

What Happened at Syracuse?¹

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We have long held to the idea of the priesthood of all believers, the idea that all believers have direct access to the ultimate resources of the religious life, that every believer has the responsibility of achieving an explicit faith, and that there are resources from the past that need to be mediated to the present. As an element of this radical laicism and sense of history, we need also affirm belief in the prophethood of all believers. The prophetic forms in society will appear where people think and work together to interpret the signs of the times in the light of their faith, to make explicit through discussion the epochal thinking that the times demand. They will arise wherever it becomes a responsibility to attempt to foresee and foretell the consequences of human behavior (both individual and institutional) and whenever there is the intention of participating in the creative dimension of the future in place of merely being dragged into it. Only through the prophetism of all believers can we together foresee doom and mend our common ways

James Luther Adams
Liberation and Epochal Thinking²

On May 15, 1961 The Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) officially became a corporate entity when consolidation of the American Unitarian Association (AUA) and the Universalist Church of America (UCA) was legally enacted. When the UUA gathers for General Assembly in June, 2011 it will mark the 50th anniversary of the formation of the UUA as a corporate entity. This surely is a date that we should commemorate, as we did in 2001 for the 40th anniversary of UUA. However, in my view, a date that should draw equal attention in our remembrance of the formation of the UUA is October 31, 1959.³ It was just before noon on this date in Syracuse, New York, that the last dispute standing in the way of full corporate merger was resolved and the “Plan for Consolidation” of the AUA and the UCA was set in motion. This article presents a mythical narrative about the meaning of what happened at Syracuse and its significance for the future of the Unitarian Universalist movement.

On October 29, 1959, delegates of the AUA and the UCA assembled for a joint conference of the two religious associations in Syracuse, New York. Delegates were charged with the task of making recommendations regarding the “Plan for Consolidation” of the AUA and UCA that had been in gestation for well over a century. At times in competition, and at times in cooperation, Unitarianism and Universalism developed as liberal forms of Christianity with histories that are closely linked in many ways. Both grew out of the liberal religious impulse present within Christianity from its earliest days. In colonial America, organized liberal religion took the form of

Unitarian and Universalist movements that emerged in opposition to the excesses of Calvinism. Unitarianism evolved within the Congregation Churches of New England without a distinct theological focus other than its rejection of Calvinist orthodoxy. Universalism was initially organized as more of a separatist movement focused on the doctrine of universal salvation.

During the nineteenth century the Unitarian and Universalist movements grew as similar yet distinct denominations that shared a common belief in the benevolence of God and adopted the critical interpretation of scripture as a method of making personal religious judgments. Both denominations shared a commitment to reason over dogma and emphasized personal development and social action as means to improving the human condition. They also shared a strong commitment to democracy as a way of religious life that values the worth and dignity of every individual and the power of “reason to work out all problems of human life, provided it were liberated from ignorance, prejudice, and dogmatism.”⁴ As the “twin heresies” of the nineteenth century, many considered Unitarianism and Universalism to differ only in name.⁵

Russell E. Miller notes that the first formal use of the term Unitarian Universalism occurred in 1824 when "The Independent Congregational Unitarian Universalist Society of Hartford" was chartered. In the late 1840's Henry Bellows, a prominent Unitarian minister in New York City, took up the cause of union and campaigned for consolidation. Bellows pronounced the differences between the two denominations a matter of degree, rather than a matter of kind, and declared eventual union inevitable. The first formal declaration from an official body regarding merger came at the AUA National Convention in 1865 when Samuel Joseph May, a leading Unitarian minister, proposed the formation of a committee to consider union. Instead of May's original proposal, a more general resolution was passed that called for greater cooperation among all Christians. A committee was formed to advance this cause but nothing of substance came of the effort. Over the next ninety years a succession of similar resolutions, committees, and study groups, were proposed with minimal results until the Council of Liberal Churches (CLC) was formed in 1953.⁶

The CLC was created during the first of four joint biennial conferences of the AUA and the UCA that were convened to study and advance a consolidation of activities between the two associations. The creation of the CLC coincided with the administrative consolidation of religious education and public relations of the AUA and UCA. At the 1953 biennial conference,

in Andover Mass., a Joint Interim Commission was also created to begin studying the feasibility of full corporate merger. At the 1955 biennial conference, held in Detroit, the Joint Interim Commission reported that the consolidation of functions through the CLC was too costly and too clumsy to maintain for long. The Commission asserted that Unitarians and Universalists had “enough in common to become one people,” and recommended full merger. The recommendation of the Commission was endorsed by both denominations and a Joint Merger Commission was appointed.⁷

By the spring of 1959 it seemed clear that a majority in both denominations supported complete corporate merger. To advance this cause the Joint Interim Commission published the “Plan for Consolidation” that was to be debated and acted on at the fourth joint biennial conference scheduled for Syracuse, NY, October 29-31.⁸ This plan, referred to as the *Blue Book*, included a proposed constitution and bylaws for the new organization and a process for formal ratification. The ratification process required the approval of seventy percent of the member congregations of the AUA and the UCA, followed by final acceptance at the annual General Conference of the AUA and a special General Assembly of the UCA. If ratified, merger would be legally accomplished in May, 1961.⁹

The *Blue Book* plan and recommended changes were presented at the first joint session of Unitarian and Universalist delegates in the Grand Ballroom of the Hotel Syracuse at 9:00 a.m. on Thursday, October 29. While polls indicated that a clear majority of the delegates favored merger, complete consolidation was not a foregone conclusion. Over the next three days delegates met in a combination of joint plenary sessions, mixed and separate small discussion groups involving different aggregates of Unitarians and Universalists, and separate denominational conferences to debate, modify, and vote on each article of the constitution and bylaws. Deliberations were complicated by the presentation of over fifty amendments. There was plenty to quarrel over. Problematic issues included: the composition of delegations to future general assemblies, the frequency of general assemblies, the function and strength of regional associations, and the duties and powers of officers and trustees. All things considered, the process of deliberation and approval of specific items went reasonably well with one notable exception.

The exception was a rather contentious dispute over a phrase in “Article II” of the constitution. “Article II” outlines the “Purposes and Objectives” of the UUA.¹⁰ The issue in dispute

was how to best state the purpose of the UUA to reflect a sense of continuity with the Christian heritage of Unitarianism and Universalism, while also embracing the universal nature of religious truth and honoring the fact the many in the faith did not see themselves as part of the Christian tradition. The nature and nuance of this dispute is reflected in four versions of the contested Article II, Section 2, Paragraph 2 presented below.

1) Original *Blue Book* Version: To cherish and spread the universal truths taught by the great prophets and teachers of humanity in every age and tradition, immemorially summarized in their essence as love to God and love to man.

2) Commission's First Revision: To cherish and spread the universal truths taught by Jesus and other great teachers of humanity in every age and tradition, and prophetically expressed in the Judeo-Christian heritage as love to God and love to man.

3) Universalist Version: To cherish and spread the universal truths taught by the great prophets and teachers of humanity in every age and tradition, and immemorially summarized in our Judeo-Christian heritage as love to God and love to man.

4) Unitarian Version: To cherish and spread the universal truths taught by the great prophets and teachers of humanity in every age and tradition, and immemorially summarized in the Judeo-Christian heritage as love to God and love to man.

The struggle over this issue was reflected in the fact that the original *Blue Book* version was revised by the Commission at the opening of the first joint session on Thursday morning (versions 1 & 2 above). The revised version included a reference to both Jesus and the Judeo-Christian heritage, whereas the original version gave the Judeo-Christian tradition no special status. By the beginning of Thursday evening's joint session, the Commission's recommendation had reverted back to the original *Blue Book* version. And so it went, back and forth, during the three days of the conference.

The final debate came down to a choice between a version favored by the Universalist delegation and a version favored by the Unitarian delegation (versions 3 & 4 above). While the account of this debate is often told as a story about a dispute between the two delegations, it must be noted that this is not strictly speaking true. There were supporters of both versions on both sides of the aisle, and throughout the conference the bi-partisan Merger Commission itself wavered on the issue, repeatedly presenting different versions in an attempt to represent the shifting majority opinion.¹¹

As morning broke on Saturday, most issues standing in the way of consolidation were satisfactorily resolved, and all remaining obstacles were quickly dispensed with, leaving only the dispute over “Article II.” Judge Lawrence G. Brooks, who was presiding over the session, reintroduce the identity issue with the comment, “Now comes the nuclear bomb.”¹² He informed the group that the Universalist delegation had recommended “Article II” be amended as presented in version 3 above. The Universalist version was countered by a Unitarian amendment that changed “*our* Judeo-Christian heritage,” to “*the* Judeo-Christian heritage.” A lively debate resumed that went unresolved when both amendments were accepted by voice vote as time allocated for debate expired.

After more than a century of movement toward the dawn of union, six years of conscientious groundwork, two and a half days of deliberation and compromise, opposing factions were separated by a word. This may seem a trivial dispute to some; but the significance of the issue is eloquently framed by Judge Brooks, who later reflected, "On just such issues, wars have been waged and Protestantism splintered."¹³ In this case, no war broke out. With both versions accepted by a voice vote, the Universalist delegation caucused while the assembly went on to deal with other items. When all other issues were resolved Judge Brooks announced that the Universalists had decided to accept the Unitarian wording of “Article II.” In that moment, shortly before noon on October 31, 1959, Unitarian Universalism was born as a religious movement that radically transcended its Christian heritage to become a spiritual harbor for religious and secular humanists, pagans, deists, theists, atheists and a variety of other faith persuasions. In the fifty years since consolidation the Unitarian Universalist movement has grown in many ways. One way in which we have not grown is in developing a common understanding of the distinct nature of Unitarian Universalism, its call and its promise to the world.

This state of affairs is reflected in the title for this article, “What Happened at Syracuse?” The title is borrowed from a tag line that appears on the cover of the December, 1959 issue of *The Unitarian Register*. The tag line refers readers to the article inside that describes the activities and results of the conference.¹⁴ There is no punctuation at the end of the line to indicate whether the expression is intended as an announcement directing the reader to a factual account of the event, or a question about the meaning and significance of the event. Victor Bovee, the acting editor of *The Unitarian Register*, describes the article as a partial account of the events

and suggests that, “only a transcript could tell the full story.”¹⁵ While a transcript certainly can provide valuable information about what happened at Syracuse, I believe the deeper significance of what happened remains a question that cannot be determined by any record of events, no matter how complete.

Evidence for this brute fact can be found in the Commission on Appraisal’s 2005 report, *Engaging Our Theological Diversity*. In this report the Commission comments on our continuing struggle with forming an identity by noting, “Faced with the messy possibility that identifying a core for the consolidated movement might be too contentious, we seem to have decided instead to leave a question mark at the center.”¹⁶ The difficulty of determining the meaning of what happened at Syracuse is also evident in a project that the Unitarian Universalist Minister Association (UUMA) sponsored for its 1995 “Convocation of Ministry.” The UUMA invited its members to take up the task of assessing those practices and beliefs that Unitarian Universalism should abandon, and those it should retain, to establish a secure foundation for the future. Twenty-seven correspondents wrote essays that were compiled in a book titled *The Transient and Permanent in Liberal Religion*.¹⁷ The faith perspectives represented in this collection include Unitarian Universalists who identify themselves as Christians, Wiccans, feminists, African-American, secular humanists, environmentalist, and so on. The diversity of faith perspectives represented in this work led Alice Blair Wesley to write, “If we could get all or our members to read all of these papers a number of them would prove incomprehensible to substantially sized groups of us.”¹⁸ Whether the faith practices represented in this collection actually fit together under the banner of a single religious identity, whatever that may be called, is certainly an open question.

In the view of John Buehrens (UUA President when the work was compiled) the faith perspectives represented in the book are all guided by a common vision of “human unity, universal and eternal” that is inherent in the name “Unitarian Universalism.” Buehrens maintains that the unity he envisions is given in the human experience as witnessed by ancient and contemporary “prophets and seers of many traditions.” Hence, we are not called to create a unity that doesn’t exist, but merely “to recognize it and then make it more manifest in how we live our lives.”¹⁹ The quest for universal unity is certainly a dominant theme in Unitarian Universalist discourse, and I think that Buehrens is pointing in the right direction to find the common ground of Unitarian Universalism. The quest for universal human unity is a good start, but there is

currently no consensus among Unitarian Universalists on what this idea means, what is required to make it manifest, and what it demands of us.

I believe that the deeper significance of what happened at Syracuse can only be understood when the narrowly cast story of a corporate merger is surmounted by a mythical narrative that presents the emergence of Unitarian Universalism as a prophetic episode in the evolution of liberal religion. According to James Luther Adams the prophetic force emerges whenever people “strive to interpret the signs of the times in the light of their faith” and struggle to make explicit “epochal thinking that the times demand.”²⁰ Engagement in epochal discourse is evident throughout the separate histories of Unitarianism, Universalism and the short history of Unitarian Universalism. It is a tendency associated with a prophetic religious attitude that “presupposes a sacramental attitude in the surrounding culture,” and subjects “the consecrated and established mores and institutions, to untethered criticism and discussion.” The sacramental attitude works for the “consecration of reality as given, whether it be the nation, the race, the authoritarian church, the bourgeois church, or a fixed social system.” The prophetic attitude protests against the noxious consequences of traditional loyalties and points to new forms of creative fulfillment.²¹

An indication of what this means for the Unitarian Universalist movement is provided by Ernest Cassara who charged the newly formed UUA with embracing its role as “the proclaimer of a strong challenge to the complacent.” The challenge he issued is to address “the relevant problem of our age,” by working to bring about the conditions on earth that “nurture understanding, fairness, and justice” for all. Cassara argues that the birth of the UUA presents a unique opportunity to lead the other religions of the world in moving beyond the traditional Christian focus on the glorification of God to an “all-engulfing-concern with the elevation of man out of misery and sin to heights of creativity and fulfillment.”²²

Cassara feared the UUA would be overly focused on the chores of institution building and lose sight of its call. Hence, he described “The Task Ahead of Us,” as affirming and promoting a “broadening view of one humanity” that requires “involvement with all individuals on earth” in working toward realization of the “supreme worth of worth every personality.” According to Cassara, the humanist-theist discourse that had been growing in Unitarian and Universalist congregations for decades made it obvious that even theists within the movement are humanist to

the extent that, instead of the glorification of God, they see their principal task to be providing the conditions for development of the potential for creativity and self-fulfillment that exists in all individuals.

It (a belief that the potential for good in man can be developed) is our faith and from it stems our whole approach to the religious life. On it is based our refusal to recognize priestly authority and our insistence that our religious teachers are laymen like ourselves -- set apart to perform particular functions of teaching and ministering. Our faith in the worth of man justifies our concern for the use of reason in religion and our insistence on the individual's right to seek the meaning of life for himself and to dissent from the formulation currently in vogue. On our faith in man is based our insistence that inspiration is not limited to a particular time and place nor reported by a particular book, but is at work at all times among all men. On this faith is based our conviction that democratic procedure in church government (congregational polity) leads to the most fruitful kind of human involvement. While other churches may accept congregational polity and democratic procedure, such methods are not essential to their faith. Their view of the nature of man in most cases is vastly different from our own, and democratic procedure with them can be considered an accident. With liberals it is at the core of our faith.²³

I think that Cassara is right and he takes us further down the path toward creating an identity than Buhrens' vision of Universal Human unity. A glimpse of where this path leads is provided in the last sentence of the above passage where Cassara refers to the "democratic procedure" as a core element of our faith. I believe that understanding the significance of Cassara's claim is crucial to understanding the meaning of what happened at Syracuse and what it signifies for the identity of Unitarian Universalism. When the significance of this statement is fully understood, what happened in Syracuse can be seen as the birth of as a religious movement that transcended its Christian heritage to become a prophetic communion of shared experience engaged in epochal discourse about advancing the culture of creative democracy.

"Creative Democracy" is the term that I use to invoke the vision of democracy John Dewey characterized as an ethical ideal, a form of spiritual association, and a personal way of life. Considered as a personal way of life, creative democracy is directed by a working faith in the capacity of all human beings for intelligent action when the proper conditions are supplied. It is a spiritual way of life that takes its task to be "forever the creation of freer and more humane experience in which all share and to which all

contribute.”²⁴ Its essence is the idea of a life of free and enriching communion where unrestricted social inquiry is, as Dewey put it, “indissolubly welded to the art of full and moving communication.”²⁵ It is a mode of associated life in which the idea of democracy “is the idea of community life itself.” Crucial to understanding the significance of this is recognizing the vital importance of free association in which unlimited social inquiry into the antecedents and the consequences of events provides the means by which the results of collective activity are experienced as good by all. In such a community “the realization of the good is such as to affect an energetic desire and effort to sustain it in being just because it is a good shared by all.”²⁶ This is why democracy is both an ideal and an actual mode of associated life.

While Dewey may have given the idea of creative democracy modern clothing it is an ancient idea that has roots in Greek and Renaissance humanism as well as certain types of Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism. I believe the spirit of creative democracy existed within Unitarianism and Universalism as they emerged from Congregational Churches of New England and was a driving force in the evolution of the Unitarian Universalist movement. However, it was the first Unitarian Commission of Appraisal that most clearly articulated the religious meaning of democracy for the practice of liberal religion. The first Unitarian Commission of Appraisal was created on May 22, 1934, when the AUA resolved to constitute a body to examine the principles, purposes and practices of the denomination and recommend changes in policy, programs, and organization.

The Commission was formed during a crisis of confidence in the future of the liberal religious movement brought about by a convergence of historical forces that resulted in a period of decline for the organized liberal religious movement. The aim of the Commission was to recover the sense of purpose and vitality that characterized the movement during the nineteenth century when it experienced a sustained period of rapid growth. James Luther Adams, one of the most influential members of the Commission, framed its purpose when he wrote, “Our intent was to interpret the future of organized liberal religion and to determine what steps would be necessary to put our Unitarian house in order so that, as a denomination, we might take our place in that future.”²⁷

Among the many problems the Commission addressed, one of the most critical issues was "the fundamental question of how a church was to function in an authentically democratic spirit."²⁸ In answering this question the Commission identified seven "distinguishing marks" of liberal churches (Unitarian and Universalist). The distinguishing marks are summarized as follows.²⁹

- 1) They will be thoroughly emancipated from the sectarian spirit, from the tendency to set themselves up as small, select, superior groups of men and women to whom by some mysterious dispensation an exclusive gift of truth has been granted.
- 2) They will be thoroughly committed to the practice of democracy within their own organized life. Within their own area, they will serve as laboratories where new techniques of a growing democratic process may be tested for a liberal church can use the processes of democratic cooperative activity more fully than is possible in almost any other organization.
- 3) They will be characterized by a fresh discovery of the importance of leadership. There will be no priestly class within such churches and no monopoly of leadership in any special group. The function of the minister will be frequently re-defined and at no time will it be permitted to crystallize in any particular form.
- 4) They will develop collective activity in their full democratic forms through which a body of common opinion will emerge that will be recognized as a common possession of the whole group.
- 5) They will recognize the central importance of worship as the deliberate effort to foster and strengthen spiritual ideals and realities.
- 6) They will accept the educational method as their primary instrument for fostering religion and the application of religion to human situations and problems.
- 7) They will affirm their belief that religion is futile and sterile unless it has direct and effective bearing upon the problems of human society. They will be unsparing in their criticism of the evils and injustices now existing in the world, and they will work unceasingly for a better social order. At every point where the ideals of democracy are challenged or flouted, they will be ready to speak and act in their defense.

As Angus MacLean describes it, Unitarian Universalism is a "religious fellowship that easily absorbed the new knowledge, the new scientific attitudes, the personal liberation, the naturalistic rationalism, and the humanistic tendencies of recent centuries." It has come to "think in the tradition of Charles S. Peirce, William James, John Dewey and their kindred spirits of the arts and social sciences."³⁰ I believe that the broadening interpretation of Universalism that Cassara described as the driving force in the evolution of Unitarian Universalism, and universal human unity that

Buehrens identifies as the common vision inherent in our faith, is the most fundamental principle of thinking in this tradition. According to Cassara, in the post Syracuse era, the "great task ahead of us" as Unitarian Universalists is to advance this way of thinking for "The greatest value we can hope to grow out of our consolidation is the strengthened voice we shall gain to propagate the broadened vision of one humanity. Transcending all other concerns is the necessity to go about the business which will make all the difference to the future of man."³¹

I believe that the responsibility of propagating of this way of thinking is the same task that John Dewey identified in *A Common Faith*, when he asserted that the things in civilization most prized "exist by the grace of the doings and sufferings of the continuous human community in which we are a link." Our responsibility is the work of "conserving, transmitting, rectifying and expanding the heritage of values we have received that those who come after us may receive it more solidly and more secure, more widely accessible and more generously shared than we receive it."³² This is why I propose that the call of Unitarian Universalism and our place in history is based on fulfilling the charge that the first Unitarian Commission of Appraisal gave us. I interpret that charge to be advancing the culture of creative democracy as our ultimate concern.³³

To take advancing the culture of creative democracy as our ultimate concern is a dynamic answer for the call to action Richard Gilbert refers to as our prophetic imperative. Gilbert asserts that, "Unitarian Universalists have been called by their tradition, their theology, their ethics, and by their sociology to live under the prophetic imperative" of the "new Social Gospel." In accordance with James Luther Adams, Gilbert defines the "prophetic church" as that religious community which seeks to intervene in human history for the sake of social justice." In the case of Unitarian Universalism, "This intervention is made in the context of religious conviction, but without the supernatural confidence of the *Old Testament* prophets who felt they were the mouthpieces of God." Instead, Gilbert argues that Unitarian Universalism defines its authority in humanistic terms that articulate a transcendent standard for social justice and establishes a "religious mandate for the corporate address of the church to the systematic problems of the culture in which it lives."³⁴

The mandate to intervene in history for the sake of creative democracy is the same charge that Cassara gave the UUA at its inception. In issuing this challenge Cassara echoes the earlier work of the first Unitarian Commission of Appraisal, Dewey's vision of creative democracy, and

the work of Unitarian religious humanists like John Dietrich, Curtis Reese and Charles Potter.³⁵ Some will say that in arguing for creative democracy as our ultimate concern I am reducing all of our principles to one. To them I say, “Our seven principles are all derived from the prophetic idea of creative democracy.” In any case, this is my answer to the question, “What Happened at Syracuse?” and what it means for the practice of the Unitarian Universalist faith.

In *Engaging Our Theological Diversity*, the Commission on Appraisal writes, “While our diversity may be theological, our unity may be something else entirely.”³⁶ The suggestion is that rather than finding unity in a theological perspective, our unity is based on values and practices. This is akin to the distinction that Karen Armstrong characterizes as the difference between “orthopraxy” and “orthodoxy,” i.e. the difference between right practice and “right belief.”³⁷ I believe the birth of Unitarian Universalism clearly established it as a faith based on common purposes, principles and practices rather than common beliefs. I am further arguing that the purposes, principles and practices that form the core of Unitarian Universalism indicate a religious faith that takes advancing the culture of creative democracy as its ultimate concern.

There are many ways of articulating our core purposes, principles and practices with different implications for how we understand our call and our place in the future. I have just presented one way of doing this. I am eager to hear what others have to say about this. I do not fear that we may have a spirited debate about this that may turn contentious at times. My fear is that we will shrink from the task and wither on the vine from failure to establish a distinguishing identity. As the work of the Commission on Appraisal suggests, the time has come for us to honestly engage our diversity in all its splendors and commit ourselves to forming the common ground necessary for establishing an enduring foothold in the field of history. As we celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the birth of Unitarian Universalism I can think of no better way to celebrate our past and prepare for meeting the demands of the future.

End Notes

¹ The copyright to this work is protected under the 1976 Copyright Act and the 1989 Berne Convention. No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying or recording, or by any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the author. For permission to reproduce any portion of this work contact Barry E. Lentz, Action Research Associates, 1011 Westcott Street, Syracuse, NY 13210; (315) 472-5401; belsyr@aol.com. This article is drawn from *Creative Democracy and the Unitarian Universalist Story*, a narrative reconstruction of the work of John Dewey and the Unitarian Universalist story. A working edition of *Creative Democracy and the Unitarian Universalist Story* is available for review and commentary.

² James Luther Adams, "Liberation and Epochal Thinking," in *On Being Human Religiously*, Max L. Stackhouse, ed., (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1976), 27-31, 31.

³ The Leadership Development Committee of the Saint Lawrence Unitarian Universalist District is holding a "District Conference" on October 30-31, 2009 to commemorate the "Conference at Syracuse" where the "Plan for Consolidation" was approved.

⁴ Unitarian Commission of Appraisal, *Unitarians Face a New Age* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1936), 4. The Unitarian Commission of Appraisal, established at the 1934 Annual Meeting of the AUA, was the first of many study commissions formed to review, evaluate and make recommendations regarding the functions and activities of the liberal religious movement in its Unitarian, Universalist and Unitarian Universalist forms. When the AUA and the UCA merged in 1961 to form the UUA, a Commission on Appraisal (note the change in the name from "of" to "on") was written into the bylaws of the UUA as a permanent body of the General Assembly.

⁵ Russell E. Miller, *The Larger Hope: The First Century of the Universalist Church in America, 1770-1870* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1979), 794.

⁶ Miller, *The Larger Hope*, 795. For accounts of the events leading up to and surrounding consolidation, see also Charles H. Howe, *The Larger Faith: A Short History of American Universalism* (Boston: Skinner House Books, Unitarian Universalist Association, 1993), 119-127; Jack Mendelson, *Being liberal in an Illiberal Age* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 70-74; Russell E. Miller, *The Larger Hope: The Second Century of the Universalist Church in America, 1870-1970* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1985), 648-665; Carol B. Morris, "It was Noontime Here..." in *A Stream of Light*, ed. Conrad Wright (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1975), 150-155; Robinson, *Unitarian and Universalists*, 168-184.

⁷ Miller, *The Larger Hope*, 656.

⁸ There is a distinction between the terms "merger" and "consolidation" that carried legal weight at the time of merger and must be noted. Under Massachusetts's law if two denominations merged two churches or any intermediate organization that opposed the merger could mount a court challenge by claiming that they were the rightful legal successor of the AUA or the UCA. However, two corporations with a common purpose could consolidate with approval of the state legislature and avoid the possibility of a legal challenge. Hence the "Merger Commission" proposed the "Plan for Consolidation." It was the "Plan for Consolidation" that was approved at

the Syracuse conference and later ratified resulting in the corporate merger that wasn't. For a fuller discussion of this issue see Warren Ross, *The Premise and the Promise: The Story of the Unitarian Universalist Association* (Boston, Skinner House Books, 2001), 21-24. While this was an important issue at the time, it is often not discussed in the historical literature and carries little meaning today. In this work I try to honor this distinction where appropriate, while also using poetic license in recognition of the aesthetic fact that most view what happened as a full corporate merger.

⁹ Victor Bovee, acting ed., "News of the Unitarian World: Plan for Unitarian-Universalist Consolidation Approved at Syracuse, Sent to Plebiscite," *The Unitarian Register*, 138 (December 1959): 19-24.

¹⁰ For a copy of the Constitution and By-Laws see *Directory, Unitarian Universalist Association, 1961-1962*, (Boston: UUA, 1961), p 24-48.

¹¹ Bovee, "News of the Unitarian World," 20.

¹² Lawrence G. Brooks, who was chairman of the AUA Board of Directors and a member of the Joint Conference Committee, appears to have been the presiding officer for most (possibly all) of the joint plenary sessions.

¹³ Lawrence G. Brooks, "This is Democracy in Action" in "Editorials" *The Unitarian Register*, 138 (December, 1959): 13.

¹⁴ *The Unitarian Register* 138 (December 1959).

¹⁵ Victor Bovee, "Despite Fatigue and Frustration," in "Editorials," *The Unitarian Register* 138 (December 1959): 13.

¹⁶ UU Commission On Appraisal, *Engaging Our Theological Diversity* (Boston, Unitarian Universalist Association, 2005), 4. This report is the eleventh report of the Commission since it was created in the formation of the UUA. A copy of this report and more information on the work of the Commission, including copies of previous reports can be found on the internet @ <http://www25.uua.org/coa/index.html>.

¹⁷ Neal, Alice Blair Wesley and James Ishmael Ford, eds., *The Transient and Permanent in Liberal Religion: Reflections from the UUMA Convocation on Ministry* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1995).

¹⁸ Alice Blair Wesley, "Afterword," in *The Transient and Permanent in Liberal Religion*, O'Neal, et. al., ed., 351-367, 359.

¹⁹ John A. Buehrens, "Preface," in *The Transient and Permanent in Liberal Religion*, O'Neal, et. al., ed., vii-x, viii.

²⁰ James Luther Adams, "Liberation and Epochal Thinking," 31.

²¹ James Luther Adams, "The Religious Problem of Peace," in *An Examined Faith: Social Context and religious Commitment*, George K. Beach, ed., (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), 281-290, 284.

- ²² Earnest Cassara, "The Task Ahead of Us: Liberal Religion's Heritage and Goal," *The Unitarian Register*, 143 (May 1961), 7.
- ²³ Cassara, "The Task Ahead of Us," 7.
- ²⁴ John Dewey, "Creative Democracy -- The Task Before Us" (1939), reprinted in *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 14 (1939-1941): 224-230, 230.
- ²⁵ John Dewey *The Public and Its Problems*, (New York: Henry Holt, 1927), *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), 2:235-372, 350.
- ²⁶ Dewey *The Public and Its Problems*, 328-329.
- ²⁷ James Luther Adams, *Not Without Dust and Heat* (Chicago: Exploration Press, 1995), 147.
- ²⁸ James Luther Adams, *Not Without Dust and Heat* (Chicago: Exploration Press, 1995), 147-148.
- ²⁹ Unitarian Commission of Appraisal, *Unitarians Face a New Age*, 3-11.
- ³⁰ Angus MacLean, *The Wind in Both Ears*, 2nd ed., (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1987), p 2-3.
- ³¹ Cassara, "The Task Ahead of Us," 8.
- ³² John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934), reprinted in *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1934*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), 9 (1933-1934): 1-58, 57-58.
- ³³ In referring to creative democracy as an ultimate concern, I am drawing on the analysis of the religious experience provided by Paul Tillich in *Dynamics of Faith*. Tillich maintains that all religious questions arise out of the problems inherent in the human situation. He argues that religious doctrines are developed as solutions to these problems and he characterizes religious faith as the "state of being ultimately concerned." See Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1957), 1.
- ³⁴ Richard Gilbert, *The Prophetic Imperative: Unitarian Universalist Foundations for a New Social Gospel*, revised ed., (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1980), 8-11.
- ³⁵ Dietrich, Reese and Potter, Unitarian ministers who were deeply influenced by the work of Dewey, played leading roles in the advancing the American religious movement. See Mason Olds, *American Religious Humanism*, revised ed., (Hamden, CN, HUUMANIST Association NFP, 1996, 2006).
- ³⁶ 2002 Commission on Appraisal, *Engaging Our Theological Diversity*, 11.
- ³⁷ Karen Armstrong, *The Spiral Staircase*, (New York: Anchor Books, 2004), p 236. See also Heidi Swarts, "How Important are Religious Beliefs Anyway," a sermon delivered at the First Unitarian Universalist Society of Syracuse New York on June 12, 2005.