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Nearer Neighbors: Unitarian Universalism, Liberal Protestantism, and Eclectic Faith-assembly

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Abstract

Unitarian Universalism (UUism), the product of unification between the sects of Unitarianism and Universalism in the 1960s, owes much to its nineteenth-century provenance among various increasingly liberal groups of Protestantism. In my paper I describe Unitarianism's differences and similarities with nineteenth-century Protestantism by means of the common trends and developments of secularization. I will argue that the mode of eclecticism that modern UUism employs to differentiate itself from its liberal Protestant progenitors preserves Christian preconceptions of the nature of fulfillment and religious truth. Additionally, I will discuss some of the assumptions inherent in UU's eclectic process of faith-construction, and argue that, though UU discourse has long sought with urgency to differentiate itself from Christianity, it nevertheless preserves the framework of a liberal Protestant religious worldview.

A theory of difference, when applied to the proximate 'other,'

is but another way of phrasing a theory of 'self.'

–Jonathan Z. Smith (2004: 246)

Introduction

Unitarian Universalism is a small denomination that one might categorize as one of the most liberal sects of Protestant Christianity were it not for the fact that Unitarian Universalist (UU) adherents have long and insistently defined their beliefs over against those of mainline Christianity. The simultaneous presence of UUism's Protestant history and its persistent attempts to distance itself from that history will be the focus of this paper.

The name Unitarian Universalism is a product of the two liberal Protestant sects that combined to constitute UUism's membership in 1961. The two strands had paralleled each other in doctrine, discourse, and devotees for over a century—many are the examples of spokespersons who adopted both faiths either consecutively or simultaneously. The unification allowed the sister sects to simplify both the overlapping similarities between their beliefs, and the membership and monetary difficulties they were experiencing in the mid-twentieth century. Prior to this pivotal moment, however, both of the traditions cultivated an involved history among liberal Protestant groups, and memberships encompassing numerous outspoken proponents in influential positions among New England thinkers of the nineteenth century.

Today, UU churches have a limited but growing membership primarily in the United States, although there are congregations scattered across Europe. Unitarianism, in fact, has its earliest roots in the Protestant Reformation, and claims Transylvania as its natal country during

the reign of John II Sigismund (1540-1571), who helped establish the first Unitarian churches. Although these churches eventually spread to the new world, they did not exert their fullest influence until the 1800s, when spokespersons such as William Ellery Channing, Theodore Parker, and Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote and orated on the rationality and tenability of a liberal religious viewpoint. During this century Unitarianism—as opposed to Universalism, particularly—had effects far wider than its limited membership. We will note that Universalism—more pronounced as a general thread of Christian beliefs than as a distinct sect—played its part as well, but the most prominent advocates of new liberal beliefs that demurred from Christianity were Unitarians. The resonance of their ideas was the result of, for the most part, Unitarianism's efforts to distinguish itself from liberal Protestantism and, implicit in that, the more fundamentalist forms of Christianity those liberal Protestant sects had already left behind.

These efforts towards self-distinction could be seen as the necessary growing pains of any new religious movement that seeks to carve out a niche for itself among the prolific and proliferating sects and sub-sects that populate the global religious environment. Consistent with what seems a general trend in religious development, though, we will see in UUism that the religious group it works hardest to distinguish itself from is its nearest genealogical relative. As Jonathan Z. Smith points out in his essay "Differential Equations," "it is the proximate 'other,' the near neighbor, who is most troublesome" (2004: 245). The trouble arises when a proximate group's characteristics threaten to overlap with one's own, to the extent that the characteristics of one might be mistaken for the other, inciting the postulation of difference as a means of "maintaining and relativizing internal as well as external distinctions" (245). Smith's essay points out that characterizations of difference—like the distinctions UUism draws with

Christianity—are not statements of otherness, but actually ways of situating and negotiating differences *and* similarities. Quite apart from any of the following in the footsteps of any of Smith's three theories of the "other" in Western discourse, UUism employs a language of difference with the group out of which it arose—liberal Protestantism—alongside a language of internal distinctions.

Accepted UU writers whose work we will explore later exhibit a palpable urgency in their efforts to differentiate UUism from its parent Protestantism, such that this difference with Christianity becomes an unavoidable underlying theme in descriptions of the faith: "Unitarian Universalists are neither a chosen people, nor a people whose choices are made for them by theological authorities—ancient or otherwise. …Ours is a faith whose authority is grounded in contemporary experience, not ancient revelation" (Church 1989: xviii). This leads to an insistence that Unitarian Universalism is a faith that "varies from Protestantism on almost every point" (Marshall 1970: 92). Such urgent assertions of unconquerable difference with Protestantism constitute the claims with which I will contend in this paper.

As the nearest religious neighbor, liberal Protestant denominations and liberal Protestantism as a whole provided the framework against which Unitarianism defined itself in the nineteenth century, but we will explore one particular way that the tradition accomplishes this: through the call to an individual eclectic construction of religious or spiritual truth. This eclecticism consists largely in reflexive self-investigation alongside inquiry into the diversity of religious expression from a historical/critical standpoint. But the purpose of this eclecticism, the inspiration for what will become familiar in UUism—an imperative spiritual "quest" for religious identity—was to posit a tradition distinct from a version of Christianity that was painted as decidedly un-eclectic. Smith asserts that "the real urgency of theories of the 'other'" are

"called forth not so much by a requirement to place difference, but rather by an effort to situate ourselves" (2004: 245); for UUism, the urgency with which some members did and do distance themselves from Christian doctrine can be seen as an effort at demarcating a religious identity. Thus, in much UU description, we see a picture of monotheism as monochromatic, monotone, and monopolizing on claims to religious truth, which Unitarianism purports to reclaim with all the confidence and good intent of a chivalric knight on a preordained quest. UU eclecticism, then, frames itself as dynamic, as active and searching, and in contradistinction to "conventional" religions, which are described as static, unchanging, or incurious.

I will argue that the UU "quest," accomplished by means of this eclecticism, is one of the primary ways in which Unitarian Universalism preserves the framework of liberal Protestant Christianity. At the same time that UUism attempts to recreate itself as distinct from its parental tradition, it does so within the discourse established by liberal Protestantism. I will begin by exploring some of the links between Unitarianism and prominent liberal religious trends in nineteenth century, and then examine the nature of UUism's eclectic process and its implicit assertions about religion and religious essence. What will appear are trends of thought and assumptions within UU discourse that fit demonstrably within the framework of a liberal Protestant outlook. Far from "varying from Protestantism on almost every point," we will see that UUism in fact maintains many patently Protestant modes of understanding religiosity; in UUism, however, these ideas are exaggerated or expounded to a further degree than in their traditions of origin, enacting the process of internal and external differentiation as a means of formulating the self that Smith emphasizes in his essay.

I do not intend to point out occasionally blunt disparagement of Christian belief within UUism and posit such parts of the religion as representative of the whole. On the whole, UU

thinkers work hard to maintain respectful relations with all of the world's traditions and beliefs; the discourse of UUism exemplifies this. But within the churches and among members, the task of differentiating the UU self from "conventional" religions, which are generally approximated by Christian monotheism, often becomes an exercise in detailing the parts of such beliefs with which a person takes issue. Instead of dwelling on these individual conceptions of belief, I intend to show how UUism's emphasis on forming individual beliefs in a framework that implicitly preserves Christian modes and themes allows adherents to inhabit a distinctly Christian religious structure at the same time as they define themselves and their beliefs over against such structures.

Methodology

My paper will analyze works of some widely accepted authors of "canonical" texts about (not of, for the tradition endorses no particular texts) UUism. These texts demonstrate how the pluralist search of UUism takes place in terms of a distinctly Western Christian liberalist paradigm. Because there is no single text that represents UUism, I have chosen works widely and enthusiastically lauded by UU churches and by the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) bookstore and website as introductions to UUism and as explanations of its beliefs and religious outlook. The tradition adopts seven principles that are unanimously and incontrovertibly supported across all of its congregations and institutions (for example, they are listed as guiding principles of the UU publishing house Beacon Press).[1] Because these seven principles are the only concrete aspects of the faith demonstrably affirmed by every iteration of UUism, I will investigate works that are put forward by the UUA, Beacon Press, and outside institutions investigating the tradition as representative of UU belief, and that openly adhere to these seven principles of Unitarian Universalism, but I will not enter into the staggeringly diverse interpretation and variations on these beliefs present in UUism's congregations.

The first book I will consider is an account of Unitarian Universalism written shortly after the 1961 unification of its constituent sects. George N. Marshall's *Challenge of a Liberal Faith* (1970), published by the church's own Beacon Press, examines many aspects of UUism

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[1] These seven principles are: "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" (*Singing the Living Tradition* 1993).

from within the faith, including a brief history of its provenance and an overview of the

perspective on religious education and interaction.

Another important text written almost two decades after Marshall's challenge explicates

many of the same themes. Authored by two UU spokespersons—John A. Buehrens, (then)

president of the Unitarian Universalist Association and F. Forrester Church, a minister at a

prominent New York church—*Our Chosen Faith* (1989) has become the standard text of UU

self-description for anyone interested in the tradition or looking to learn more about it. The UUA

bookstore, Beacon Press, and UU World Magazine put this work (and others by Church,

particularly) first in terms of introductory information on UUism. Although UU congregations

vary markedly in their sentiments and styles of worship, works like *Our Chosen Faith* come as

close as possible to being unanimously accepted across UUism's characteristic multiplicity of

religious and spiritual beliefs.

Jack Mendelsohn (1918-) authored a third standby text of UU description. He is a

Unitarian minister who began preaching well before the unification of Unitarianism and

Universalism, and author of a well-known biography of Channing—one of the aforementioned

Unitarian progenitors (*William Ellery Channing: Reluctant Radical,* 1971). Mendelsohn's 1985

edition of *Being Liberal in an Illiberal Age: Why I Am A Unitarian Universalist* provides further

emphasis of many of the views expressed in Marshall's and Buehrens and Church's books.

Mendelsohn, in fact, goes somewhat further than the former two in his treatment of "static"

monotheism in contradistinction to UUism.

Mendelsohn's book is no exception to a general rule: UUs walk a fine line between

acknowledging (or admitting) the legitimacy Christian faith and practice, and attempting to sever

their own tradition's Protestant roots. Of course, we must note that UUism does not necessarily

or requisitely hold many of the most fundamental (indeed, definitive) Christian beliefs: many UUs identify as atheists; some believe in a capital-g God but deny Jesus-as-Christ; some would call themselves Humanists and others perhaps Earth-worshippers or Agnostics; few, however, would accept the designation Christian—especially without some qualifying modifier attached to the label. Digging into the history of Unitarian provenance, we find a consistent trend of criticism of outmoded models of belief. Unitarianism, like liberal Protestantism, made efforts to distinguish itself as more inclusive than its "conventional" religious counterparts throughout the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, this theme continues through the inclusion of views on human fulfillment that are gathered from outside the scope of traditional religious belief altogether: philosophies like atheism, humanism, agnosticism, and what we might call deferential apathy toward religion at large.

The diversity of beliefs held within UU ranks has caused some to dismiss its status as a "religion"[2]; however, this is not necessarily a point of contention for many UUs. We will spend some time talking about the tradition's views on the word "religion," because this demonstrates one of the key components of a liberal Protestant view that persists in UUism today. For now, we can note that the values and beliefs of UUs show it to be a religion at least in some distinctly Christian characteristics that, in the modern West, often serve to define "religion": its congregations meet on Sundays, have churches, celebrate holidays (including traditionally "religious" ones), perform marriages, and sing hymns from a hymnal.

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[2] In fact, in his discussion of some tensions between more "Humanist" and more "Spiritualist" camps within UUism, Richard Lee points out that the tradition falls quite in line with the definition of "cult" as a group whose distinctiveness "mainly consists in eclectically combining beliefs and practices appropriated from various domestic and foreign sources" (1995: 380). However, Lee's discussion also details UUism's obvious match with the definition of a "sect" as breakaway a group from a larger, preexisting religious tradition.

While these habits of Christian praxis are points of similarity between the larger tradition and UUism, the hymnal is actually a primary place where the differentiation between UUism and Christianity is apparent. *Singing in the Living Tradition* (1993), the committee-edited and collected hymnal of representative UU songs and readings is a bursting collection of diverse music and poetry from almost every greater tradition in the world. In addition to its demonstration of UU eclectic practices, it also provides the tradition's seven fundamental principles at the front; these are the closest UUism comes to conventional religious "rigidity," and the tempering of that is one of its main goals. In the opening pages containing UUism's principles and sources of inspiration, the hymnal's language suggests the singularly Christian background from which UUism arose with phrases like, "We free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support" (1993).

One thing we should note in comparing UUism with liberal Protestantism is that the latter came into its own during a time of intense ideological shifts in the West. A pertinent concept for understanding these shifts is secularism in part because of the close tie between secular developments in the West during the nineteenth century and liberal Protestant movements, and also because of the role that important progenitors of UUism played in these developments. Unified Unitarian Universalism appeared in a society that already conceived of itself as largely secular, at least in the respect that religion was seen as the province of private parties and not as political or in any way public. This secularism, whether correctly or not, is often conceived as a society or environment in which religion no longer has a formative or foundational role. In a similar fashion to UUism's distancing itself from the name of religion, secularism is often seen as a process of disengagement with longstanding modes of religiosity. While many scholars— among them, Martin Marty and Charles Taylor—have taken issue with the simplicity of such a

single-sided story, the transformations they trace often expose this sort of sentiment. The sources

of ideas that characterized "conventional" religions as outdated or obsolete, in these narratives of

secularism, are often iterations of developing liberal Protestantism or early Unitarian groups.

Of course, even those who argue that secularism is a complex phenomenon with multiple

factors have attempted to hint at some provisional essence. Charles Taylor, for example, sees *A

Secular Age* (2007) as an age in which "belief in God is no longer axiomatic" (3). He studies

secularism as the product of a centuries-long change consisting in a bewildering variety of

disparate factors that he attempts to trace by way of genealogy. In *The Modern Schism* (1969),

Martin Marty expresses a similar sentiment in regard to the often simplistic conceptions of

secularism, which "in the writings of many theological and social thinkers, has a single

dimension and direction" (10).[3] Much like Taylor, Marty proposes to attempt "a historian's

contribution to the understanding of secular reality as it has unfolded" (1969: 10).[4] Because of

the important role that both nineteenth-century liberal Protestantism and Unitarianism played in

the development of concepts and trends in secularism, these two works are useful for

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[3] In *The Sacred Canopy* (1967), Peter Berger precedes both Taylor and Marty, and differs slightly, in asserting, "By

secularization we mean the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of

religious institutions and symbols" (107). However, he details many facets of this secular relationship in the same

vein as Taylor and Marty, and concedes, "it is also possible to inquire into its historical origins, *including* its

historical connection with Christianity, without asserting that this represents either a fulfillment or a degeneration of

the latter" (107).

[4] For an anthropologist's contribution to the discussion, Talal Asad's *Formations of the Secular* (2003) provides an

attempt by answering the question, "What might an anthropology of the secular look like?" Asad's work provides a

somewhat more contemporary focus than the accounts of Taylor and Marty, but he agrees with the two insofar as he

finds secularism "neither singular in origin nor stable in its historical identity" (2003: 25).

contextualizing Unitarian and Universalist beliefs in terms of their growth, although they, like most works, find more to discuss in terms of Unitarian thinkers than Universalists.

The early exponents of Unitarianism and their relationship with liberal Protestantism in the nineteenth century play a crucial role in marking out the shape of UUism today. The works we will consider give special importance the roles of major thinkers in the history of Unitarianism, saying, for example, "We remember the phrase of our predecessors: 'Religion is a present reality; it is also an inheritance'" (*Singing the Living Tradition* 1993). The books by Marshall, Buehrens and Church, and Mendelsohn all devote significant portions to the history and historical persons of Unitarian Universalism. *Challenge of a Liberal Faith* is composed largely of quotations from UU thinkers of the past; *Our Chosen Faith* includes nearly as many quotes, and a lengthy chronology of UUism at its end. This emphasis on UUism's past is the reason that a discussion of the developments of secularism is helpful in tracing the persistence of UUism's roots even when unacknowledged in the literature—all these figures of UU provenance played important roles in the developments of secularism in the nineteenth century.

Throughout this exploration, I will attempt to show the threads of certain beliefs, values, outlooks, concepts, and trends in Unitarianism—along with the relationship of these to their counterparts in liberal Protestantism—and how they fit into more recent UU discourse. Specifically, I will begin with Unitarianism's growing rift with mainline Christian doctrine in the nineteenth century and some of the values associated with this—values that simultaneously marked the ideological developments of secularism—and then move to an investigation of the nature of Unitarian, and later UU, eclecticism.

Unitarianism, Secularism, and the "split" from liberal Protestantism

Taylor's and Marty's books both discuss secularism within the context of Western Christianity, especially in North America, which was marked in large part by the advent of liberal Protestantism. This is important because UUism's gestation took place almost entirely within this permeable Christian-framed and inflected environment, and therefore interacted often with these formative groups, paralelling the developments of secularism spearheaded largely by groups of liberal Protestantism. In this section, we will explore some of the formative ideas and notion of secularism, particularly as liberal Protestantism and early Unitarian thinkers formulated them. A consistent trend will appear: these concepts and notions that helped constitute the secular shifts in the 1800s were present in both liberal Protestantism at large and in the thought of Unitarian thinkers, but they remain in UUism today, often in an exaggerated form.

One of the foundational aspects of secularism with regard to Protestant Christianity, and one that we will see appear in Unitarianism and later in UUism, is the phenomenon of liberalism. Marshall uses the word "liberal" to describe UU faith in the title of his book, and specifically he refers to the Unitarianism of the early 1800s, which embraced the Enlightenment propensity for a historical/critical approach to elements of religion commonly held as sacrosanct. William Hutchison explores this more broadly in *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism*, in which he points out that nineteenth-century liberal Protestantism commonly entailed "modifications of the more rigorous doctrines concerning God's sovereignty, human wickedness, and the exclusiveness of Christian revelation" (1976: 3). This trend produced such works as Thomas Jefferson's emendation of the New Testament gospel narratives—a project that removed various content and some of the more miraculous parables in a "quest for a rational and

universally valid religious worldview" (Hatcher 1999: 34). Jefferson's process was emblematic

of Protestant liberalism, which defined itself partly by attempts to reevaluate the Biblical texts

"in order that they might be 'objectively' interpreted in the context of the historical

circumstances in which they originated" (Richardson 1969: 192). Indeed, not only Protestant

liberalism but also the secular process itself embraced a new approach to sacred texts. Taylor

points out the invigoration of Biblical criticism as early as the seventeenth century: "Biblical

accounts begin to be weighed in terms of what was considered plausible; allowances begin to be

made… and the like" (2007: 271).[5] Liberal Protestant attempts to fit the content of the Bible into

a rational, Enlightenment worldview were emblematic of the intellectual currents permeating the

increasingly secular West in the 1800s.

For this reason, Marshall's description of the UU approach to the Bible as "based on

comparative religions, on archeological findings, [and] on the historical method of criticism"

(1970: 160), a method that appears to be a direct descendent of the Jeffersonian/Liberalist take

on exegesis, is unsurprising. And in fact, within the liberal environment surrounding it during the

nineteenth century, Unitarianism played a pivotal role in modification of Christian doctrine,

helping to produce what might be called a "softened" Christianity (Taylor uses the word "tamed"

(2007: 292)). Hutchison goes so far as to say, "In America it was the Unitarians of the first half

of the nineteenth century who fused such modifications into an organized movement" (1976: 3).

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[5] In his discussion of religious plausibility, Berger links this project, and ones like Jefferson's, to the growing

prevalence of secular pluralism. Because there are a growing number of religious traditions that are all equally

viable to an individual, these traditions often have to "market" themselves. This process often means that the

traditions must modify their views to conform to greater post-Enlightenment standards of plausibility: "In extreme

cases (as in liberal Protestantism and Judaism)" says Berger, "this may lead to the deliberate excision of all or nearly

all "supernatural" elements from the religious tradition" (1967: 146).

From the basis of this organized response to Christianity, while it "remained small as a denomination," Hutchison claims Unitarianism "performed disproportionately large service as a vehicle and testing-ground for liberal religious ideas" such as the aforementioned critical approach to the Bible (1976: 3). Indeed, in the nineteenth century and even today, to a certain extent, Unitarianism and then UUism have had effects far wider than their limited membership would suggest.

Although painting a much broader picture of secularism, Taylor regards Unitarian groups during secularism's pivotal nineteenth century as widely influential, saying that in a sense, "Unitarianism wasn't confined to Unitarians" (2007: 291). This is one way of saying that the values that appeared in Unitarianism were emblematic of more pervasive and all-encompassing trends in secular development. Liberal Protestant concepts, new ideas, and alternate takes on Christian doctrine might have their test drive in Unitarianism, but would in some way, at some point, return to Christianity at large to work their influence in broad swaths of secular society. In this way, the development of the accelerating process of secularism in the nineteenth century was simultaneously enacted in Unitarian and Universalist groups, and within liberal Protestant groups at large, instilling formative concepts and constructions in both that remained into the twentieth century.

While many concepts within the development of secularism and liberalism influenced various groups and milieu, Unitarianism would be the tradition to take and apply them to their fullest extent. What this meant, however, was that ideas that grew from increasingly liberal Protestantism—the historical/critical take on the Bible, for example—remained in UUism and maintained its link with the previous traditions long after UUism's break with mainline Christianity. In this way, we could respond to the claim that "Unitarianism wasn't confined to

Unitarians" by saying that, likewise, Christian religious structure wasn't confined to Christianity; these same structures, the same consideration for the Bible that caused liberal Protestants to investigate it critically, remained in Unitarianism and then UUism, preserving a relatively high regard for the text within a faith that purported to be patently non-textual, non-Christian, and unsentimental.

We will return to this trend, but for now explore further the tendency of UUism to function as the "testing ground" for liberal religious ideas, which were foundational to the accelerating developments of secularization in the nineteenth century. To take one example, Taylor explores Unitarianism's treatment of Jesus, which would become a common—if not the standby, or at least politically correct—conception of the figure for the secular West: "Unitarianism… can be seen as an attempt to hold on to the central figure of Jesus, while cutting loose from the main soteriological doctrines of historical Christianity. …Jesus' role in this is that of a teacher, by precept and example" (2007: 291). This emphasis upon Jesus' example was important in the post-Enlightenment moral world, when questions of plausibility and rationality called the more fantastic claims of the Bible into question. Jesus's life was now crucial as the necessary framework for people who lived life as Christians and, at least to the extent of their ability, lived according to the idea of Jesus and his teachings. But more importantly, the idea of Jesus as the great exemplar might be the most important part of his meaning in modernity. Jesus as a teacher has become a fairly common concept, and he is regularly grouped with other figures of momentous historical, philosophical, ethical, and didactic importance such as Socrates, St. Francis, and Gandhi—as one whose work and wisdom both serve as examples of morality.

This transformation of Jesus into an exemplar is one step in a process that eventually allows Marshall to conclude that, in UUism, "we find Jesus emerging from history not as a God

but as a teacher who, filled with the urgency of his times, called upon men to make their religion more humane" (1970: 154). Likewise Church, in summarizing the thinking of Theodore Parker (1810-1860), a well-known Unitarian minister, says that "Parker went to the heart of Jesus' own teachings" and focused on what Jesus taught "not as a Christian, but as a Jew" (1989: 123). The idea of reasoned teaching and Enlightenment-era critical inquiry shaped the UU conception of Jesus—one which would return to sects of more traditional Protestantism, eventually modulating the greater Christology to increase its focus on teachings or on moral salvation.

It is worth emphasizing the focus on historical research and critical inquiry into Jesus's life and teachings, because such projects were emblematic of a secular stance towards religious beliefs. Marshall begins his discussion of Jesus by saying, "At the outset we must note that changes and advances in scholarship have developed rapidly" (1970: 150). He goes on to state some of the (then) recent discoveries or hypotheses about Jesus and his ministry, scholarship on the gospels, and archeological discoveries. This tendency to assume the historical perspective at the outset, to employ or recognize the historical method first, is a product of the trends of secularization that opened the door to questions about Jesus in the first place; a place where UUism continues to enact a tendency founded in sects of liberal Protestantism. Church supports this idea by citing, in his discussion of Unitarianism and Christian ideals, the venerable Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing (1780-1842) speaking in 1819:

> Not only did [Channing] defend the principle of God's unity (rejecting the trinity
> as nonscriptural), but he also presented contemporary Unitarian views on the
> interpretation of scripture. "We feel it our bounden duty to exercise our reason
> upon it perpetually; to compare, to infer… and, in general, to make use of what is

known for explaining what is difficult, and for discovering *new truths*." (1989:

122, emphasis mine)

Channing speaks of the need to reason with the Bible, to infer and compare (ostensibly using

historical method for critical comparison); moreover, he was presenting, early in the 1800s, a

contemporary *Unitarian* view on the Bible as a text to mine for "new truths." This idea of taking

and working—maybe even struggling—with the content of the Bible has become, in the

intervening years, a common notion even for relatively conservative Christian traditions. Many

adherents today welcome more historical or scientific information about the times and places of

the Bible, and especially those of Jesus. At the time of their expression, however, the degree of

emphasis in ideas like Channing and Parker's might have distanced them from the approval of

Protestant Christianity proper.

Nevertheless, this sort of conception of Jesus by secular society demonstrates the depth of

the imprint of religiosity in its structure and preoccupations. It is part of a relationship between

the positions of belief and unbelief, the latter of which must necessarily preserve a "sense of

some religious view which is being negated" (Taylor 2007: 269). In other words, this secular

position of unbelief defines itself based upon what it is not. The act of overcoming or surpassing

the previous guise of belief is not an act of complete alienation. In actually, it exposes the degree

to which the patterns and precepts of the previous construct influence the renewed sense of social

and religious self. Even for those furthest from traditional religiosity, says Taylor, "God is still a

reference point… because he helps define the temptation you have to overcome and set aside to

rise to the heights of rationality" (2007: 268). This intrinsic connection to the belief left behind is

implicit in a wide variety of UU concepts, more closely than the "temptation" view of God in

exclusive humanism. Protestant religious structure and form are present even in the very idea of

worship itself: the vast majority of UUs have "congregations" that still meet in "churches"; still carve out sections of their Sunday services for the "sermon" or, occasionally, "message"; and to that end, still meet on Sunday mornings.[6]

The deeply rooted connection to Christianity is one of the most interesting complexities of Unitarian Universalism. Although writers like Marshall insist that the faith "varies from Protestantism on almost every point," and "simply cannot be explained in terms of Protestant beliefs in a positive way" (1970: 92), they fail to acknowledge the debt implicit in such a formulation. This much is true: Unitarianism defined itself specifically over against the Protestantism from which it grew by categorically disavowing many or most Protestant beliefs. However, because of this conditional self-definition, the framework of Christian religious structure was preserved—including aspects such as the question of Jesus and his divinity, the unnoticed assumptions of houses of worship and the idea of congregations—thus permeating every aspect of Unitarianism and, associatively, UUism.

As a result of this influence, Unitarianism in the nineteenth century was very much molded in the shape of the preexisting Protestantism, but this is not to say that it is nothing more than a "softened" Christianity, because Christianity itself was experiencing a softening in the 1800s. According to Taylor, during this time "opinion begins to move against" extreme doctrines like predestination (2007: 262). This trend allowed for the tempering of aspects of Christianity that had always been incontrovertible, and opened the door to reevaluations of even such a

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[6] If one might ask, "Why not Friday night spirit sessions?", one would arrive at a curious facet of UU diversity: while meeting primarily on Sunday mornings, most—perhaps nearly all—UU churches have meetings, sessions, worships, meditations, workshops, discussion groups, and other activities throughout the week, open to all members or even people in the community, and representing various traditions and groups. This is an example of a notion of liberal Protestantism—that of "weeklong worship"—being reinterpreted and extended in UUism.

sacrosanct figure as Jesus himself. UU texts today expend considerable effort on distinguishing

the faith from those traditions that are characterized as holding too securely or incuriously to

questions like the divinity of Jesus—thus the picture of UUism as a tradition in motion, as

dynamic, in contrast to "conventional" religion as static and unchanging. But these texts often

fail to acknowledge the similarities between Unitarian spearheading of these concepts and their

parallel development, and occasional adoption, within liberal Protestantism. See in this light,

Unitarianism in the nineteenth century appears not so much as a sharp break with organized

religion as it does the furthest stretching of the liberal imagination—the place where the

experimental beliefs born of secular concerns were taken to their logical conclusions.

Within such an active environment of inquiry, reinvestigation, and self-examination of

the foremost religious traditions (in, we must keep in mind for the sake of this paper, the modern

West), Unitarianism occupied a pivotal space. As Hutchison points out, it functioned as

something of a "testing-ground for liberal religious ideas" (1976: 3), ideas that represented the

whole of nineteenth-century secularism's conceptual shift from treating religion as the

transcendent, overarching principle shaping all of reality to a more immanent and less efficacious

force that had its place in some social milieu, but not in others. Though this trend was

widespread, says Taylor, "the defining theological beliefs of Unitarianism reflect the shift

clearly" (2007: 291). Here he is in agreement with Hutchison that, in the nineteenth century,

Unitarianism was the faith in which the formative concepts and constructs of secularism were

clearly reflected. This is part of how the normative modes of religion defined by secularization

trends and developments within liberal Protestantism were embedded into Unitarian—and later,

UU—discourse, but remained or became structuring principles of these more "conventionally"

religious groups as well.

Perhaps the most important example of the trend of the adoption and subsequent emphasis and exaggeration of certain developments of secularism from within liberal Protestantism by Unitarian and later UU thinkers is the increasing emphasis on individualism and individual conceptions of salvation or fulfillment. This idea springs from the deepening "entrenchment of a new self-understanding of our social existence, one which gave an unprecedented primacy to the individual" that Taylor marks as a defining feature of secularism (2007: 146). Bernard Rearden, too, traces this individualist shift through the development of *Liberal Protestantism* (1968). He finds evidence of an individualist transformation as far back as the Reformation, saying, "The assertion of the right of the individual believer to judge for himself—albeit under the Spirit's guidance—was something which could never be wholly expunged" (1968: 10). Indeed, far from ever being "expunged," this right became the dominant framework for the secular understanding of salvation and fulfillment. And where the notion of individual fulfillment came to be an overarching concept in Protestant belief, it became, as we will see, a formative assumption of the very way in which UUism defined faith.

Fulfillment or "fullness," as Taylor describes it (2007: 7), must be achieved per individual, and moreover, the individual must look within to discover the path. In this way, individuality does not only imply that different means are possible for different people, but that each individual must find his or her own way, whether it is unique or revealed in a preexisting faith. These ideas were implicit in the secular shift, but not always outwardly expressed. It is true that the vast majority of people from generation to generation have usually retained whatever denominational leaning their parents held, as opposed to embarking on personal spiritual journeys. The difference has been in increments and instances, as new ideas like Unitarianism

broke into the social consciousness and established their claim to "new truths" that might be appearing—or be revealed where they had lain hidden within established doctrine or practice.

Thus the exponent of these "new truths," William Ellery Channing, held on to the ideal of religion itself, but cried out for its revitalization. This is a primary way in which UUism's progenitors had staked out a space for the new tradition: religion was outdated, stagnant, and Unitarianism was the freshest iteration that would revitalize the dying concept of "faith" and reinvent personal spirituality. This theme remains clear and present in UUism today. According to Hutchison, Channing demanded that religion focus on "affirming rather than denying," and above all, that it "become more inward" (1976: 18). Inwardness is framed as not just a worthwhile turn for religion, but a necessary condition to the preservation of faith and spirituality. This is why Unitarianism, in this period, could be seen as more than just the testing-ground for new religious ideas: it was the proving-ground as well; the place in which they were brought to their fullest potential. Where in liberal Protestantism the possibility of an individual spiritual life was affirmed over the course of centuries of secularization, in UUism it becomes the absolute necessity of individual fullness.

The importance of this individual spiritual path lends a degree of urgency to UU individualism. Taylor sees some of this urgency in general secular individualism—"The basic mode of spiritual life," he says, "is thus the quest" (2007: 508). But the increased emphasis upon its importance makes the name "quest" particularly applicable in UUism. This quest structures UU belief, and UU discourse describes it in ways that set it up in opposition to a satisfied and static type of monotheistic belief that does not search and does not accommodate individual variations on traditional faith. The reality is more complicated—we have shown the presence of a greater "quest" spirituality throughout liberal religion and secularism in the nineteenth century.

Regardless, for now we will explore two ways of talking about the UU "quest": as a personal, individual search for personal fulfillment, as above, and as an investigation into the variety of religious traditions available once "fullness" is conceived of as possible through various routes peculiar to the individual.

The first of these two is apparent in the overall process of secularization. In fact, the personal search is implicit in the posited difference between church and state matters in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which says, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." Upon interpretation, the "free exercise" of "religion" simply expands to embrace spirituality and/or fulfillment at large (also Taylor's "fullness"), as a private matter for private, independent groups or persons. State has thereby divested itself of the concerns of individual fullness or personal salvation—it is no longer a responsibility for the society, culture, government, or religious state, and instead the responsibility of the individual. Thus a secular state supposes an ideological difference between the greater good and personal fulfillment prior to the formulation of specific policy or parameters. This stops short of even implying that fullness is to be obtained through some sort of salvation or through an established church—that difference comes later. All that the Constitutional separation dictates is the privatization of religiosity, faith, and spiritual fullness.

However, it is the quest for churches, so to speak—the interaction with various religious traditions, and the evaluation thereof—that is important to UUism. This quest takes various forms, but it is a part of most UU self-descriptions, and part of the way that it distinguishes itself from those same religions. The search appears in some guise in every essay of John A. Buehrens and F. Forrester Church's book, for example, and certainly exists in implication in the title: it is a *chosen* faith, which necessarily implies some sort of limited search, because one cannot choose if

there is only one option. Therefore, one has at least searched beyond a previous religion or two before arriving at Unitarian Universalism. And indeed, as many studies attest (Casebolt & Niekro 2005: 240; Miller 1976: 207; Lee 1995: 385; Tapp 1973: ix), UUism is a religion of "come-inners" (Casebolt & Niekro 2005: 240), with estimates of the number of converts in the ranks falling between 85-90% in studies distributed over three decades.

The propensity for movement between religious traditions, incidentally, is one more trend within UUism that arises out of the general secularization process in the West—as Taylor points out, "The U.S. since the early nineteenth century has been a home of religious freedom, expressed in a very American way: that is, it has been a country of religious choice. People move, form new denominations, join ones that they weren't brought up in, break away from existing ones, and so on" (2007: 529). As was the case with some other secularizing trends we have looked at, UUism takes this idea and stretches it to its fullest extent, comprising itself almost entirely of people who have moved from another faith. Robert Tapp uses the subtitle "Converts in the Stepfathers' House" for his book on UU demographics, *Religion Among the Unitarian Universalists*. He situates UUism within an environment of increasing "religious mobility," asserting "the Unitarian Universalist denomination exemplifies this to an almost extreme degree" (1973: xi). This mobility and high percentage of converts lend a double meaning to Buehrens and Church's use of the word "chosen" in their title, in that it refers not only to the adherent's personal search, but also implies—almost tongue-in-cheek—the "un-chosen" faiths, those faiths that have been left behind for the majority of Unitarian Universalists in pursuit of a more fitting one. Channing's prophetic declaration of the search for "new truths" seems to have resurfaced here, in that UUs have apparently already turned from one "truth" in search of another from the beginning of their association with the faith.

The quest for these new truths ties in directly with another notion of secularism that we implied earlier, in our discussion of the constitutional separation of state and religious matters. This is the responsibility for personal fullness—if it does not lie upon the state, the onus lies upon individuals to find or create their personal sense of fullness, whether through a unique spiritual process or by joining an existing religious tradition. This is inscribed not only in the structure of the United States Constitution, but also in the phenomenon of individualism that Taylor and Rearden trace throughout Western secularization. According to Taylor, this "individualism… is first of all that of responsibility" (2007: 541), in that if one does not produce one's own sense of fulfillment, no one else can or will.

In UUism, the responsibility is valued very highly—as we mentioned before, both Marshall (1970) and Buehrens and Church (1989) title their books with the word "faith," and they frame this faith—Unitarian Universalism—in two ways: as "chosen," in Buehrens and Church's book, and as a "challenge" in Marshall's earlier work. These accounts often intersect in their amalgamation of these ideas. UUism emerges as a challenging choice for the potential participant, a continuous contest of self-evaluation and introspection, where people are "challenged to formulate their own beliefs" and "encouraged to respect the beliefs of others" (Buehrens and Church 1989: 94).

This respect for other beliefs is important to note at this point; each UU is responsible for upholding this value. To mistake religious discernment for discrimination would be to misunderstand the goal of UU self-definition as a faith one chooses over others. As Marshall, Mendelsohn, and Buehrens and Church would likely agree, the tradition holds as one of its fundamental goals an honest attempt "to facilitate virtuous human living in loving relationships with other humans and other forms of life on our planet" (Peters 2007: 392). Thus one of

UUism's structuring principles is openness, but this is not easily achieved; therein lies the

challenge of Marshall's liberal faith. Such tension between personal disbelief and respect for

others' beliefs is a delicate balance to strike, and the acceptance and sustenance of those

differences requires tireless self-evaluation. Unitarian politician Adlai Stevenson (1900-1965)

spoke of this difficulty:

> I think that one of our most important tasks is to convince others that there's
>
> nothing to fear in difference… Here lies the power of the liberal way: not in
>
> making the whole world Unitarian, but in helping ourselves and others to see
>
> some of the possibilities inherent in viewpoints other than one's own; …in urging
>
> the fullest, most vigorous use of critical self-examination. (qtd. in Buehrens and
>
> Church 1989: 81)

We have already established the UU propensity toward constant evaluation of one's own

religious standpoint in terms of the more widespread secular trend of inwardness and

individuality. Stevenson takes this idea, and moves beyond it by emphasizing the self-critical

openness and respect necessary to preserve the integrity of UUism's interactions with different

conceptions of fulfillment outside of the individual's beliefs.

Since, in Unitarian self-conceptions, sects of Christianity would have fallen largely

outside the bounds demarcated by UU principles, Stevenson's address sought to soften the

prevailing stance towards UUism's parent tradition among its congregations. But the distinction

between dissatisfaction with the preexisting Christianity and outright atheism is important to

note: although the secular shift that framed Unitarianism in the nineteenth century was often

conceived as such, Marty argues that it did not mark "the decline and fall of Western religion"

(1969: 15). As evidence to the contrary, UUism, as a reasonable example of a liberal faith in a

secular age, accounts for itself in strong terms as a religious or spiritual, as opposed to a discussion group or communal gathering (although the distinction between "spiritual" and "religious" is a point of contention in much of the discourse of UUism). Self-descriptions of the tradition describe it as spiritual, and as an alternative to overwhelming or fundamental skepticism. Note, for example, that both Marshall's *Challenge of a Liberal Faith* (1970) and Buehrens and Church's popular *Our Chosen Faith* (1989) include the word "faith" in the titles. This faith is a particular kind of faith—a phenomenon quite enmeshed in the trends of secularism and certainly distinct from predominant models of faith in the larger monotheistic traditions of the world—but a structuring principle of UUism, nonetheless, which orients and underlies the "quest" through and through. Additionally, the fact that UUism accounts for itself first and foremost as a faith exposes another facet of its underlying indebtedness to a conventionally Christian religious framework. In contrast to, for example, an exclusive atheistic position, UUism does not deride the concept of faith, and instead embraces it.

The nature of this particular UU faith, the challenging choice type of faith, is important for understanding the way that UUism relates itself to different religious traditions and situates itself within the spiritual complexities of the secular age. Exploring the faith implicit in the UU quest, however, reveals aspects of the tradition that raise questions about Unitarian Universalism's real difference from liberal Protestant Christianity. Before we discuss this further, we will have to look deeper into the nature of UUism's eclectic faith-building process.

Eclectic faith construction and the framework of liberal Protestantism

The individual UU "quest" is a primary way that UUism differentiates itself from general monotheistic traditions, despite being indebted to the forms of religion that came before it. Although the process of differentiation was taking place during the heyday of Unitarianism, it has reached its culmination in modern UUism; true to form, writers such as George Marshall and Jack Mendelsohn have applied such differentiation to its fullest extent.

Evoking Channing, Marshall emphasizes that UUism is part of, and embodies, an ongoing search that "must not settle for repose, must not shut the door on new truths, must not rest" (1970: 23) for as long as it is maintained. This is the first and foremost place that UUism distinguishes itself from most mainstream monotheisms, because while it searches for "new truths" manifesting continuously in the multitudinous facets of human experience, the monotheistic faiths are presented as static entities predicated on the existence of static truths. It is no accident that the Unitarian Universalist hymnal is called *Singing the Living Tradition* (1993). The "live" tradition is UUism, and the insinuated "dead" traditions are the very structures out of which UUism arose.

In this treatment of "static" monotheism, we can look for clarification to Mendelsohn, who writes of UU faith as an active verb: "[W]e faith together as a style of life," he says, "a way of relating to self, to others…We participate in common faithing" (1985: 178). This characterization of an active and dynamic faith appears in Mendelsohn's book, as throughout early Unitarian or UU literature, in direct contrast to the stagnant noun inherent in "organized faiths," which Mendelsohn describes in strong terms: "Overwhelmingly the organized faiths, from Christianity to communism, still remain bastions of the tense, closed, heresy-hunting mind"

(1985: 78). Mendelsohn's "faithing" seems to insinuate a response to such "heresy-hunting"; UUism is presented as the foundation of a shared quest for "new truths" over against some monolithic monotheism that serves as the locus for all inflexible, "illiberal" thought.

Recall the aforementioned propensity for UUism, although occasionally characterizing itself as "religious," to distance itself from the noun "religion." Here, once again, UUism adopts a common trend within the overall project of secularization and applies it with enthusiasm. Taylor points out that the "quest" mindset of secular belief "is often called by its practitioners 'spirituality', and is opposed to 'religion'" (2007: 508). This distinction between "spirituality" and "religion" was important to both increasingly individualistic secularists like nineteenth-century liberal Protestants, and more so to large numbers of UUs today. In general, UUs distance themselves from the term "religion" in two ways: one way is using different language or grammar to deemphasize the solidity of monotheistic or conventional "religion" and its difference from UUism—thus the propensity for UUs to describe their "spirituality" or "religious" tendencies instead of their "religion." Another way UUism distinguishes itself from "religion" is to redefine the concept in UU terms, to shift its meaning in light of the tenets of liberalism, and to distill a pure essence through eclectic borrowing that correlates better with the project of Unitarian Universalism.

As an example of the first method, Marshall defines UUism not as a liberal religion, but as a "religious liberalism" (1970: 22). Of course, the liberal label should come as no surprise by now, considering the strong ties Unitarianism held to liberal Protestantism. This is one clear instance where UUism has not yet sloughed off the trappings of "conventional" religion despite its claims of difference. Regardless, what is revealing about the passage above is the importance placed on grammatical differentiation—it matters whether religion stands as the noun, the

definite and static part of the sentence, or as the adjective, the part capable of change contingent upon its application. As a point of comparison within Protestantism, Reardon points out that "one who unquestionably regarded himself as a Liberal Protestant, Jean Réville [1854-1907], wished to distinguish between Liberal Protestantism in the true sense and mere Protestant Liberalism" (1968: 9). Réville wished to preserve Protestant as the label, the noun, and the functional part of the new construction of "Liberal Protestantism." On the contrary, however, in Marshall we see not a "liberal religion" like Réville's but a "religious liberalism." These similar quotes illustrate the importance of denoting a phenomenon like the "notoriously vague" liberalism (1968: 9) as either a label or a descriptor. The grammatical difference makes an ideological difference.

In this way, though UUism uses a grammatical differentiation to separate itself from "religions" like liberal Protestantism, it simultaneously adapts a tool already employed by Protestantism in its own self-differentiation from previous, and even more fundamental, faiths. Marshall emphasizes that UUism is a "religious liberalism… precisely because at no point does it settle down into becoming a static faith, a building-block philosophy, but is a quest for values which each must develop for himself" (Marshall 1970: 22). This emphasis on malleability, movement, individual searching, and on critical evaluation characterizes the "liberalism" of UU self-definition. But we have seen in Taylor, Marty, and Reardon how liberal Protestantism saw itself as a more moderate iteration of sects with extreme beliefs like Calvinist double predestination. Nevertheless, in UU discourse, monotheistic traditions like Protestantism (no matter how liberal) are, in contrast, characterized as patently brittle; they are inflexible structures, immobile fortresses, or, in Mendelsohn's words, "bastions of the tense, closed, heresy-hunting mind" (1985: 78). The irony is that liberal Protestantism, as we have seen, was engaged in a similar process of defining itself over against the preexisting modes of belief.

UUism would like to posit a sharp break with "religion" by discarding such terms, but in many ways it finds itself aligned with tried and tenacious habits of religious self-identification.

This process of self-identification, though, is certainly taken in a new direction in UU discourse dating back to the birth-era of Unitarianism. The two ways we saw of distancing oneself from formal "religion" are parallel; the former, discarding the word as above, is really a process of creating a UU identity by doing away with terminology associated with the vestments of monotheism. The second, though closely related to the first method of distancing UUism from "religion," is a process of creating self-identity through redefining the word. Both are tied to UUism's distinct self-assembly of faith, both are implicit in the eclectic process that we will investigate further, and both, in fact, reveal the tradition's indebtedness and relation to liberal Protestant modes of thought that arose during the nineteenth century.

The way UUism has attempted to redefine religion on its own terms is through the search for "new truths" that Channing spoke of in 1819, and which we saw Church exhorting above. According to Church, "Channing's was a quest not for novelty, but for essence. His defense of Unitarianism was also a defense of the Bible and religion" (1989: 122). Here, religion (even the Bible, remarkably) is retained because it is redefined in terms of an abstract essence. The essence, though indistinct, allows for the clear existence of "new" truths within "old" traditions. The persistent essence manifests sporadically, to be sure, is often quashed or obscured, in UUism's eyes, but is available in its different guises for liberal seekers to collect and add to their religious inventory. Additionally, this "essence" is the primary way in which the religiously diverse quest of UUs continues to take place in terms of a distinct Western Christian liberalist paradigm.

We will turn first to the religious "inventory," then to this liberalist paradigm. The inventory concept relates to Taylor's argument that secularism was constituted in large part by the possibility of unbelief. Once such a possibility appears, it "fragilizes" (to borrow Taylor's terminology) each position (2007: 556), because many people do not firmly adhere to one or the other perspective regarding, for example, the immanent or transcendent nature of God. Once their views were influenced by both possibilities, the people inhabiting the secular shift and witnessing the rise of conceptions of "religions of the world" [7] often "constituted by bricolage a sort of median position" (2007: 556). The "bricolage"—nearly synonymous with what we are calling eclecticism among UUs—is the same as the religious inventory mentioned above. Furthermore, it appears to be implicit in Channing and Church's above passages regarding essence. Unitarianism began to compare itself to the larger set of traditions in a "quest for its larger inclusiveness in the family of world religions" (Marshall 1970: 92). It embarked upon a process of what could be called diversifying its religious portfolio. Early Unitarianism attempted to, if not incorporate aspects of different traditions, at least identify and compare the content of different "world religions" with its own worldview in order to flesh out the true meaning of the personal liberal religious experience.

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[7] While the UU search advocates investigation of the multitude of religions in the world, this investigation, as described in works such as Marshall's, Buehrens and Church's, and the UU religious curriculum itself, is by no means exhaustive. In general, beliefs are culled from the select few "world religions" enumerated in Masuzawa's work on general academic inquiry into religious diversity—itself a phenomenon that is closely paralleled by Unitarianism's growing interest in religions of the world. In either milieu, these are generally limited to Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Taoism, occasionally Sikhism and Zorastrianism, and the troublesome category of "other" or "native." These potentially problematic broad strokes constitute the basis of UUism's religious education program as well.

One key point of comparison, then, was the most clear and obvious example of religiosity in the West: Christianity—particularly, Protestant Christianity—further, in terms of proximity to UUism, liberal Protestant Christianity. Here, Jonathan Z. Smith's observation of the troublesome postulation of difference between the religious self and the "proximate 'other'" is demonstrated in full: Channing did not want to say that Christianity itself was worthless, but simply that UUs searched, beyond liberal Protestantism, for new truths, for the recurring essence, in all religions. The differences between the developing Unitarian faith and its parent Protestantism were differences of degree rather than kind—Unitarianism, while boldly adopting many controversial or contested ideals of secularism, was never truly an enemy to Protestant Christianity, but more like a younger sibling constantly pushing the limits of what was permitted. It challenged the fundamental beliefs of conventional Christianity, such as the divinity of Jesus, but it also retained the concept of faith. It collected religious data in the same ways that Taylor's questioning secularists assembled, among the ever-increasing sects of Western Christianity and the rise of exclusive humanism, a "median position" by means of "bricolage"; but UUs made this process paramount. Stopping short of condemning all of Protestantism or even Christianity to sentimentalism, Unitarianism redefined a religious "essence" to be found in all traditions, Christianity (possibly begrudgingly) included.

The nuanced relationship between Unitarianism and liberal Protestantism informs much of UU faith today, but it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine every facet of this interaction. We will limit ourselves in the remaining discussion to investigating the eclectic process of UUism, and a further explanation of the ways in which this notion preserves the framework of "conventional religion."

Recall Church's characterization of UU faith as "chosen." We may, at this point, ask which faith one chooses. This is a tricky kind of question, as we will see, because the process really dictates choosing aspects of *faiths*—faiths in the plural, noun faiths, which have been a point of contention in the UU discourse we have considered. Indeed, for UUs, the choice lies not in choosing a faith, but in the way they identify new truths within faiths. These truths are seen as appearing piecemeal among the clutter of dogma and orthodoxy in different religions, or within the folds of religious superstition and ritual around the world. A quick survey of *Singing the Living Tradition* (1993) reveals a staggering diversity of samples from various religious viewpoints, each one an intentionally chosen pericope grouped by subject with other songs or stanzas from other cultures. According to Brian Hatcher's discussion of the eclectic process in *Eclecticism in Modern Hindu Discourse* (1999), by "calling upon such a diverse set of religious data to provide the sense of a universal human tradition, today's Unitarian effectively practices a modernist mode of eclecticism" (38).[8]

It may come as no surprise that an eclectic assembly of values is apparent in greater secularism as well as within Unitarian Universalism. We saw Taylor's use of the analogous concept of "bricolage" above, which recurs in his narrative when he describes how many people "are engaged in assembling their own personal outlook, through a kind of 'bricolage'" (2007: 514). Elsewhere, he comments that "we have moved into a world where spiritual vocabularies have more and more traveled, in which more than one is available to each person, where each

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[8] As Hatcher points out, the words "eclectic" and "eclecticism" have their roots in the ancient *eklegein*, which "was in fact used to communicate the act of selecting the best from among any group of things" (1999: 28). Most dictionaries will trace it additionally to a rough approximation of *ek*–"out" + *legein*–"choose"; or, "to pick out." Semantically, as a distinctly "chosen faith" predicated upon rational discernment between viable religious forms, UUism seems particularly compatible with analysis qua eclecticism.

vocabulary has already been influenced by others" (2007: 148). The eclectic process is implicit in the dawn of the exploration of "world religions" in the 1800s, the proliferation of diverse sects within Christianity and new humanists strands besides, and people's increasing awareness of their ability to question their own personal religious outlook. What we will see once again is the more urgent application of this tendency in UU discourse.

The secular signs of personal spiritual bricolage point the way to a new religious identity, one that assumes knowledge (however small, limited, cursory or possibly skewed it might be) of the varieties of religious experience, to use William James' phrase. This knowledge of different religious experiences and traditions is part of what allows for the possibility of an individualized faith. The personally identified and personally idealized faith is fundamental to the UU eclectic process, but this is not to say that it was absent from the discourse of liberal Protestantism as well: the growing recognition of such wide variety of religious life around the world forced Western Christianity to consider such diversity. Thus, not just Unitarianism but every sect of Christianity and any other religious group in the West began, of necessity, to view itself in light of a much larger variety of "truth" claims than ever before. In embracing this experience, Unitarianism sought to distinguish itself from the larger set of Christian sects, but in fact enacted the same comparison that they did; as usual, UUism's modification was to further emphasize the idea.

Hutchison describes Orestes Brownson (1803-1876)—a Presbyterian turned Universalist turned Unitarian turned Catholic—as one of the earliest adopters of the eclectic strategy: "He valued… eclecticism precisely because it harmonized conflicting principles and obviated the need for any one of these principles to conquer another" (1976: 26). The early Universalist and

(later) Unitarian was an outspoken supporter of a growing religious convergence.[9] In his eyes, "the agelong antinomy was being overcome: specifically, the doctrine of the Atonement (or At-one-ment) was being recognized in its true, previously obscured meaning—'that all things are essentially holy'" (1976: 25). This constitutes a strong early implication of the "holy" essence of all religious modes, and part of the reasoning underlying the "new truths" quest of UUism.

The assumption of an essence also allowed for expansion of the developing secular propensity for investigation, inquiry, or interaction between religions. But though Brownson and other progenitors of UUism may have seen evidence of some great spiritual commonality implied in the variety of world traditions, they did not necessarily accept every religious or ritualistic idea—by and large, UUism interacted with these religions in much the same way that Christianity did: in comparison with itself. The idea of identifying some core religious substance, some essence, is quite prevalent in UU discourse, but it is an a priori premise of UU belief structure; thus, as in greater Christianity throughout the West, UUism's brush with "world religions" was really a comparison with those parts of such religions that fit easily enough into UUism's preconceptions of the nature of religion and religious truth.

Such assumptions have the potential to construct or imagine religious content in diverse situations and reify it in a distinctively UU context. This potentiality hints at something Hatcher calls "the violence involved in disarticulating truths one from the other" (1999: 29)—the danger inherent in eclectic reification. Hatcher refers to the necessary assumption of eclecticism as a

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[9] Brownson contributed steadily to liberal religious literature until his somewhat perplexing conversion to Catholicism, whereafter he spoke vehemently on the necessity of the United States' adoption of Catholicism as a national religion, and prophesied with gusto the inevitable damnation of his previous colleagues in liberal religion, whom he assured must convert if they were to save their souls (Packer 2007: 171). Notwithstanding this noteworthy ideological shift, Brownson's early writings are considered formative of Unitarian, and liberal religious, theology.

"grid," in that "its perfectly ordered coordinates promise to provide answers to all our questions—even before they are posed" (1999: 37). This is important to note; we find this sort of grid present in all processes which posit—implicitly, explicitly, by association or otherwise—an essence upon which all religions will operate, which preemptively provides the possibility for "answers to all our questions." Such, in fact, is the prophesied result of the UU quest itself: that "direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder" will be "affirmed in all cultures" (*Singing the Living Tradition* 1993); that each person is capable of developing some latent "faith that is not external but internal" (Marshall 1970: 44); and that each person can, nay, "must assume responsibility for awakening" themselves (Buehrens and Church 1989: 14). These foregone conclusions of the UU eclectic quest constitute the grid to which Hatcher refers, and in this way UUs eclecticism interacts with diverse religious traditions only insofar as they match with the values and beliefs that UUism is already open to.

In fact, eclecticism of any guise necessitates discrimination to maintain integrity, lest the religious data of the world be swallowed whole—what Church refers to as "the smorgasbord approach to religion," which can leave one "with a stomach ache and a confused palate" (1989: 88). Hatcher, likewise, speaks of a modern North American "spiritual smorgasbord" (1999: 42), which is often so outlandish as to invite parody. Clearly, without a guide for selection, the UU search will find all religious forms to be spiritual treasures, because all will appear spiritual, and therefore become part of the mix of ideas, traditions and beliefs in the UU's personal religious outlook.

This hints at the limit of UUism's inclusivism, because there are necessarily parts of the world religious traditions that will be left out. Thus, rather than a completely open exchange with religious experience from around the world, UUism engages in a process of comparing religious

data with its own preexisting grid of religious values. This is exactly how sects of Christianity were forced to interact with "world religions" as well: one need only look at the numerous examples of Western Christian scholars comparing the life of Buddha to that of Jesus to see the struggle to fit different religious modes into a preexisting framework. The difference in UUism, once again, is in degree rather than kind. Whereas for most sects of Christianity in the Western world, comparison with "world religions" was a necessity of the growing knowledge of these implicit in the process of secularization, in UUism the obligation became an opportunity—but the method of comparison remained.

As an example, we can consider the aforementioned tradition holding Jesus as a famous, perhaps even saintly, teacher—Tapp claims the "longstanding Unitarian Universalist stress upon the humanity of Jesus… led this group to make much of the authority and value of his moral teachings" (1973: 66). UUs might regard Jesus as a figure from whom the seekers of any tradition could learn, but not, importantly, as the messiah. This is a more localized example of eclectic comparison enacted only on the terms of the party doing the comparison, but we can also point out UUism's underlying reluctance to completely discard Jesus. Here, as throughout our investigation, is another instance of UUism's simultaneous differentiation from Protestant belief and preservation of a Christian religious framework—in this case, the framework is a background regard for the figure of Jesus, whether conceived of as messiah or not. Nevertheless, the distinction between valuing Jesus' teachings and regarding him as the Son of God is, quite obviously, vital.

But one more point regarding UUism's eclectic "grid": F. Forrester Church enthusiastically quotes writer D.H. Lawrence in a letter to a Congregationalist pastor who attempted to "save" the young author: "A person has no religion who has not slowly and

painfully gathered one together, adding to it, shaping it; and one's religion is never complete and final, it seems, but must always be undergoing modification" (1989: 10). For UUs, the pursuit of "truths" constitutes religion *sine qua non*. According to UUism's grid of comparison, any tradition circumventing or foreclosing on this process of evaluation—whether through epiphany, text, singular truth or sacred myth—falls outside of such a search-based definition; "one has no religion" if one settles. Clearly, despite UUism's official stance of inclusivity, this stance excludes much of religious diversity; and, moreover, this comparative grid within UU eclecticism is a reflection of the same comparative stance taken by greater Christianity in its interactions with "world religions." Both are really comparing these religions with a religious framework they have already established.

In fact, in the characteristics of this framework or grid we arrive back at the "liberalism" with which Marshall prefaces his description of UU faith. This underlying liberal current is a defining feature of the grid of UU eclecticism, a means of selection from the variety of world faiths, and a rubric for quantifying a given tradition's proximity to "true religion," but it is also present in the iterations of Protestantism that produced Unitarianism and Universalism in the nineteenth century. And we find that the liberalist search for a core religious essence is a crucial base for the UU worldview. Marshall puts it bluntly: "This point will be made over and over in presenting the liberal religious way of life: religion in its essence is simple and can be simply stated" (1970: 21). Indeed, as regards the hunt for this *sine qua non* of "true religion," UUism falls neatly into the Christian Liberalist tradition, which "tried to define the perennial 'essence' (German: *Wesen*) of the Christian Faith" (Richardson 1969: 193). The scope has simply expanded, UUs enacting the quintessentially Western habit of interchanging "Christianity" with

"Religion in general"[10]—here, though, their point of comparison remains a distinctly Christian-influenced and informed outlook.

We can see, as clearly as ever, the way in which UUism continues to function within the general framework of a liberal Protestant religious outlook: the Western world of modernity could be called notorious for its habit of positing Christianity as representative of "religion" in its most general sense, and UUism performs a similar substitution in even beginning to search for a religious essence. Furthermore, in searching for an essence of faith, Christian liberalism was trying to develop a better means for defining itself; in its comparative interactions with world religious diversity, liberal Protestantism would certainly have found some subgroups and sects to lack "essence." Similarly, UUism searches for an essence of religion, claiming to move beyond Protestant belief because it must move beyond the beliefs of its neighbor to better understand its own spiritual composition; and yet the same comparative framework persists.

Finally, liberal Protestantism held many views, adopted many trends, and tested many ideas that were expansions upon or revisions of longstanding Christian beliefs. These ideas often appeared simultaneously in Unitarianism, in the process of secularization occurring throughout the Western world in the nineteenth century, and were often taken and emphasized to a further degree than their Christian counterparts. But through this relationship, genealogically related concepts permeated the belief systems and religious outlooks of both groups.

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[10] We may note here that while utilizing Christianity as a stand-in for religion in general is certainly a Western phenomenon, the action of using the most pervasive or prevalent religion as a measure for all religious activity and a means of characterizing all religions is not limited to the West. This habit occurs within many other cultures of the world in which a particular religions enjoys prominence. In fact, a primary way for a religious movement to establish itself is to found a discourse on the assertion that it alone represents "true" religion, and that other ways are somewhat misguided, or incomplete, or incorrectly interpreted.

Conclusion

We have arrived at an explanation of why Protestant beliefs and UUism are nearer neighbors than UU literature might suggest.[11] In addition to Taylor's assertion that "Unitarianism wasn't confined to Unitarians" (2007: 291), we can conclude that, similarly, Christian structure wasn't confined to Christians. Though Unitarianism walked a line between meriting categorization as a Christian sect and contesting crucial Christian beliefs, and though UUism outright defies much of conventional Christianity, it operates in terms of a distinctly liberal Protestant framework: both UUism and the varieties of liberal Protestantism maintain in their approach to personal fullness, religious behavior, and spiritual worldview an underlying Christian mode of belief. The Unitarian Universalist tradition is a nearer neighbor to its religious history than it often admits or recognizes; through the conception and characterization of a religious essence implicit in its mode of spiritual eclecticism, UUism falls into longstanding trends identifiable in the processes of liberal Protestant development, Unitarian differentiation, and even secularism at large.

Now we can better understand the urgency in Unitarian Universalism to explain the difference between itself and Christianity. Its nearest neighbor provides the clearest and most crucial means of distilling UUism's own essence. The ways of conceiving of the proximal religious "other," here represented precisely by nineteenth-century liberal Protestantism, become ways of conceiving of the religious self.

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[11] There is a distinct possibility that current Protestant literature might imply the same vis-à-vis Unitarian Universalism. UUism has certainly withstood disparagement from both religious "sides": from exclusive humanist or atheist groups regarding, primarily, its maintenance of concepts by the names of "faith" and "spirituality"; and, in contrast, from fundamentalist or "conventionally" religious groups for attitudes toward some aspects of traditions that are seen as bordering on (or patently) sacrilegious.

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