meaning-making” activity of humanity. After a series of overtures toward union, the two groups completed their consolidation in May 1961, when the UUA was formed.¹² The UUA now gave the broad humanistic concerns of both groups a united — and therefore stronger — voice.

Understanding UU views concerning the nature of humanity is the key to understanding the UU system of thought.¹³ But before doing this, one must consider the particular methodological difficulties and concerns involved in determining UU views in this or any other area of study.

METHODOLOGY

UUs take great pride in the fact that their faith is “creedless.” Insofar as UUism neither promotes an “official” list of answers to major theological and philosophical questions nor recognizes any book or ecclesiastical official(s) as being the final authority on religious questions, it is without a creed. In UUism, the answers to such questions are determined by the individual. This accounts for the extremely wide range of beliefs — often mutually exclusive — found under the UU designation.

Despite this great diversity in theological particulars, there are indeed some underlying commitments, ideals, and values shared by all UUs. Their primary allegiances are not to specific theological assertions, but to commonly held humanistic values and an open forum for individual religious searching and “meaning-making.”¹⁴ In general, the emphasis in UUism is on the process of belief formation, not the beliefs themselves.

The nature of these shared commitments is best articulated in the UUA Principles and Purposes,¹⁵ which were adopted in 1985. This is the closest thing that UUs have to a creed,

and along with the “six sources,”¹⁶ they constitute the most authoritative articles in all of contemporary UUism. These must be our starting point for understanding UU belief, but because they are so minimal, they cannot be our last if we are to truly understand UU thought. The accompanying box below offers a hierarchy of authority (moving from more to less authoritative) for contemporary UUism according to two different categories: publications and persons.¹⁷ This list gives us at least a start in helping to understand this group.¹⁸

UU DOCTRINE OF HUMANITY

Given the fact that the Principles and Purposes and the “six sources” serve as the most authoritative documents in all of UUism, they will be used as the starting point for this discussion of UU views on the origin, nature, and destiny of humanity. The principles are:

“We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote: The inherent worth and dignity of every person; Justice, equity and compassion in human relations; Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations; A free and responsible search for truth and meaning; The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large; The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all; Re-

spect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

The living tradition we share draws from many sources: Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life; Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love; Wisdom from the world’s religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life; Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God’s love by loving our neighbors as ourselves; Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit; Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision. As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support.”²⁰

SOURCES OF CONTEMPORARY UU THOUGHT

Publications:

1. Principles and Purposes; “six sources”
2. *UU Pocket Guide* — published by UUA
3. UUA Pamphlets; John Sias’ *100 Questions*¹⁹
4. *UU World* (formerly *The World*) magazine and other official UUA publications (including on-line information and articles)
5. Beacon Press publications on UUism — owned by UUA
6. Skinner House Publications — affiliated publisher of UU material

Persons:

1. President of the UUA, currently Rev. William Sinkford
2. National UUA Officials/Spokespersons
3. “Star” Clergy; Prolific UU authors; UU “saints” (Channing, Emerson, etc.); Professors or administrators at Starr King and Meadville-Lombard, UU ministerial-training schools
4. Regular UU clergy
5. UU lay persons
6. Non-UU religious liberals

HUMAN ORIGINS

Although the Principles and Sources do not explicitly address the question of human origins, they hint at the most commonly held opinion in UU circles: that we are the result of evolution.²¹ In case there is any doubt, numerous quotes in other UU sources verify this conclusion:

"[Question:] Do you believe in the concept of evolution? [Answer:] Yes."²²

"Unitarian Universalism is cooperation with a universe that created us."²³

"For we are the earth speaking — the universe grown conscious of itself."²⁴

"Similarly, we are part of the whole universe. We were before we took our present form; we always will be."²⁵

"Our thoughts are the products of millions upon millions of years of evolution, and our religious myths have emerged from within the stream of human consciousness just as the various species of animals have emerged from within the life stream."²⁶

"It is sometimes said that we are born as strangers into the world and that we leave it when we die. But in all probability we do not come into the world at all. Rather, we come out of it, in the same way that a leaf comes out of a tree or a baby from its mother's body. We emerge from deep within its range of possibilities, and when we die we do not so much stop living as take on a different form."²⁷

"I find wondrous a fact that most people seem to take for granted — that the universe has evolved in such a way as to try to understand itself," Helen Berg wrote in *The World* in 1996. "Humans are not exotic beings visiting the universe on a research project but exquisite systems of the same elementary particles that make up all the systems of the universe," she further stated.²⁸

Because UUism is a creedless faith and houses many "Christians"²⁹ and

theists, there are most likely some within its ranks who do believe that God is guiding the evolutionary process and is ultimately responsible for our creation. However, UUs mostly consider natural selection to be the mechanism of the evolutionary process.

HUMAN NATURE

The fact that an affirmation of the worth and dignity of the human is the first item in the Principles and Sources indicates the centrality of the human subject in UU thought. This claim is reaffirmed in many of the other principles and sources. No one can argue that almost all of the other principles and sources are just footnotes to this first one, in that it serves as the presupposition for each. It is only because every human has inherent worth and dignity that UUs can promote and affirm the other goals and sources.

All UU values are derivative of the prime value of human-ness. Beginning with this principle, here are what appear to be the core UU affirmations about human nature and some of their logical corollaries.

"We believe in the worth and dignity of each human being. All people on earth have an equal claim to life, liberty, and justice; no idea, ideal, or philosophy is superior to a single human life."³⁰

"Unitarian Universalism is a fierce belief in the way of freedom and reverence for the sacred dignity of each individual."³¹

"I agree with Protagoras that 'the human is the measure of all things' and with Sophocles that of all the many wonders of the world there is 'none so wonderful as the human,'" Kenneth W. Phifer wrote in *The Faith of a Humanist*. "I see with Shakespeare what a piece of work is the human being," Phifer also noted.³²

In answering the survey question, "What things should your congregation be most intent on helping children learn?" 51.8% answered, "A sense of their inherent worth, self-respect."³³

In fact, because we cannot be sure of the existence of any being greater than the human (such as God), it is the individual human subject that is the locus of religious authority:

"We believe in the authority of reason and conscience. The ultimate arbiter in religion is not a church, a document, or an official, but the personal choice and decision of the individual."³⁴

"Each individual congregant must, of course, determine for him or herself what rings true. It is not required that people agree with all that is said."³⁵

"Because we have learned by experience that, in religion, the truth that matters above all, is not that which is expressed in a traditional holy book, nor in creeds or doctrines; rather, it is the truth that emerges in the minds and hearts of each living individual in community, as they share in a lifelong search for truth and meaning."³⁶

"We believe that personal experience, conscience, and reason should be the final authorities in religion. In the end religious authority lies not in a book, person, or institution, but in ourselves. We put religious insights to the tests of our hearts and minds."³⁷

"The primary source of authority in religious matters, we believe, is not the Bible or the Koran, not official doctrine or ecclesiastical officials, but each individual in conversation with tradition and in community with others. You know better than I what religious affirmations square with your personal insights and experience."³⁸

Even those UU "Christians" who criticize this state of affairs cannot deny the following assertion:

"[Ralph Waldo Emerson] essentially shifted the authority for truth from Jesus Christ to the sovereignty of the self. Once that transformation is accomplished in the believer's heart, the rest of

our history is merely footnote. ... In the Emersonian epistemology, each individual person is invited to tailor-make a designer religion out of one's own experience, needs, and taste."³⁹

UUism teaches that man is not inherently sinful, but is born with a capacity for great good (or evil), possessing the power to direct history and change the world for the better.

"We have the power within ourselves to realize the best we are capable of as human beings."⁴⁰

"There is a unique spark of divinity in each of us by virtue of our human endowment; we need only try to find it."⁴¹

"A universal of humanism is the optimistic belief that human beings can perform saving acts, that indeed only we can."⁴²

"Not only do we have a hopeful and optimistic attitude about life, we believe strongly that humans have great potential to recognize right, correct wrongs, find solutions and make this a better world."⁴³

"...our theological starting (and ending) place **will always be** our bedrock spiritual confidence that persons come to us PRECIOUS AND POTENTIAL in their essential nobility and goodness."⁴⁴

The "or evil" was placed in parentheses above because on rare occasions UUs do admit to the reality of human evil, at times even speaking about it in strong language:

"The problem is that even as a theology based upon evil and sinfulness tends to stint on goodness, one based upon goodness may be equally obtuse when it comes to evil and sin. Too much mercy can squeeze out justice; and too much attention to our better nature can blind us to the awesome human capacity for evil."⁴⁵

"I am a liberal who has a deep belief in our natural sinfulness," UU leader F. Forrester Church said in a 1990 interview. "I don't mean that we are born evil, I just believe we are

born capable of an enormous amount of rationalization that allows us to do evil things while we think we are doing good things."⁴⁶

However, the overall tenor of their discourse about human nature is generally optimistic. Even though they may acknowledge human "weakness" or "frailty" — UUs rarely use the word "sin" — UUs operate with the assumption that proper education and nurturing can overcome this problem:

"Rather than feel bound by human weaknesses and frailties, we emphasize human strengths. We believe people have the strength, power and intelligence to make good things happen. You might call it a 'can do' religion."⁴⁷

"There is a belief in the devastating power of evil; and a belief that all people can do good if their innate capacity for goodness is well nurtured and guided."⁴⁸

"There is nobility in everyone, even if it does require a little more recognition and support to bring it out in some people than in others."⁴⁹

"What most distinguishes Unitarian Universalism from orthodox Jewish and Christian traditions is that WHEN IT COMES TO HUMAN PERSONS AND THEIR BEHAVIORS, WE SEE THE GLASS AS AT LEAST HALF FULL (RATHER THAN MORE THAN HALF EMPTY AS PURITANICAL THINKERS DO)."⁵⁰

UUism maintains that we are finite beings limited in knowledge, power, perspective, and time.

"No matter how spiritually astute we may be, we are limited, like the blind persons with the elephant, by who we are, by where we are standing and by what our perspectives are and can be. None of us has, or ever will have, the total picture."⁵¹

"Among other things, this theology suggests that we must acknowledge the partial nature of our understanding; respect in-

sights that differ from our own; and not only defend the rights of others to believe their own truths so long as they do not deny us the same privilege, but also credit them with a measure of truth (with a small *t*) even though it may conflict with the truth that we embrace."⁵²

This last statement demonstrates that when one holds both affirmation number one (and the corollary that the individual is the locus of authority) with its radical subject-centered epistemology, and affirmation number three, with its major epistemological limits, then a kind of inclusive pluralism (which we find in UUism) is inevitable. If, as we quoted above "no idea, ideal, or philosophy is superior to a single human life" then certainly none of our limited, individual, "small *t*" truths is worth contending for.

Accordingly, UUs believe we are relational beings that thrive in community.

"We believe in the importance of a religious community. Peers confirm and validate experience, and provide a critical platform, as well as a network of mutual support."⁵³

"Although individual religious and political philosophies differ widely, our congregations have one thing in common: they exist because we need one another. As religious liberals, we sometimes feel ourselves to be a misunderstood minority, and our church home — whatever shape it takes — gives us the courage to be more fully ourselves than we might be without it. A sense of community is part of the vital support system we all need in order to live whole, productive, satisfying lives."⁵⁴

Further taught by UUs is that we are spiritually⁵⁵ inclined beings with religious and "meaning-making" impulses, the source of religious thought.

"In a Unitarian Universalist church, revelation is an ongoing

process; each of us is a potential harbinger of meaning."⁵⁶

"For us there is no closed revelation. We are all prophets and seers and seekers after wisdom. Within our holy gatherings, we find the ways to peace and justice and love."⁵⁷

"As we learn to walk gently upon this planet, we create a true religion. ...that religion is found full within our human condition, both within us as individuals, and among us as community."⁵⁸

"Religion is a human enterprise. It is the human race that has created religions out of that unique self-awareness that drives us to ask questions about our origins and our destiny. It is the human race that has invented religious communities in order to share the burden of our aloneness as individuals."⁵⁹

"The adventure of religion is not in the discovery of Eternal Truth or Absolute Meaning, arenas in which human beings do not and cannot deal, but in our individual and communal search for and creation of meanings and values that dignify and enhance life."⁶⁰

"We are the force that creates and destroys even the gods we worship."⁶¹

"Theology is done by humans for humans. We're the ones who construct the God-images. Our job now is to give those images meaning for our time."⁶²

"I find it exhilarating to believe that the perfection we have poured into the figure of Jesus has come from the minds of human beings, from human imagination, and ethical aspiration," John G. MacKinnon wrote in *Unitarian Universalist Views of Jesus*. MacKinnon further stated, "My faith is that it will grow better as human experience is added to it. I'm for a better and better Jesus, born from the aspiring heart of humanity."⁶³

"[I] believe that a sense of the sacred ... is built into us, virtually imprinted in our genetic code, as part and parcel of our evolutionary devel-

opment as humans," UUA official and minister Khoren Arisian has said.⁶⁴

HUMAN DESTINY

The Principles and Sources really do not address the issue of what happens to a person after death, but according to UU minister John Sias, "very few UUs believe in a continuing individualized existence after physical death."⁶⁵ However, they do seem to believe that we are eternal in two rather qualified senses:⁶⁶

"We believe immortality manifests itself in the lives of those we affect during our lifetime and in the legacy we leave when we die."⁶⁷

"Immortality is found in the examples we set and the work we do."⁶⁸

UUism also argues that we are eternal in the sense that we, as matter, simply take on another material form after death and continue as part of the earth.

"We emerge from deep within [the earth's] range of possibilities, and when we die we do not so much stop living as take on a different form. Then death — the return to earth — becomes release from aloneness, shelter from responsibility, and return to continuity and union, from which we emerged for a brief time."⁶⁹

"Similarly, we are part of the whole universe. We were before we took our present form; we always will be."⁷⁰

A BIBLICAL RESPONSE

Human Origins: The biblical response to the UU position is simple. We are not the products of impersonal forces, but are created by God in His image (Genesis 1:26-27; 5:1; 9:6; 1 Corinthians 11:7; James 3:9). Most all of UUism's difficulties stem from this fundamentally different starting point.

Human Nature: When we turn our attention to UU statements about human nature, we see that in some respects UUism and biblical Christian-

ity don't appear that far apart. However, upon closer inspection we discover that they are actually miles away from each other. The difference lies not necessarily in what is affirmed — assuming the appropriate nuances and qualifications — but on what grounds such statements can be affirmed.

Like UUism, Christianity affirms that human beings have worth and dignity. For Christians, however, this is because we are created by God in His image, which means that despite the corruption of the Fall, all of us bear a limited, though defaced degree of God's rational, moral, spiritual, and social likeness.⁷¹ In addition, we are valuable because we are potential recipients of the grace and renewal of God, capable of a loving and intimate relationship with God Himself. That is, we are not necessarily valuable by virtue of our inherited nature, but because of what we once were and still can become by the grace of God. The important question, however, is whether or not UUism's naturalistic worldview permits such a lofty evaluation of humanity. James Sire probes this question:

"[Does] naturalism give an adequate reason for us to consider ourselves valuable? Unique, maybe. But gorillas are unique. So is every category of nature. Value was the first troublesome issue. Could a being thrown up by chance be worthy?"⁷²

Morality and human freedom were also subject to questioning:

"Second, could a being whose origins were so 'iffy' trust his or her own capacity to know? ... If consciousness is an epiphenomenon of matter, perhaps the appearance of human freedom which lays the basis for morality is an epiphenomenon of either chance or inexorable law. Perhaps chance or the nature of things only built into me the 'feeling' that I am free but actually I am not."⁷³

The scientific determinism of a closed naturalistic system swallows up notions of love, meaning, freedom, personality, etc., as simply the func-

tions of inexorable and impersonal laws of the universe. All the sacred cows of the UU understanding of humanity fall by the wayside.

Like UUism, Christianity affirms that human beings do have the potential to do great good (moral likeness), but apart from the renewal and restoration of the regenerating grace of God, this ability is severely impaired by a profound innate sinfulness, our hearts by nature being bent away from the love, holiness, and goodness of God and toward the promotion of self. Even the limited good we do prior to regeneration is "as filthy rags" (Isaiah 64:6) because it is tainted by pride and self-curvature, instead of being done to glorify God.

Like UUism, Christianity agrees that humans are finite, limited beings. But, it adds to this the further recognition that God is not. If we were dependent upon reason alone to make our way to God, our human limitations (not to mention our sin) would make meaningful knowledge of God impossible. However, the good news is that God has not left Himself without witness. He has taken the initiative to reveal Himself to us, first, in the handiwork of His creation (Psalm 19:1-2; Acts 14:17; Romans 1:19-20),⁷⁴ second, in His work and words for the nation of Israel, and third, and most brilliantly in His Son Jesus, in whom full human nature and eternal deity were united. We have not been left to seek after God by our own limited powers. In His other-directed love, God takes the initiative and makes overtures toward us.

Like UUism, Christianity affirms that we are relational beings who thrive in community. Here again we turn to the *imago dei* for an explanation of this facet of humanity. It is at this juncture that we see that the doctrine of the Trinity, though frequently scoffed at by those outside of Christianity, is actually one of the most effective apologetic resources Christians have. Even the most isolated introvert will attest to the desire to be loved, understood, and have meaningful relationships with others. What can better account for this universal human desire than the fact that we are created in the social

likeness of a Triune God, in whom from everlasting to everlasting there is an interpenetration of three persons in a reciprocal relationship of other-directed, perfect love?

Finally, like UUism, Christianity affirms that we are spiritually inclined beings who are driven to seek answers to the larger religious questions of meaning and purpose. Yet, we return to the *imago dei*, this time focusing on the spiritual likeness, for making sense of this inclination. Christians affirm that our personhood consists of more than a mere material body, that as humans created in the image of a God who is spirit, there is a spiritual dimension to our being. We ask and seek answers to spiritual questions because our soul or spirit are necessary components of who we are as persons.

Human Destiny: The biblical understanding on this matter differs significantly from the opinion of the majority of UUs, who either deny conscious personal existence beyond death altogether, or remain agnostic about the prospect. The biblical position follows necessarily from the *imago dei*, specifically that part of the doctrine which says we are beings composed of a body and a soul (or spirit), the latter which survives physical death. Jesus and the apostles clearly taught that after death we will continue in conscious personal existence either forever *with* God (Matthew 5:12; 6:20; 8:11; 18:34; 19:21, 23, 29; 25:46; Mark 10:21, 30; Luke 6:23; 16:9; 18:30) or forever *separated from* God (Matthew 5:22, 30; 10:28; 23:33; 25:41, 46; Mark 9:43, 45, 47; Luke 12:5).

SUMMARY

One of the primary measures of any worldview or religious system is its explanatory power: its ability to make sense of the data of human experience in a coherent and satisfying fashion. Ironically, at the end of the day, it is the biblical worldview and not the UU's naturalistic perspective that best explains fundamental UU affirmations concerning human nature.⁷⁵ A biblical worldview holds in place much of what UUs believe about human nature — that we are valuable, capable of moral good, spiritually inclined,

capable of love and meaningful relationships — while the UUs are stuck in the closed box⁷⁶ of deterministic naturalism which swallows up all human value, freedom, and meaning. In pledging their fidelity to naturalism, they forgo all epistemic rights to speak meaningfully about human value, and even personality itself, as anything more than processes of the brain. All their moral intuitions, their freedom, are simply illusions.

If Christianity is the more hopeful of the two systems and makes better sense of the data of human experience, why do UUs cling so tenaciously to naturalism? There are two major reasons.

One is because naturalism, based on scientific investigation, scholarship, and "facts," gives the impression of being honest, objective, respectable, and coherent. There are many options available to the Christian that neither neglect the scientific data nor compromise the core teachings of the Genesis account. One need not decide between Christianity and science.

The other reason, and why many UUs cling to naturalism despite the logical trouble it causes for their understanding of humanity,⁷⁷ is that they cannot adopt a Christian worldview unless they also adopt the entire framework within which, and only within which, that understanding can be sustained. And, the starting point for any Christian theology is the affirmation that God is God and we are not; that He is Creator and we are creature; that He is Lord and we are servant; that He is Father and we are child; that He is giver and we are recipient; that He is lover and we are loved. God is the first and the last and is at the center of it all, not us. This admission is simply unfathomable to a group that has spent the last century placing the human subject at the center and ridding itself of such a meddling God who demands — and deserves — our reverence, submission, trust, love, and praise. However much UUs may want all the "existential goodies" entailed in the Christian doctrine of humanity, in the end they are simply not worth the cost of abdicating the throne of the

kingdom of self. Individual autonomy is just too precious to them.

Endnotes:

1. Hereafter I will use the following abbreviations: Unitarian Universalist — UU; Unitarian Universalists — UUs; Unitarian Universalism — UUism; Unitarian Universalist Association — UUA.

2. Gary Leazer, "Unitarian Universalist Association," *CIS Interfaith Report*, Vol. 6, no. 4, June 2001, pg. 3.

3. *Ibid.*; Mark W. Harris, *Unitarian Universalist Origins: Our Historic Faith*. Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1998, pamphlet; John A. Buehrens and Forrest Church, *A Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism*, revised edition. Boston: Beacon Press, 1998, pg. 215; Jack Mendelsohn, *Meet the Unitarian Universalists*. Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1997, pg. 14.

4. *Unitarian Universalist Origins*, op. cit.; *Meet the Unitarian Universalists*, op. cit., pg. 14.

5. *Ibid.*; Andreas Reif, *Unitarian-Universalist Association*. Exeter, N.H.: Sound Doctrine Ministries, 1989, pg. 3.; *A Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism*, op. cit., pg. 214.

6. *A Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism*, op. cit., pg. 214.

7. *Meet the Unitarian Universalists*, op. cit., pg. 14.; *Unitarian Universalist Origins*, op. cit.

8. *Unitarian Universalist Origins*, op. cit.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Meet the Unitarian Universalists*, op. cit., pg. 14.

11. *Ibid.*, pg. 15; *Unitarian Universalist Origins*, op. cit.

12. *Meet the Unitarian Universalists*, op. cit., pg. 15.

13. UUs, of course, would not refer to any of their beliefs or values as doctrines because for them such language smacks of the creedalism they so detest. But, for the purposes of this article, this terminology is quite useful as my focus is on those questions about humanity usually included under the heading of "doctrine of humanity" (or "of man") in systematic theologies and questions concerning the origin, nature, and destiny of human persons.

14. As we will see in the Principles below, in some sense UUist core values are simply the ideals of American democracy in religious garb.

15. My designation of UUA leaflet.

16. *Ibid.*

17. The key word here is contemporary. UUism is a self-professed "living tradition" which is always changing and adapting with the times. Therefore, unlike many historical faiths that focus attention and place supreme emphasis on past

historical events, UUs are more likely to privilege that which is recent, new, and "progressive."

18. However, it cannot be reiterated enough that when studying UUism one must always keep in mind that for them the individual is the final religious authority, and provided that a person subscribes to the short list of affirmations in the Principles and Purposes, they can believe just about anything they want within the parameters of the UU family.

19. Though this is not produced by the UUA, I place it on par with official UUA pamphlets because many UUs refer non-UUs to it as a good source of information and because hard copies of this document (also available on-line) are frequently distributed to visitors by local UU congregations.

20. Principles and Purposes. Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, n.d.

21. Source five tells us that UUs "heed the results of science" and principle seven and source six allude to what they believe to be one those results — the understanding that we are part of the "interdependent web of all existence" or the "sacred circle of life."

22. John Sias, *100 Questions that Non-Members Ask About Unitarian Universalism*. Nashua, N.H.: Unitarian Universalist Church, 1994, pg. 6.

23. *A Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism*, op. cit., pg. 77. Here, former UUA President John A. Buehrens is quoting UU layperson Ed Schempp.

24. Paul N. Carnes, "Affirmation," in *Death and Immortality: Unitarian Universalist Views*, ed. Jane Rzepka. Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, n.d., pg. 8.

25. Carl Seaburg, "Death as Part of the Journey," in *Death and Immortality: Unitarian Universalist Views*, op. cit., pg. 12.

26. Edward T. Atkinson, "The Myths Given New Life," in *Unitarian Universalist Views of the Bible*, ed. Daniel G. Higgins. Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, n.d., pg. 4.

27. Barbara Hollerorth, "Separation," in *Death and Immortality: Unitarian Universalist Views*, op. cit., pg. 4.

28. Helen M. Berg, "The Cosmic Significance of Humans," *The World*, Vol. 10, no. 6, November-December 1996, pg. 22.

29. I use the designation Christian only because this is how they refer to themselves. Most all of UU "Christians" are only so in a very generic sense and do not adhere to doctrines such as the deity of Christ, the Trinity, etc., defined in a biblical sense, though there do seem to be a scattered few who may.

30. David O. Rankin, "Our Beliefs," *The Unitarian Universalist Pocket Guide*, revised edition, ed. Harry B. Scholefield. Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1988,

pg. 9.

31. Buehrens, "The Known and Unknown," in *A Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism*, op. cit., pg. 77. Buehrens is again quoting Ed Schempp.

32. Kenneth W. Phifer, *The Faith of a Humanist*. Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, n.d.

33. *The 1997 Unitarian Universalism Needs and Aspirations Survey*. Document available at: <http://www.uua.org/promise/results.html>. This was the most popular response of 8,118 UU members who responded to this survey.

34. "Our Beliefs," op. cit., pg. 9.

35. Christopher Gist Raible, "Our Ways of Worship," in *The Unitarian Universalist Pocket Guide*, op. cit., pg. 36.

36. Alex Crane, "From the Minister's Study: Samplings of Newsletter Columns by UU Ministers." Document available at: <http://www.uua.org/CONG/column99.html>.

37. Marta Flanagan, *We are Unitarian Universalists*. Document available at: <http://www.uua.org/aboutuu/weare.html>.

38. William F. Schulz, Foreword to *Our Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism*, John A. Buehrens and F. Forrester Church. Boston: Beacon Press, 1989, pg. x. Schulz was the UUA President at the time this book was published.

39. Duke T. Gray, "Letter to the Christians," *Unitarian Universalist Christian*, Vol. 47, nos. 3-4, Fall-Winter 1992, pg. 43.

40. Sarah Oelberg, *The Faith of a Unitarian Universalist Humanist*. Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 2000, pamphlet.

41. *Ibid.*

42. Brian Eslinger, "Why I Am a Humanist I," *The World*, Vol. 11, no. 6, November-December 1997, pg. 17.

43. *100 Questions that Non-Members Ask About Unitarian Universalism*, op. cit., pg. 11.

44. Scott Alexander, "*Sin*: That *Really Little* Word that Makes Unitarian Universalists *Big Time* Uncomfortable." Document available at: <http://www.rruc.org/sermon99.html>. This is a sermon Rev. Alexander delivered at River Road Unitarian Church on Sunday, Feb. 4, 2001. Bold and upper case in original.

45. Forrest Church, "Deeds Not Creeds," in *A Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism*, op. cit., pg. 43.

46. "Interview: F. Forrester Church," *The World*, Vol. 5, no. 1, January-February 1991, pg. 38. This article is a reprint from *The Door*, July-August 1990. At some point in the 1990s, F. Forrester Church changed his name to Forrest Church.

47. *100 Questions that Non-Members Ask About Unitarian Universalism*, op. cit., pg. 11.

48. "Our Beliefs," op. cit., pg. 7.

49. "The Cosmic Significance of Humans," op. cit., pg. 22.

50. "Sin: That *Really Little* Word that Makes Unitarian Universalists *Big Time* Uncomfortable," op. cit., upper case in original.
51. Tom Owen-Toole, "Truth is One, the Wise Call it by Many Names: Our UU Commitment to Religious Pluralism." Document available at: http://www.firstuusandiego.org/public/sermons/sermon_text/2001-01-28-text.htm. This is a sermon delivered by Rev. Owen-Toole at First Unitarian Church of San Diego on Jan. 28, 2001.
52. Forrest Church, "The Cathedral of the World," in *A Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism*, op. cit., pg. 87.
53. "Our Beliefs," op. cit., pg. 9.
54. Joan Goodwin, "Our Caring Communities," in *The Unitarian Universalist Pocket Guide*, op. cit., pp. 11-12.
55. Though "spirit" and "spirituality" are current buzzwords in UUism, there is little consensus regarding what the terms mean. Most of the discussions I have read are vague, ambiguous, and unsophisticated. Perhaps this is because they realize that they simply can't smuggle a soul or spirit into a worldview informed by scientific materialism.
56. Forrest Church, Introduction to *A Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism*, op. cit., pg. xxi.
57. James Ishmael Ford, "On Being a Unitarian Universalist: Is it a Religion?" Document available at: <http://www.vuu.org/jford/SS980201.htm>. This sermon was given at Valley Unitarian Universalist Church in Chandler, Ariz., on Feb. 1, 1998.
58. Ibid.
59. *The Faith of a Humanist*, op. cit.
60. Ibid.
61. "Affirmation," op. cit., pg. 8.
62. Barbara Stevens, "Many Images of God," *The World*, Vol. 7, no. 6, November-December 1993, pg. 20.
63. John G. MacKinnon, in *Unitarian Universalist Views of Jesus*, ed. Daniel G. Higgins. Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, n.d., pamphlet.
64. Khoren Arisian cited by Warren R. Ross in "The Marginalized Majority: UU Humanism in the 1990s," *The World*, Vol. 10, no. 6, November-December 1996, pg. 19. Ellipsis in original.
65. *100 Questions that Non-Members Ask About Unitarian Universalism*, op. cit., pg. 5.
66. Admittedly, some UUs are agnostic about the prospects of a personal afterlife, and at least leave room for such a possibility, though by no means do they affirm it. But, overall, these responses (especially the first) are the most representative of typical UU thought.
67. *100 Questions that Non-Members Ask About Unitarian Universalism*, op. cit., pg. 6.
68. *The Faith of a Unitarian Universalist Humanist*, op. cit., pamphlet.
69. "Separation," op. cit., pg. 4.
70. "Death as Part of the Journey," op. cit., pg. 12.
71. Although every aspect of the *imago dei* has been defaced in natural man, the spiritual image has been especially ravaged.
72. James Sire, *The Universe Next Door: A*

- Basic Worldview Catalog*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1997, pg. 72.
73. Ibid., pg. 73.
74. This revelation alone being sufficient for making all people accountable for knowing God exists.
75. I say this is ironic because the UUs pride themselves in being a religion founded on reason. It is they who frequently denounce Christians as irrational and anti-intellectual. Perhaps some Christians do have anti-intellectual leanings and fail to love God with all their mind as well as with all their heart, soul, and strength. But, it simply does not follow that because some (or many) Christians do not have good reasons for their Christian beliefs that such reasons do not exist. Many UUs have mistaken a criticism of certain individuals for a criticism of the belief system itself.
76. Scientific naturalism holds that humans, as mere matter, are simply part of an unbroken chain of cause and effect. It is a closed box because there it allows no room for supernatural intervention or human freedom.
77. Here I tread cautiously because I have ventured into the realm of speculating about the motivations and intentions of other persons. But, I believe biblical teachings concerning the general orientation of the human heart allow me such latitude. I am not "picking on" UUs as such, but including them as equally a part of the fallen human race. This criticism is not peculiar to UUs, but of human waywardness in general. 

HERMENEUTICS

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Scripture. ... the vocabulary of the cults is not the vocabulary of the Bible by definition. ... The cults capitalize on the almost total inability of the average Christian to understand the subtle art of redefinition in the realm of Biblical theology."⁴

If language means anything, it can't mean *just* anything. Misusing the Bible the way Arnott does so radically defines biblical words that it is catastrophic for the Church. Spiritual deconstructionists get pulled into doctrinal quicksand.

A linguistic and contextual study of both the Hebrew and Greek words for prophecy show that Arnott is creating theology from his distorted imagina-

tion. This is another case of "Whatever!"

Prophecy in the Bible always employs intelligible speech. Any rare and peripheral action accompanying it is first, unique; second, commanded by God in direct revelation; and third, explained by that speech.⁵ In defining biblical prophecy we do not have to make up interpretations. The immediate or larger context is always self-evident.

We must remember that the Apostle Paul, under inspiration, informs us that true prophets are never out of control, but speak to edify, exhort, and comfort others (1 Corinthians 14:31-33, 37-40). Edification and exhortation are always intelligible.

It is mind-boggling to see the endorsement of Arnott's book by Four-square pastor Jack Hayford:

"John Arnott clearly is seeking to provide a biblical soundness and a shepherdly care amid the mix of both the familiar and unfamiliar evidences of God's working at Toronto Airport Vineyard."⁶

Arnott's twisted explanation is not biblical. The "unfamiliar" and bizarre is rationalized and smuggled in by hanging a biblical term on it.

At times there is an appeal to and a misuse of John 21:30: "Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book." These other signs might be contained in the other Gospel records: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. If they are not, there is still no reason to believe that out-of-control people are a sign of Jesus at work. There is no reason to believe the other signs are different in nature and character than those