Credo

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Systematic Theology 2, Spring 2014

Non ridere, non lugere, neque detestari, sed intelligere
-Spinoza
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I believe in mystery, and in the inherent worth and dignity of all human beings. I am a product of my upbringing, and my theology reflects this. I am a relatively young, well educated, caucasian, straight man, writing in early 21st century America. Denominationally, I spent my early life in the Methodist church, before embracing Unitarian Universalism in my teenage years. My background has been primarily academic, with a strong scientific bent both in the social and hard sciences, though history was and is my first love academically. Each of these attributes has a deep impact on my theology as it develops; some of those impacts I likely cannot yet see myself. Theology is deeply contextual, however, and my statements of belief must be read in the light of who I am and when I write.²

In the first meeting of our systematic theology class, I described myself as a ‘principled agnostic,’ which has caused some difficulty in relating both to the class and the mission of systematic theology in general. I respond more to questions of orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy- which is reflected in my identification as a Unitarian Universalist. My theology, such as it is, is primarily apophatic, more concerned with finding God or the divine in moments of silence and uncertainty than in the kind of

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1 I did get married this semester, so I hope you’ll allow this particular edit in the tongue in cheek tone it’s meant.

doctrinal argument so central to the task of systematics. For me, to expect a human being defined (even limited) by his context to understand even part of the nature or task of God is like asking an ant to understand the inner workings of an iPad: it is simply too far from a common point of reference or understanding. While many faiths claim insight on the basis of some special revelation, I have not been blessed with the kind of faith that accepts those insights without considerable skepticism.

The larger faith that I belong to, the Unitarian Universalist Association, is still in the process of forming its (our) collective theology. On one hand, we are blessed with a church that allows considerable input into what it will become. At the same time, we do not have the kind of doctrinal statements contained in the Methodist Book of Discipline, leaving us with a lack of clear positions to uphold or push back against. This *credo*, then, stands as an imperfect attempt to impose a rational structure on beliefs and experiences that almost by definition transcend rationality.

**Mystery**

“Surely, we ought to be a little more upset than we are over this great universe that has just died so suddenly”

“What universe?”

“Why, yesterday’s universe. Newton’s universe. Hitherto, the various cosmic systems have fitted inside our skulls. This new one refuses to do so. From the point of view of the man in the street, it is absurd. That is what is really great about it.”

-Anatole France to Nicholas Segur (c. 1920)

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Mystery, the question ‘why?’ is the staring point of all knowledge. Mystery, in the sense of questions of faith, is not simply a question with an answer that can be found. As discussed in class, mysteries of this kind are perhaps better referred to as puzzles. Mysteries, however, are the questions that we can delve into each day of our lives, plumbing deeper and deeper depths of knowledge of self and what we are looking at without ever reaching the end. Mystery is the face of a lover, the sound of the north woods on a winter afternoon. Mystery is both the beginning and end of theology: the question ‘why?’ prompts us to try to answer, while any answer that we come up with entails further questions of why.

In the sciences, where much of my background lies, this is a first principle: that any theory we come up with is a provisional way of explaining underlying principles at work, most of whom are beyond our sight. The quote that opens this chapter comes from a moment in history where the whole enterprise of scientific understanding had been turned on its head, with the move from newtonian to quantum physics. What is applicable for theological enquiry is that Einstein and Bohr did not discredit Newton, rather they supplemented him, providing a deeper look into the same underlying physical laws that Newton was approximating. Thus, any conclusions drawn in theology must be responsive to the same principle: they are provisional, based on an conception we must understand as incomplete. Further experience and evidence must inform our theology, just as it does our science.

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4 Soulen, Kendell. *Systematic Theology Notes*. Wesley Theological Seminary, 8/26/13

5 Indeed, a classic definition of theology itself is *fides quaeens intellectum*, “faith seeking understanding.”
Mystery, encased in the question why, is the heart of theology. So much of the what is described by theologians and mystics as the divine mystery is contained in the experience of living a human life, full of its inherent joys, tragedies, and contradictions. Many of the ‘why’ questions of theology are grounded not in abstract ideas of the Godhead, but in the cries of our souls in the best and worst moments of our lives.

While I may at times feel like I have some kind of understanding of the divine around me, it is important that I remember that that understanding only provisional, that there will always be more to discover, challenging even my most hard fought understandings.

**Humanity**

*And angels everywhere were in their midst
In the ones that I loved, in the ones that I kissed
I wondered what it was I’d been looking for above
Heaven's so big there ain't no need to look up
So I stopped looking for royal cities in the air
Only a full house gonna have a prayer*

- *Josh Ritter, “Thin Blue Flame”*

Humanity holds a special place both in Unitarian Universalism and my own theology. So much is uncertain, so much a mystery, that the tangible interactions between us must form the core of our beliefs. While I am agnostic with regard to a personal God, I cannot be agnostic to the person in front of me.

The first of Unitarian Universalism’s 7 Principles holds to ‘the inherent worth and dignity of every person.’ This statement began me *credo*, and is a thread throughout.⁶

⁶ As well as causing some consternation in the first draft and revisions.
This principle, though, is relatively easy to derive. I know that I am a conscious being, and know that I desire both physical safety and comfort as well as opportunities for self-actualization. Conversely, I know that I am conscious of that which harms or hinders me, and am very aware of the pain it can cause. I express both pleasure and pain through language, and through interactions with other people, know that they too have consciousness, that they desire safety and opportunity.

Each person, then, should have the possibilities in life that I desire for myself. We are a marvelous species, history testifies to our capability of greatness both for good and evil. More than anything else, we are social creatures. My life is better for having other people in it, and a group of people can nearly always accomplish more than an individual. Community not only provides a means of cooperation to achieve what we cannot alone, but a source of solace and support when we need it. Absent all other points of theology, this is what I continue to fall back on: the capability and the necessity of human beings living and working together.

**Doctrine and the Church**

“We do not know what God is. God Himself does not know what He is because he is not anything. Literally God is not, because he transcends being.”

~John Scotus Erigena⁷

Doctrine, it was argued in class, is how we hold the mysteries of faith in focus: that by narrowing the range of ways of seeing the mysteries, we can gain a deeper

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understanding and grow in our communion with God. Respectfully, I must disagree. To state a doctrine, and claim that God is somehow contained in the boundaries of the possibilities it allows for, seems to me to be a human limitation on something beyond the capacity of human speech, much less thought, to hold.

Aside from my personal aversion to doctrine, I belong to a non-creedal tradition rightly proud of its lack of stated doctrine. This serves two purposes: by practically addressing the pluralistic nature of our congregations, it focuses our members attention on their personal search for truth and meaning; and by avoiding questions of orthodoxy, the faith can focus more on orthopraxy, emphasizing right relationships in a community defined by difference.

The individual right of conscience is at the heart of the modern Unitarian Universalist position. It allows us to serve as the ‘church of last resort’ to individuals who for whatever reason do not feel themselves welcome in more mainstream belief systems, but who nevertheless feel a deep need to belong to a spiritual community. It is a great strength, and to those of us who believe that all people are equally deserving of respect and love, it drives us to build these pluralistic, individualistic communities. The danger in this emphasis, as Paul Rasor identifies, is that it “...can produce personal belief systems or theologies articulated in generalized ideals, perhaps sincerely felt, but

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8 ie: Discussion of the Trinity, Systematic Theology Notes, 10/14/13

9 Although you could claim that the Unitarian Universalist statement of 7 principles (Appendix 1) is a creed-like document, it does not attempt to describe God directly, instead focusing on action or praxis.

often without a deep grounding or much specific content.” This is a charge that I am certainly conscious of at Wesley, ranging from comments that Unitarian sermons are not ‘gospel based’ enough to notes that a credo lacks ‘internal consistency.’

This is a fair critique of Unitarian Universalism, and perhaps of liberal theology more generally. However, from a Unitarian Universalist perspective, it fails to account for the Christian tendency to place considerable emphasis on orthodoxy, rather than orthopraxy. Many forms of Judaism, and to some extent Unitarian Universalism, deemphasize questions of belief, instead focusing primarily on practice, how your faith identity informs what you do in the world. What makes you a good Jew is not that you believe the words of the shema, but that you keep the Sabbath, keep Kosher, and tell the story of your faith to the next generation every year at Passover. Likewise, what makes you a ‘Good Unitarian Universalist’ is not doctrinal positions, but a tangible commitment to social justice, and to living together in community with people of wildly diverging beliefs.

Thus while Unitarian Universalists are often criticized for a lack of doctrinal certainty, I believe this critique misses the divergent emphases Christianity and Unitarian Universalism place on doctrine and practice.

\[\text{\footnotesize\ref{footnote}}\]

\[\text{\footnotesize\ref{footnote}}\] Ib.

\[\text{\footnotesize\ref{footnote}}\] This distinction was first described to me and then elaborated on in conversations with Devorah Schoenfeld, my advisor at an earlier institution. While there is no record to quote, this paragraph owes much to Dr. Schoenfeld.

\[\text{\footnotesize\ref{footnote}}\] To respond to the earlier draft’s comment: This is not a duality, but a difference of emphasis. Rabbi Kaplan and the Reconstructionist movement were on my mind when I wrote it, though the same emphasis can often be seen in the Reform and Conservative movements.
Pluralism

“Thou art the path
and the goal that paths never reach”
-from Reading 523, “Singing the Living Tradition”

Pluralism, to me, is both a statement of personal theology and a practical imperative of my denominational affiliation. My personal theology of pluralism is heavily influenced by John Hick, and I am in a member of a faith that embraces a pluralistic, even at times syncretistic worldview.

Hicks is hardly perfect, notably in his answer to the theodicy question (described below), but in his approach to religious pluralism he provides a framework for talking about a worldview that gives privileged position to no single religion, while affirming the insights of each. To Hick, there is a single “Real” (his word for God), and each religion attempts to describe it from their own context, cultural, physical and historical location. This is not unlike the story of three blind men who come upon an element, and upon examining it with their hands describe a snake, a tree trunk, and a wall. While each were attempting to describe the same underlying reality, each had a piece of the whole.

This is a deeply compelling insight. My own religious context and background has been in the academic study of world religions. In the course of that work, I have spent long hours with Pastors, Priests, Rabbis, Imams, Tibetan Monks, Wiccan Priestesses, and more. I cannot judge between the competing truth claims of each of these traditions, and I can say with honesty that I have been in the presence of holy men and women of deeply different traditions. Romain Rolland, in a letter to Sigmund

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Freud, postulated that there seemed to be a feeling, shared by the majority (if not all people), of a ‘sense of eternity… a feeling of something limitless, unbounded— as it were, ‘oceanic.’ Rolland concluded that this shared feeling was the basis of the world’s religions.

I can testify personally to experiences of this ‘oceanic feeling,’ but that sense of the eternal, by its very eternal nature, is not something I feel I can fully understand. Nevertheless, the kind of mystic feeling Rolland describes, and that I have experienced, has remarkable parallels in the writings of Julian of Norwich, Rumi, Chuang-Tzu, and others. Bearing in mind that theological claims are provisional, based on incomplete understandings, I maintain that it is humility, rather than a feeling of superiority, that leads me to the understanding that my own beliefs and experience of that ‘oceanic feeling’ are not privileged over those of others. To go a step further, even the experience of that feeling must be taken as provisional. Little conclusive proof of it exists (discussed below), so the possibility that I am completely wrong must also be acknowledged.

Two more objections to pluralism are of note: first, that it invites syncretism; second, that it is no more than an expanded version of exclusivism, or particularism. The syncretism objection is easy to respond to. Both for myself, and for Unitarian Universalism in general, there are many worse things in the world than being a syncretist. If an individual search for meaning leads someone to embrace both

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16 Particularism, for the purposes of this argument, holds that there is only one saving revelation of God, and all understandings of God that contradict it are inadequate to false. (Class Notes, 9/23/13)
celebrating rebirth and hope at Easter, while believing that desire is the root of suffering and practicing meditation, who am I to judge? So long as it is respectful of the traditions it draws from, there seems little wrong with syncretism.\(^\text{17}\)

The objection to pluralism as a valid category, as described by Gavin D’Costa\(^\text{18}\) is worth more consideration. To D’Costa, pluralism is inherently contradictory, in that while claiming to not judge between the truth claims of different traditions, it nevertheless draws a circle around the ‘great religious traditions’ and excludes at least some ‘religious’ beliefs on the basis of belief. The church of Jim Jones, then, is excluded because it fails to follow what Hick claims are the commonalities between the ‘great traditions.’

While there is a semantic value in D’Costa’s objection, I return again to the distinction between orthodoxy and orthopraxy. In a praxis focused understanding of religion, whether or not a specific belief is salvific is almost beside the point. What matters is how you act. Put another way, a self described Satanist should be welcomed into the Unitarian Universalist community- but only if his or her actions in the community follow the basic guidelines of respect and care that define our Unitarian Universalistness. D’Costa, in an important way, is setting up a straw man of what he sees as pluralism while not addressing the lived experience of pluralistic faiths. Very few members of my congregation would limit their understanding of pluralism to ‘the

\(^{17}\) The respect problem is not a minor one. Our 7 Principles call us to the “Free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” Too often, members of our congregation appropriate rituals and practices from other traditions without fully understanding them, which is both irresponsible and condescending to the other traditions in question. This is more of a pastoral, practical objection than a theological one however.

great religious traditions,’ but instead believe that any faith can be a legitimate expression of belief. More important than the belief, however, is the core of how we live together in practical ways given the variety of our beliefs- the central project of a pluralistic faith.

**Revelation**

“P.S. What makes you so sure that there’s anything? Love, Hitch”

“Suppose there were nothing. Then there would be no laws; for laws, after all, are something. If there were no laws, then everything would be permitted. If everything were permitted, then nothing would be forbidden. So, if there were nothing, nothing would be forbidden. Thus nothing is self-forbidding.

*Therefore, there must be something. QED.*

~Jim Holt to Christopher Hitchens (c. 2012)^19

A discussion of the relationship between general and special revelation necessarily follows from that of pluralism. If there are a myriad of different faiths, each interpreting God, the divine, or the Real in their contexts, what are we to make of the special revelation claimed by each?

González defines general revelation in part as ‘self-disclosure of God... which is available to all human beings through their own experience.’^20 For many theists, there are aspects of creation that unambiguously testify to the existence of God. Guthrie is an example of this, describing multiple examples of evidence of God’s existence present in

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creation.\textsuperscript{21} These arguments are a logical train wreck that it would be difficult given the page limit here to address,\textsuperscript{22} but for the sake of argument, let us look at Guthrie’s first proof of God’s existence: “The World is Not Self-Explanatory: When we look around us, we ask, Where [sic] did it come from? What holds it together? There must be a God who is the source and ground of all things.” Guthrie’s transition from questions of the universe’s origins and existence to the existence of a sustaining God is a logical non sequitur; many alternate explanations for the universe’s origin exist that do not require God, therefore the universe’s origin does not require, self-evidently, the existence of God (much less the God we come from and return to that the same argument concludes with).\textsuperscript{23}

If general revelation is not the self-evidence of God in nature, surely there is something that compels us to return to questions of meaning and existence over and over again? Jim Holt’s book, quoted above, begins with the very basic question: “Why is there something rather than nothing?” and describes a multitude of answers put forth by contemporary theologians, philosophers, and physicists. Perhaps general revelation can be thought of not as God’s self-evident disclosure, but the questions that seem inherent in the human experience. What do we make of the face of our beloved? And why does this tiny, objectively tiny part the universe seem so central to our world?

\textsuperscript{21} Guthrie pp. 41-42

\textsuperscript{22} Rebecca Goldstein’s \textit{36 Arguments for the Existence of God, A Work of Fiction} is one of the most accessible critiques of common arguments from general revelation, while remaining a work that is at least ambiguous in its position regarding the value of religion in the world.

\textsuperscript{23} Dr. Soulen: Your comparison between this and the ‘single wellspring’ described above is taken under advisement, but I would argue that there is an enormous difference in degree between saying that there appears to be a spiritual experience common to humanity that I cannot fully explain and attempting to prove the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, personal deity from the evidence of nature.
Special revelation then comes out of the questions posed by general revelation. From a pluralistic point of view, I believe that if general revelation is the questions posed by the human condition, special revelation can be seen as the various answers to those questions. This implies two kinds of special revelation: that which comes from the individual conscience of each person, and the communal answers presented by the great religions of the world.

Sources of Special Revelation

Two thousand years ago in Alexandria, we are told in a legend, a sage of the Greeks asked a sage of the Hebrews: ‘Why are you Jews so proud of your heritage? We Greeks have Homer, Plato, and Aristotle. What have you? Our sages have discovered the idea of the cosmos. What have yours done? How can you even venture to compare your intellectual heritage with ours?’ ‘True,’ said the Jew, ‘you have discovered the cosmos. Yet what we have transcends even the mystery and vastness of the cosmos.’ ‘What can that be?’ queried the Greek. Came the reply: ‘We have the Torah.’”

-Abraham Heschel, “God, Torah, and Israel”

John Wesley’s quadrilateral of Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience is somewhat beyond the bounds of the Unitarian Universalist tradition, but it does provide a helpful way of looking at the sources of special revelation.

Scripture and Tradition

The Unitarian Universalist Association, along with our Seven Principles, also affirm a list of six sources of wisdom, beginning with an affirmation of individual

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experience and the examples of women and men through history. It continues by affirming the special place of the great religious traditions of the world. These traditions each have the accumulated wisdom of thousands of years regarding the divine, codified in scripture and passed on through interpretation - the black fire and white fire described in the Talmud (itself a form both of scripture and tradition). These sources each claim to be the explicit self-disclosure of God, which must be respected and appreciated, even as the contradictions create problems in navigating conflicting claims.

For my own ministry, I recognize the power of the stories, the myths (in Carl Jung’s sense of the term) contain in scripture. Because of my Midwestern American cultural context (not to mention my seminary education), I know the Christian scriptures best, as so draw examples from them, particularly in sermon writing and pastoral care situations.

Reason

Reason serves two purposes in special revelation: through its application in science, reason can tell us about the universe around us in order to answer some of the questions posed by general revelation; reason can also serve as arbiter between different truth claims claimed by various scriptures and traditions. Reason, as Descartes argued, is inherent to our human experience, the first principle of our consciousness. As such, it is positioned best, or least poorly, to evaluate competing claims.

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25 With the possible exception of Buddhist Scripture, which do not have the same language or goal in describing the role of the divine in human life.

26 This deserves a longer explanation, and can best be shown as an example. I am including a brief sermon (appendix 2) from this spring, discussing an issue at my home church in the context of Matthew 4:1-11.
Experience

Experience is at once the ultimate arbiter and source of revelation, while also being deeply problematic, creating blind spots and assumptions on our part that we may not always be aware of. I believe what I do because of my experiences over three decades of life in the time and place I have been in. At the same time, those same experiences may preclude me from certain forms of revelation. As described in the introduction, I have never had the kind of assurance in faith that many of my colleagues at Wesley are blessed with, perhaps in part to a background that has emphasized skepticism and rationality over absolute claims to truth. I remain unconvinced that this has been a good thing for me, but it has undoubtably had a large effect.

Christology

“I find Servetus acute and subtle enough in disputation, but not very solid... On justification he is plainly demented. As for the Trinity you know I have always feared this would break out some day. Good God, what tragedies this question will excite among those who come after us.”

-Phillip Melanchthon to Joachim Camerarius, 1533

One source of Special Revelation bears some further discussion, given the context this credo paper is written in. While I would not normally spend much time on the person or works of Christ in a paper of this nature, the amount of time spent this semester on this topic requires some attention on my part. Barth writes that Christology

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“is the touchstone of all knowledge of God in the Christian sense, the touchstone of all theology...the Word, the Logos, is actually the work, the ergo, as well; the verbum is also the opus.”28 While a more detailed discussion of the Trinity is contained bellow, I want to touch quickly on the role of Jesus in my faith and Unitarian Universalism in general.

This week my home congregation in Baltimore celebrated Union Sunday, marking the anniversary of William Elery Channing’s sermon ‘Unitarian Christianity,’ preached in our pulpit. Channing’s sermon is often pointed to as the initiation of American Unitarianism, where an emerging theological movement formally broke ranks with the Congregationalist churches that gave it rise. In it, Channing explicitly denies both the Trinity, and the divinity of Jesus, on strictly scriptural bounds: “We wish,” he writes, “that those from whom we differ would weigh one striking fact. Jesus, in his preaching, continually spoke of God. The word was always in his mouth. We ask, does he, by this word, ever mean himself? We say, never. On the contrary, he most plainly distinguishes between God and himself, and so do his disciples”29 Famously summarized by James Luther Adams, Unitarians have generally been more willing to consider the “religion of Jesus rather than a credal statement about Jesus.”30 Since Adams, Unitarian Universalists have moved further from traditional Christianity, respecting and drawing from the religion of Jesus, but no longer giving it privilege of place among the sources of revelation.


All of this is a very roundabout way of saying that much of the subject matter covered in the second half of Systematic Theology was incongruent with my tradition. For myself, I have a deep and abiding respect for the Christian tradition and the faith of my peers at Wesley. I am in agreement with Adams and Channing, however, that there is little evidence for Jesus’ divinity, and given the place of reason and experience as arbiters of my theology, I must set Christology aside.

**Unitarian Universalism(s)**

“We’ll build a land where we bind up the broken.  
We’ll build a land where the captives go free,  
where the oil of gladness dissolves all mourning.  
Oh, we’ll build a promised land that can be.”

- *We’ll Build a Land, “Singing the Living Tradition”*

I am a member of the Unitarian Universalist Association, a free association of churches and congregations that have historically identified as either Unitarian or Universalist, two liberal Christian denominations that merged and broke away from the larger Christian faith in the mid 20th century. While a belief in either Unitarianism or Universalism is unnecessary in the modern UUA, I still hold both theological positions to some degree. They provide an excellent framing device to address issues of the Trinity and Creation that have formed a large part of our Systematic Theology class:

**Unitarianism**

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31 *Singing the Living Tradition*, 121.
Unitarianism is the name given to a rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity, a position that has existed as long as Christianity itself. While early unitarian theologians like Arius were concerned with the effect the doctrine of the Trinity had on the essential monotheistic nature of Christianity, the modern Unitarian movement began during the Protestant Reformation, and was later carried forward by the liberal wing of Massachusetts Congregationalist churches. This American Unitarianism still rejected the Trinity, specifically by expressing skepticism about the divinity of Jesus Christ.

To the early American Unitarians, a belief in Jesus’ divinity was incongruent with the test of rationality, and further was unnecessary for an affirmation of his teachings and example in the world. In doing so, the modern Unitarian position affirms the unity of God, while emphasizing the role of rationality and human capacity to lead a righteous life. Jesus, with Buddha, Confucius and others is a great teacher not for his other-worldliness, but because he is an example of how it is possible to live and teach peace. To return to an earlier point, I see Jesus as a great teacher not for what he believed, or what people believe about him, but for what he practiced and showed was possible.

Universalism

Universalism is an odd position for me to hold, especially given the emphasis on reason I have just described. I know it does not completely fit with the rest of my theology, but some amount of internal inconsistency is a part of almost every system when put into practice.

Unitarianism is simply an affirmation of Universal Salvation- that is, that God’s plan is the salvation of every individual. If we posit a loving God, the argument goes,
there must be salvation for all in the fullness of time. Eternal love and absolute
sovereignty is incompatible with eternal punishment. Universal Salvation has a long
history in the Christian Church as well, with such luminaries as Origen, Julian of
Norwich, and Barth all displaying universalist leanings in at least some of their writings.

While I remain a ‘principled agnostic,’ a serious embrace of pluralism and of
human potential for good suggests to me that if there is an all loving God, the end point
of all human lives is reconciliation. Neibuhr writes that the final form of love is
forgiveness, and surely if reconciliation is the highest human expression of love, how
much more so for God?

The Nature of the “Church”

Love is the spirit of this church,
and service its law.
This is our great covenant:
To dwell together in peace,
To seek the truth in love,
And to help one another.
~James Vila Blake, Singing the Living Tradition\textsuperscript{32}

Unitarian Universalism is an evolving faith. Our non-Trinitarian theology places
us squarely outside the World Council of Churches consensus of “The Church” as a
whole,\textsuperscript{33} but we maintain our self definition as a faith community, descended yet
separate from Christianity. This relationship, between our faith and “The Church,” as

\textsuperscript{32} Singing the Living Tradition, 473.

\textsuperscript{33} World Council of Churches, The Church: Toward A Common Vision. Faith and Order Paper
usually described, has been a topic of considerable challenge and thought for me over the last year.

My former thesis advisor, Dr. Schoenfeld, was in Baltimore for the annual AAR conference last fall. She came over for dinner, and over pasta and a bottle of wine, the conversation turned to our somewhat similar institutional circumstances. Devorah is now a professor at Loyola, a Jesuit university in Chicago. Naturally, much of her work now involves Christian-Jewish relations, and the fraught history of the two great traditions.

After I described the confusion and anxiety that many UUs seem to have surrounding our Christian history and relationship with the Christian church, she posed a question to me: Unitarian Universalism began as a part of the American Christian Church, distinct in its theology but still on the edges of the mainstream. Over a century, it gradually split from Christianity, while keeping many of the rhythms and traditions of its parent. Put that way, what would it look like to think of the relationship between Unitarian Universalism to Christianity as like that of Christianity to Judaism? Since I heard this comparison in the fall, I’ve discussed it with classmates, ministers, and friends, and while it is not a perfect comparison, it does have advantages. Critically, it asks us as Unitarian Universalists to be mindful of our relationship with our theological forbears, and to tread lightly lest we repeat the mistakes of that earlier relationship.

Much of who we are and who we are becoming as a community of faith is still being worked out, but some general trends are clear. While Avery Dulles’ models of the
church\textsuperscript{34} approaches the nature of the church from a decidedly Christian point of view, three of his models are applicable to our context: The church as community, herald, and institution.

\textit{The Church as Community}

Dulles frames this image as a ‘mystical communion,’ emphasizing relatively small scale groups in which members of the church share a spiritual experience with one another. While this is true of Unitarian Universalism, our emphasis on community goes beyond this conception. Emphasizing the role of humanity, and of individual conscience, our congregations are voluntary associations of individuals, operating on democratic principles and responsible, ultimately, to themselves as a collective. All authority, whether in ministry or governance, derives from the community that makes up the congregation. The ‘denomination’ as a whole reflects this emphasis. The Unitarian Universalist Association is an association of independent churches, with little oversight or authority over individual member congregations.

\textit{The Church as Herald}

My home church’s mission statement, read every Sunday, calls us to strive to be “...a beacon of hope, social justice, and liberal religious values in Baltimore and in the world.”\textsuperscript{35} Our good news is certainly dissimilar to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, but it is a


\textsuperscript{35} First Unitarian Church of Baltimore, Mission Statement
message that we hold fast to, and proclaim to the world around us. For a more complete statement of the message we proclaim, see “Eschatology,” below.

The Church as Institution

Unitarian Universalism, as an institution, is notable for its disfunction. A minister of mine once remarked that given our faith’s appeal to iconoclasts, we shouldn’t be surprised that our board of trustees couldn’t come up with a clear list of committee chairs after four months. This is a place of real growth for our faith. While our emphasis will always be on community, congregations, and bringing our good news to the world, a more realized institutional structure could help to make us more effective.

I see this as a major aspect of my ministry, to build up the institution of Unitarian Universalism in two primary ways: First, we have a deep, rich history to draw on as a faith, that we often overlook. From Servetus to Emerson, our history holds lessons and tradition for us. Secondly, our institutional structures are deeply inefficient. This may be the Public Policy student in me, but we can surely find a way to communicate and coordinate between congregations that is better than the hash we have now. Rev. Tom Schade, one of our more outspoken public theologians, has recently begun speaking and writing about the internalized negativity many UUs seem to have about our faith- that we are dilettantes, intellectual lightweights embracing a watered down new age philosophy without the kind of backbone of churches around us.36 By emphasizing our

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36 This was emphasized in a recent sermon he gave in Baltimore. Rev. Schade’s blog, “The Lively Tradition,” can be found at <http://www.tomschade.com/>
long history and improving our practical institutional structures, I hope that we can
begin to change that image.

**Sacraments**

*May the waters gathered here remind us what each of us brings to this
community, and of the waters that nourished us before we were even born, that
continue to give us sustenance and energy for our life journeys and that of all
creatures on this earth.*

-Susan Karlson

Unitarian Universalism is not a sacramental tradition, nor am I sacramental in
my own theology. This point has been made abundantly clear in class, and so it may
seem odd that a section on sacraments is included in this credo. We do, however, have
highly symbolic and deeply meaningful liturgy, practiced in a way that approaches the
form of an ordinance, but with slightly different justification. Our emphasis as a faith,
described above, on the power of the community is emphasized in these practices, in a
way that provides meaning both for the community and for the object of the practice.

Water services are held almost universally in UU congregations, as part of the
ingathering service at the beginning of the church year. Members of the congregation
bring water from their lives to the church. The water can come from many places- a
beach their family visited over the summer, the hospital room of a loved one, or their
garden hose at home. In coming together at ingathering, each member pours their
offering of water into a communal urn, signifying the combined experiences of all. The

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mingled water is used for ceremonial occasions throughout the church year, before becoming the base for the next year’s collection.

Notably, the water gathered from the congregation is used in child dedications and in ordination. Child dedications proceed much like the Christian practice of baptism, though critically no faith commitment is made on the child’s behalf. During the ceremony, the child is anointed by the water,\(^\text{38}\) signifying the role the congregation as a whole will have in his or her life. Similarly, the gathered water is used to anoint ministers during ordination, as a sign of the congregations support and love.\(^\text{39}\)

**Suffering and Evil**

>“Behind me, I heard the same man asking:
>‘For God's sake, where is God?’
>And from within me, I heard a voice answer:
>‘Where He is? This is where--hanging here from this gallows.’”
>-Elie Weisel, *Night*

I am (still) hesitant to write this section. Over the last several years I have experienced suffering and pain in my life and those around me to a degree few of my peers have. Immediately following my undergraduate degree, I joined the Peace Corps, and spent two years in Southern Africa. I worked primarily with an HIV/AIDS clinic, working on HIV education projects, but also seeing firsthand the devastation wrought

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\(^{38}\) Important health note: the water is frozen when not in use, and boiled before any ceremonial practice.

\(^{39}\) Orinations in the Unitarian Universalist Association follow the congregationalist model, further emphasizing the role of congregations. Rather than being appointed to a church, ministers are hired *and ordained* by the church they serve. Ordination is a process that happens not from the top (Association) down, but from the bottom (Congregations) up.
both by the disease and the systemic poverty of the area where I lived. That systemic poverty expressed itself in many ways, but high on the list was violence towards anyone perceived as more well off. While I was not targeted, Peace Corps Volunteers, good friends of mine, were physically and sexually assaulted. Eventually my friend Tom was shot and killed. We were there to help, but for too many of us the price was far too high.

I joined Peace Corps to give myself a few years to discern my call to ministry. After my return, I struggled with issues of theodicy, and ended up forgoing ministry in order to go into Public Policy: a nice, practical discipline where I could concentrate on helping, but perhaps not the bigger issues I had been dealing with. Six months after I came home, in what I sometimes imagine as a piece of dark cosmic humor, I was diagnosed with Hodgkins Lymphoma. Six months of chemo, two years of recurrent infections, and a diagnosis of an underlying primary immunodeficiency later, I can safely say that I am well versed in my own soul as to the challenge of theodicy both personal and corporate.\(^40\)

During chemo, for reasons I still cannot put into coherent words (though my Methodist colleagues at Wesley who have heard this story are quick to credit the work of the Spirit), I lost much of the bitterness that I left Peace Corps with. I came to Wesley shortly after going into remission. While theodicy is still a major challenge to any conception of God or philosophy, it is not the absolute block for me it was at one time.

\(^{40}\) I am still somewhat unhappy with including these details in a statement about belief, although they were and are certainly formative to my theology. Given their importance to the latter discussion of eschatology, however, I have included them in this draft.
Rather, it is something to think about and consider carefully, but not a topic to assume will be answered to our satisfaction in our lifetimes.

Several ways of thinking about suffering are possible. Barth’s position of the shadow side of creation has merit, but is answers the question of willful evil as it being something that humans bring into creation from their own fallen nature. Hick’s position, that suffering is a kind of growth opportunity for the soul, is entirely unsatisfying and condescending to those whose lives have more suffering in them than growth.

There is an important distinction to be made, present in Barth, between suffering inherent in our corporeal nature, and that caused by human choices. My genetic structure causing my immune system to self destruct at age 26 is something that no human hand could have directly caused, just as tsunamis or earthquakes cause great suffering for little apparent reason. This is what Barth considers the ‘shadow side’ of creation. Contra, systems created by human beings can create great suffering, both intended and unintended. While AIDS could, perhaps, be considered a ‘shadow side’ aspect of creation, the grinding poverty and violence of parts of Southern Africa are shaped by human institutions. The effects of this systemic violence, whether intentional or not, can and should be labeled for what they are: evil.

There is, certainly, some cross pollination between these two groups. Human systems can have effects on the natural world, from mudslides, to drug resistant

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41 Class Notes, 11/18/13

42 More accurately, I find it revolting to attempt to assign, from an outside vantage point, positive meaning either to the suffering I have experienced or that which I’ve witnessed in friends and colleagues described above.
bacteria, to climate change. Teasing out the exact distinctions between the two may ultimately be impossible.

Where I part ways with Barth is over the role of humanity in suffering. While Barth, as a good Reformed theologian, has a very low opinion of human beings and our propensity to sin, I believe that we are at least equally capable of acts of love and healing as sin and destruction. Human systems are destructive, absolutely, but because they are human systems, they are capable of being reformed. Until that time, however, we remain with the reality of suffering.

What, then, are we left with? Perhaps suffering is the place where, more than anywhere else, God is opaque, silent. There is suffering in the world, sometimes too much for words to contain, and I think it is notable that Lamentations is the single book in the Bible without God present as an explicit character in the drama. In the end, there may be no answer to the ‘why’ of suffering, other than silence and mutual support in our times of trial.

**Eschatology**

“We are builders of that city,
All our joys and all our groans
Help to rear its shining ramparts;
All our lives are building stones:
Whether humble or exalted,
All are called to task divine;
All must aid alike to carry
Forward one sublime design.

And the work that we have builded,
Oft with bleeding hands and tears,
Oft in error, oft in anguish,
Will not perish with our years:
It will live and shine transfigured,
In the final reign of right;
It will pass into the splendors
Of the city of the light.”

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43 Discussed more at length in the eschatology section.
-Hail the Glorious Golden City, “Singing the Living Tradition.”

Given the discussion of suffering and evil, above, a descent into cynicism over the state of the world seems very plausible. With all the suffering in the world, and without a belief system that allows for an external ‘salvation,’ we seem at first glance to be destined to lives of sadness, pain, and profound suffering. Yet an interesting moment takes place in many of my classes at Wesley, when the conversation turns to Eschatology and the future of mankind: I end up as the most optimistic person in the room. This end result depends on three presuppositions:

- Human beings are not inherently evil. We are capable of great evil, to be sure, but also of great good. I tend towards Pelagius’ position, that we have the capacity to choose our actions for ourselves, and are responsible for them.

- The problems we face are human problems. While this sounds like a tautology, what is meant here is that there is no supernatural force causing suffering. Nature plays a role in suffering, but humans are a part of nature. Many of the difficulties we face—poverty, violence, systemic oppression—are products of human hands.

- We must not depend on a supernatural end to suffering. Many traditions hold to some variant of supernatural eschatology, expressed in Abrahamic traditions as a time of judgement, and/or an inauguration of a reign of peace. While not discounting this as a possibility, I cannot count on it as a surety.

This leaves the conclusion: if our problems are human problems, then the solutions can, should, and must be human solutions. The promised land is ours to build, and indeed we are in the process of building it through the long arc of history.

44 Singing the Living Tradition, 140.
This is not meant to discount the possibility of things going horribly wrong; there are still enough nuclear weapons and will to violence to wipe out all of humanity. Yet there are signs of hope.

We live in the most peaceful era yet of human existence. While this seems counterintuitive the moment you read the news, the number of violent deaths is at a low point both absolutely and relatively. Archeological evidence suggests that over 15% of prestate human beings died violently. In more recent times, between 1400 and 2000, the murder rate in Europe declined by between 1,000-5,000 percent, depending on country. While the World Wars in the first half of the 20th century were brutal, the last sixty years have been remarkably free of conflict and war from a relative, historical point of view.45

In our social life, we have made vast strides in addressing the injustices of our lives together. The last 300 years have seen the general abolition of slavery, decolonization, the American Civil Rights movement, women's liberation, dramatically expanded access to education, and the recent movement for gender and marriage equality.46

Even in dealing with the ‘shadow side’ suffering described above, humanity has taken great strides. Medically we’ve all but eliminated many of the worst diseases we’ve faced, and are making strides in combatting those that remain.47 Norman Borlaug’s


46 There are certainly exceptions and holdouts to each of these examples, but in some ways the fact that they are holdouts shows the progress that has been made.

47 As a Africa RPCV, the recent clinical success of Truvada and the PREP protocol in reducing HIV transmission rates is both staggering and deeply hopeful. While not a vaccine, PREP may be the biggest step towards eliminating the virus since its discovery.
green revolution saved millions (if not billions) of lives, and gives us the possibility of a world without hunger. Even natural disasters are gradually becoming less dangerous, due to early warning systems and improved communication.

I believe that this is not just an accident of history. It is the result of billions of human beings, across the arc of our existence, working to make their corner of the world a better place for themselves and their children. Many of our UU hymns (including two quoted in this *credo*) call us to a kind of realized eschatology, building ‘the promised land that can be’ by contributing to this work.

Another student here at Wesley shared one of the most powerful metaphors of realized eschatology I’ve heard: Imagine that we are all at work, building a cathedral. In front of you, you have a single stone. Maybe it’s a piece of pillar, maybe it’s a cornerstone to an arch, but it is your life’s work to carve it as beautiful and as enduring as you can. You know the cathedral will not be completed in your lifetime, and you may not even know what it will look like, but in your life you will make that small, enduring contribution to the glory of the whole.

I don’t know what the promised land will look like. I don’t even know that we’ll reach it. Humanity may be like Zeno’s Achilles, perpetually getting closer but never quite reaching the goal. The goal is still there though, calling us to carve the stone in front of us.
Conclusion and Areas for Further Reflection

Come, come, whoever you are
Wanderer, worshiper, lover of leaving
Our is no caravan of despair
(even if you've broken your vows a thousand times)
Come, yet again, come.

-Rumi

This *Credo* is a limited, still in progress attempt at a coherent statement of my conception of a Unitarian Universalist theology. As such, there are many topics that I would like to have addressed, but for reasons of time and space have left out. While not everything that we covered this year, I believe the topics chosen flow together well, and present a picture of a theology still in formation, even as I am skeptical of the task of theology itself.

As a faith, so much of our theology and identity as UUs is still being formed. Ernest Becker wrote that the single driving force behind humanity is the fear of our own mortality. To compensate, we attempt to gain immortality by attaching ourself to cultural or religious projects that will live on beyond us.\(^49\) To Becker, this drives people to such varying aims religious practice, having a family, or joining a political party. Maybe Becker is right, and the coincidence of my coming to Wesley immediately following chemo is an attempt to cheat my own mortality. Even if Becker does have it right, I am happy to be a part of the process of forming a more coherent Unitarian Universalist identity. It will be a long process, each answer leading to more questions,

\(^{48}\) *Singing the Living Tradition*, 188.

but one that I embrace fully. This paper is concluding, but I expect to be writing some form of it for the next 50 years.
Our Principles

- 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;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Sources of Our Living Tradition

- 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.
Appendix 2

“Into the Wilderness”

This is not the sermon I meant to give today. There are times when preparation is not enough, when events in the life of the congregation overtake any carefully planned service or Sunday morning. This week has been one of those times. As you heard earlier, two days ago our Board of Trustees voted to cease our involvement with BRIDGE, disassociating ourselves from an organization we helped to found, and with whom many of us have spent time and energy on many different projects.

I am not here to speak to the specific circumstances that led to this decision, there will be meetings and discussions outside of worship to address them. I will only say that I was part of the decision making process, and while my heart breaks for the lost opportunities, I am convinced disassociation was our best, even our only, option. Instead, I want to take a few minutes to address the confusion and loss that so many of us are feeling this morning, and to affirm that even as we find ourselves in the wilderness, there is a way forward.

It is perhaps fitting that this is the first Sunday of Lent. While we often use Lent as a time to cut back or give up vices, for our Christian sisters and brothers it is a time of contemplation, penitence, and even grief. These forty days and nights leading up to Easter are symbolic of the time Jesus spent fasting in the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry. In turn, Jesus’ fast recalls the 40 years the Israelites spent wandering in the Exodus, yearning for but not yet entering their promised land.

Our reading this morning begins with Jesus being led by the spirit into the wilderness. In the verse before, God Himself has declared Jesus ‘my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’ We might expect, Jesus might have expected, that this would be the start of a triumphant ministry, bringing words of justice and mercy, healing the wounds of the world. Instead, Jesus is led into the wilderness -the desert- to be tempted, and fasts for forty days and nights.

Imagine, for a moment, this wilderness. This is not the pristine wild of one of our national parks, where a hot meal and a bed are only a short drive away. This is the wilderness of ancient Judea, a desert mostly, with no habitation and no easy way out. Close your eyes. Feel the wind, blowing dust in your teeth, scorching hot by day and icy by night. Feel the thirst and the hunger, growing, without an easy way to quench them. Listen to the silence ... ... Only the wind and the occasional rustling of an insect to keep your heartbeat company. Most of all, feel the isolation, the loneliness of the place, the wilderness. ... ...

Scripture tells us that after forty days and forty nights Jesus is tempted by the devil. Three times he is tempted to use his power to alleviate the suffering he must have felt- first to create bread from stone, then to escape the wilderness and have power over the world. Each time Jesus refuses the easy way out, until the devil retreats and Jesus is waited on by angels.
Now, I don’t think you need to believe in a literal devil to understand this story. The temptation to take a shortcut, to leave the wilderness, is powerful enough as it is. What is remarkable in this story is Jesus’ faith; even in the midst of isolation and uncertainty, he knows that he will be provided for, that there is a way out. By rejecting the easy way out of the wilderness, Jesus embraces all that is to come.

Our church feels lost in the wilderness this morning. Our guide-stone for much of our work these last ten years is no longer there. Today we are left wondering what the way forward is, and there are no easy answers. We are in uncharted territory together, fasting in the desert.

What will we do with this time in the wilderness, this Lentan season? For many of us in the past, we’ve given up vices for lent- I know I have. But I want to challenge us to do more this year, to use this time in the wilderness as a time of reflection. We’ve lost a connection that helped define our place in this city, and there is grief in that, it’s true.

But this can also be a time to affirm that which is true and good about ourselves and our mission as a people. We are still dedicated to developing genuine equality in Baltimore and in the world, nothing has changed about that. We are still a church founded to be a beacon of hope and and truth, nothing has changed about that. And while our connection to BRIDGE and some of our neighbor churches is changing, we remain committed to being a force for social change and reconciliation in this city.

The forty days and nights Jesus spent in the wilderness are an echo of another, older story, that of the forty years the Israelites spent in the wilderness before reaching their promised land. The part of the story that we often leave out is their first arrival at the Jordan river, coming to the promised land after only two years but, due to their own failings, they wander another generation before crossing.

Maybe we saw in BRIDGE a glimpse of what we seek: a city less divided, a place where all faiths come to the same table and work together to solve our common problems. We grieve this morning that that promise has not been fulfilled, yes. It will be a difficult road ahead. There will be false hopes, successes, setbacks and celebrations. In this wilderness time we find ourselves in, searching for that road while the icy wind howls, let us rededicate ourselves to our highest principles. Knowing the road will be long, we will not take the easy way out, but instead trust that the future we work towards will come, in the fullness of time.

Bless you all.
Amen.
Bibliography


