Intimations of Deity: The Latest Form of Fidelity?
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... And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.

— William Wordsworth, “Tintern Abbey”

1. Introduction

In this paper I identify and explore a significant, perhaps surprising, recovery of theism within the Unitarian Universalist movement in recent decades. The evidence for this theological shift comes from several sources: empirical survey data on growing UU interest in process theology, increasing theistic references in UU liturgical language, and a rise in polemical commentary from the humanist sector of the UU theological and congregational landscape.

I begin with an overview of these varied indicators of change and then move on to interpret this theistic trend as a religious response to new perspectives that have arisen, since the early twentieth century, in the fields of cosmology, physics, environmental ethics, and philosophical theology, and more recently, to the increasingly gnawing emptiness of social life, the spiritual barrenness of scientific, philosophical, and capitalist materialism, and a revival of multiple languages and cultures of spirituality in the public arena. I conclude with some reflections on what all this might mean for the future directions of the Unitarian Universalist movement, its potential as an ecclesial “home base” for process thought, and the significance that could have for a renewed and creatively engaged UU presence within the broader conversational circles of liberal theology.

2. Humanism Triumphant?

In their theological evolution, Unitarians and Universalists have moved mainly in a direction away from traditional attitudes, orthodoxies, and focus on other-worldly speculations, and toward an ever greater openness to the influences of modernity and a secularizing1 concern for fulfillment and pursuit of an ethical vision of this-worldly common good. We are familiar with how these tendencies led the center of our movement increasingly to move beyond its former identification with Christianity in the late 19th century and to begin taking a non-theistic turn early in the 20th century. Impelled by the seminal ministerial leadership of John Dietrich and Curtis Reese, this latter development within Unitarian churches soon became widely known as “humanism”—a term requiring some clarification.

Nearly every discussion of humanism is hampered by a multiplicity of conflicting or overlapping meanings and nuances that have been attached to the word, often distinguished by a bewildering list of adjectives: classical, Renaissance, cosmic, philosophical, theistic, atheistic, literary, ethical, pragmatic, naturalistic, religious, secular, and so on.2 In my attention to humanism within Unitarian churches, it suffices to distinguish the three most often encountered contemporary senses of the word.

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1 I use “secularizing,” not to mean secularism, but in the prophetic sense stressed by John B. Cobb Jr, Spiritual Bankruptcy: A Prophetic Call to Action (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010).
2 Such distinctions may be found in many places within humanist literature. See, for example, Curtis W Reese, The Meaning of Humanism (Boston: Beacon Press, 1945), 6-9; Warren Allen Smith, “Authors and Humanism,” The Humanist, October 1951, 193-4; and Frank Carleton Doan, Religion and the Modern Mind (Boston: Sherman, French & Company, 1909), 173-201 passim.
First is the basic etymological meaning of humanism as an affirmation of, and emphasis on, the fundamental and intrinsic dignity, meaning, and value of human life. Humanism in this broad and positive sense is to be contrasted with the anti-humanistic doctrines of original sin, total and intrinsic human depravity, and bondage of the will. This positive meaning is common to and embraced by all of the more specialized forms of humanism, for which reason I will refer to it as inclusive humanism. It is a humanism that underlay, in incipient form, the affirmation of human free will and capacity for meritorious salvation that was first articulated by the Polish Brethren around 1600 and began to resurface as Arminianism among the liberal-leaning divines of the Massachusetts Standing Order by the 1740s. This kind of humanism was slower to develop among Universalists in America; the Rellyan universalism of John Murray, for example, was still strongly Calvinistic.

Second is the humanism first preached by John Dietrich, reportedly beginning in the later years of his tenure (1911-16) at the Spokane Unitarian Church, but fully developed only after his move to the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis in 1916. Dietrich’s humanism, while denying any atheistic claim or accusation, simply had no interest in God-talk, choosing rather to speak of religion and the religious life wholly in ethical and worldly terms. I call this agnostic humanism.

Third is the more restricted sense of humanism as a clearly non-theistic stance but preferring the more positive label “humanism” to the lexical negativity of “atheism.” In unambiguously excluding any belief in or affirmation of God, however liberally or abstractly understood, this narrower form may be called exclusive humanism.

These distinctions help to describe the growth of humanism within Unitarian consciousness prior to the 1961 consolidation with the Universalists. Despite Dietrich’s clarity in promoting a position of agnostic humanism, many saw it as a direct attack on theism and reaction against it became the substance and focus of the “humanist-theist” debate in the 1920s. The growth of humanist identification was bolstered by new publications and organizations aimed at the spread and understanding of humanist ideas. Popularized in books by Corliss Lamont and Paul Kurtz, among others, humanism was seen in many quarters as “the next step” in religion and was advocated by one enthusiast, in the context of the Cold War, as the salvation of human civilization—a “third way . . . between Christianity and Communism.”

Under the banner of humanism, not only God-language, but much of Protestant-derived liturgical structure was systematically discarded from the communal life and vocabulary of many UU congregations. Especially in smaller and newly formed congregations without professional ministerial leadership during the post-war “fellowship” movement, it was the exclusive form of humanism, moving beyond the more cautious agnostic humanism of Dietrich and Reese, that gained particular strength. Among Unitarian Universalists in the 1960s and 1970s, although there was still widespread affirmation of “creedlessness” and a proclaimed openness to various traditional perspectives, humanism became nearly the default or de facto theological identity of the UU movement in the minds of many laypeople whose experience of our tradition was confined to its limited expression in their own congregational cultures. Among a substantial number of UUs, embrace of exclusive humanism took on a triumphalistic tone, and was not infrequently accompanied by a sneering attitude toward God-language, a knee-jerk reaction against anything reminiscent of Christian practice, and contempt for much of the familiar liturgical vocabulary and usages of Protestant tradition. The largest proportion of UU ministers regarded themselves as humanists, although of which variety is difficult to determine. Nonetheless, in the eyes of many, it was only a matter of time before humanism’s revolution would be complete, not only within the UU movement but in American society at large.

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1 Early publications were The New Humanist, begun in mimeographed form in Chicago in 1927, and the original Humanist Manifesto of 1933, which led to founding of the American Humanist Association and its magazine, The Humanist. See Lloyd and Mary Morain, Humanism as the Next Step: An Introduction for Liberal Protestants, Catholics, and Jews (Boston: Beacon Press, 1954), esp. chap. 8.

2 Hector Hawton, in Morain. Next Step, 100-108.
3. A Return to Theism?

But a funny thing happened on the way to this imagined humanist apotheosis. In the late 1970s the language of spirituality, a word disdained as superstitious by many humanists, began to germinate and take root within more than a few UU churches. In 1985, the interconnectedness of human life on a cosmic scale was formally adopted as a principle by delegates to the UUA’s General Assembly—the first time that those venerated principles had gone beyond merely human values to assert grounding in something bordering on a metaphysical principle or ontological proposition. And with the renewed interest in spiritual practices, a new comfort with God-language and invocations of the holy began to be manifested in UU worship. Growing tension between the methodology of reason and a spirituality of responsiveness to the holy for the position of primacy or centrality in UU faith burst into the open at a national gathering of UU clergy in 1995.

In a 2003-04 survey conducted by the UUA’s Commission on Appraisal among 170 UU ministers and 271 UU laypeople, the “largest proportion” (32%) of ministers, responding to a question of “theological orientation,” used “the language of process theology (including panentheism and process naturalism)” as the dominant descriptor for their theologies. “Humanism,” the next most frequent label, stood at only 20%, although it was almost always hyphenated with some other descriptor, including again, “process theology.” More surprising perhaps is that, among laypeople responding to the same survey question, process theology was tied with humanism at 17% as the most frequently cited religious outlook. This last percentage needs to be reduced by the likelihood that lay respondents to the survey comprise a non-random sample of people who have more than the average UU interest in theological matters. This would mean that the fraction of the total UU population who identify themselves with process thought may well be closer to perhaps 10%. Even so, process/relational thinking clearly offers an appealing theological option to significant numbers of Unitarian Universalist clergy and laity. To judge by the impressive number of UU sermon texts available on the internet that give substantial attention to process theology, this level of interest can only be seen to have grown over the past ten years since these survey data were collected.

Linda Weaver Horton, who designed the survey instrument and did most of the data analysis for the CoA study, goes further to note that among the self-descriptions of theological orientation given by all respondents, lay and clergy, more than 80% mentioned ideas or phrases that could be broadly or generically categorized as “processive” in outlook, even if they did not explicitly cite “panentheism,” “process theology,” or other terms that would indicate specialized familiarity with the process school. “What I keep finding [in the survey responses],” Linda adds, “is a pervasive ‘process’ cosmology, rather than ‘theology’ per se.” These data seem to show that, beyond those who have some direct and well-informed acquaintance with the standard literature of contemporary process theology, there is a much broader majority of contemporary UUs who may be, to invoke an old UU canard with a new twist, process thinkers without knowing it.

What should we infer about status of theism among us from this impressive UU interest in process theology? Certainly process theologians have been centrally concerned to articulate radically revised, but still robust and dynamic, conceptions of God. Whitehead found God to be necessary for the internal consistency of his metaphysical system, which he called a “philosophy of organism,” and Charles Hartshorne spent most of his philosophical career clarifying the nature of a “neoclassical” God that

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5 Commission on Appraisal (hereinafter CoA), Engaging Our Theological Diversity (Boston: UUA, 2005), 10 (also available online at: http://www.uua.org/documents/coa/engagingourtheodiversity.pdf).

6 CoA, Theological Diversity, 71.


8 Linda Weaver Horton to Jay Atkinson, private e-mail, 18 February 2015.

would be free of the classical conundrums of omnipotence, theodicy, and precognition.\textsuperscript{10} Similar concerns have occupied the work of nearly all process theologians in subsequent generations, especially David Ray Griffin and John B. Cobb Jr, arguably the leading process thinkers of our own time, both of whom have developed robust and nuanced ways of understanding God and God’s activity in the world within a naturalistic framework. Despite very limited attempts to formulate non-theistic forms of process thought,\textsuperscript{11} it is fair to say that nearly everyone embracing contemporary process thought understands that tradition in theistic terms. With nearly one third of UU ministers in the CoA survey identifying process thought as their dominant religious orientation, we seem to have a solid contingent of theists among UU clergy. Others whose theism may take a different form would only add to this number.

With this apparent level of interest, it is disappointing, even somewhat inexplicable, that very little broad or intentionally focused treatment of process thought has emerged from a UU perspective. The few UUs who are producing significant theological scholarship these days (aside from sermons) are remarkably brief in explicating process-relational theology or following out its implications for ecclesiology, social ethics, economic theory, or political democracy in any detailed way within our movement. Even in their brevity, however, they are all clear about process thought’s emphasis on an immanent God, and none of them argues for a nontheistic view. UU theologian Paul Rasor, for example, in his prospectus for liberal theology, cites process thought at only two points, but notes Marjorie Suckochi’s stress on “mutuality between God and the world” as “an image of God as radically immanent.\textsuperscript{12} Process ideas can be discerned at many points between the lines in the recent book on progressive religion by John Buehrens and Rebecca Parker, but only five pages give explicit attention to the underlying metaphysical and theological elements of process thought.\textsuperscript{13} Nonetheless, in that brief treatment, Rebecca Parker gives a compelling defense of Whitehead’s “profound concept of the nature of God,” who is “part and parcel of the nature of reality.” UU minister Gary Kowalski offers an all too brief survey of process ideas in his pursuit of a God compatible with scientific rigor but expresses a liking for “the process conception of God” that is reminiscent of Emerson’s “Oversoul” — “In a panoply of events, God is simply the Main Event.”\textsuperscript{14} And Galen Guengerich, who undertakes to “re-vise God” for a “scientific age,” disappointingly sidesteps any attempt at an orderly account of neo-classical theism, stewing fragmented allusions across widely separated pages, but appears to come down, confusingly to my reading, on the side of God as a logical or experiential, but not quite Anselmian, necessity.\textsuperscript{15} An interesting and unusual exception to these briefer treatments is a lengthier exploration of affinities between modern physics and process thought by UU layman and physicist

\textsuperscript{10} On the topic of divine precognition, i.e., inclusion of future events as a part of God’s omniscience, Hartshorne was especially fond of citing the seminal work of Polish Brethren theologians Fausto Sozzini and Jan Krell. Among several such references the most useful is Charles Hartshorne, \textit{The Logic of Perfection} (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, 1962) p. 42n5, and other references cited therein. For fuller treatment of the precognition question in the thinking of the Polish Brethren, see John Robert Andrew Mayer de Berncastle, “The Temporalistic Implications of the Socinian Doctrine of Divine Knowledge and Some of its Historical Anticipations,” Ph.D. dissertation, Atlanta: Emory University, 1962). The original work on Berncastle most heavily relies is Johannes Crellius, \textit{Liber de Deo Epijuse Atribuitus} (Raków, 1630), reprinted in \textit{Bibliotheca Fratrum Polonorum} (Amsterdam: post anno 1656), vol. 5.

\textsuperscript{11} One advocate of nontheistic process metaphysics is C. Robert Mesle, “Process Theology: A Basic Introduction” (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 1993), who argues that, in analogy to the “purely secular, nontheistic interpretation of the Christian gospel” in the “Death of God” movement, we can “preserve the values of the process-relational vision . . . while finding sacredness entirely within the world of natural processes . . . without the idea of a divine being,” 125-26. Regrettably, Mesle confuses the issue by calling his view “process naturalism,” that is his emphasis on an i


\textsuperscript{13} John A. Buehrens and Rebecca Ann Parker, \textit{A House for Hope: The Promise of Progressive Religion for the Twenty-first Century} (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), 102-6, 135.

\textsuperscript{14} Gary Kowalski, \textit{Science and the Search for God} (New York: Lantern Books, 2003), 131-144 passim, esp. 139-140.

John Jungerman, who weaves process ideas through accounts of modern quantum theory, relativity, and cosmology, and devotes two entire chapters to a well-ordered and more technical survey of the basic elements of Whitehead’s metaphysics and theology.  

Returning to the CoA survey data from 2003-04, it is striking that, of the 34 UU clergy who identified themselves with humanism (20% of 170 total clergy respondents), only three gave this response in unhyphenated form. The other 31 combined it with “language related to one or more of the following: mysticism, process theology, God/transcendence, or Christianity.” While no precise numerical conclusions can be extracted from such a summary, we can at least make the following observations. The theistic implication of humanists embracing “transcendence” and “humanist-mystics” is difficult to judge, but among those who hyphenate their humanism with God or Christianity, we presumably have an additional group of theists. If we may surmise that this latter group represents half of all the “hyphenated humanists,” then we end up with 9% of UU clergy who may be called humanistic theists, notwithstanding some who will see such a term as oxymoronic. Combining this group with the 32% primarily identifying themselves as process theists, it is not unreasonable to conclude that more than 40% (possibly many more) of UU clergy are theists of one kind or another. Clearly this will include a significant number who understand their “humanism” not as “atheism” but rather in its underlying and more basic etymological sense as an affirmation of the fundamental dignity of human life and values and thus of a God who, in some broader way, encompasses such values.

This pattern of renewed acceptance of a theistic perspective is apparent, from my own experience, in growing use of God-language in the liturgies, preaching, and hymnody within both congregational and larger assembly settings. It was particularly evident, even pervasive, in worship at last February’s UUMA Center Institute at Asilomar. Without any way of systematically measuring the reaction of UU ministers to such usage, I can say at least that I did not overhear complaints about this in dining room or other conversation. Maybe I move in biased collegial circles, or maybe this is just not as much an issue for UU ministers as it is for, I surmise, a relatively larger proportion of our lay people.

Beyond these somewhat unmethodical and impressionistic perceptions of changes in worship style, we can turn to a third source of evidence for the theistic shift that comes from humanists themselves. Contemporary UU humanism is far from being monolithic, of course, but the alarm from some in that community indicates their own perception of a decline in their own ranks and what they lament as a misguided return to theism within the UU movement.

Michael Werner, a past president of the American Humanist Association, is a prominent exponent of this concern. He summarizes the ranks of UUs who self-identified as “either humanists or theists” as having declined from 73% in 1989 to an “estimated” 49% just three years later in 1992. I cite him here, not so much for the accuracy of the numbers themselves, which are questionable, but to confirm views that exist among humanist leaders. Another past president of the AHA, Mel Lipman, substantiates the perception, precisely accurate or not, of shifting UU theologies among both clergy and laity, claiming that “25 years ago [1987], over 90% of UUs were Humanists as were about 80% of UU ministers · · · [while] today [2012] only about 30% of UUs are Humanists as are less than 10% of [UU] ministers.” Mr. Werner attributes this decline and the parallel growth of theism among UUs in sweeping terms, stemming from the “revolution” begun by Paul Tillich’s idea that “we could redefine the word God in secular terms” (Werner’s words) to “the revival and use of metaphorical religious language” and eventually to today’s UUA’s having “moved toward a focus on indiscriminate pluralism and radical tolerance rather than reason in religion.” He goes on to observe:

17 CoA, Theological Diversity, 71.
19 Lipman’s text actually ends with “as are less than 10% of Humanist ministers,” surely an inadvertent slip for “UU ministers.” From his online posting: http://uuhumanistsymposium.com/2012/07/03/is-uu-humanist-becoming-an-oxymoron.
When the UUA was focused on reason in religion and heretical humanism it grew greatly. By widening the spectrum of beliefs and becoming more theistic (a statistical regression to the mean) it lost its vibrant appeal and brand image. It became one more in a family of liberal, syncretistic, fuzzy theistic communities that exhibit great tolerance but are without foundations. This change reflects the growing trend in the United States of religion becoming a religion of the self—what I like to call the church of the greater solipsism.20

Despite such protestations from exclusive (sometimes referred to as “old-guard”) humanists, it is clear that significant numbers of UUs today are finding some theistic form of humanism more satisfying. Although older humanism has always been strong in its articulation of an ethical basis for human life and meaning, it has suffered from failure to offer a robust cosmology, and I see this as a significant factor in the search of many of our people for “something more.” Even in our secular culture the word “God” continues to have powerful connotations of that “more”—a ground of meaning and belonging that makes it irreplaceably valuable in communal liturgies and personal spirituality, but if, and only if, it can be provided with a referent that is tenable in relation to common sense and the contemporary scientific worldview. To be embraced, “God” must point to a God that we can believe in. For some UUs, neoclassical theism, à la Whitehead, Hartshorne, and their contemporary disciples, has provided an important naturalistic avenue of such credibility, as the data above have shown.

This completes my argument for the reality of a substantial new wave of theism within Unitarian Universalist circles. I now turn to some more analytical questions. Why has the humanist option in our movement, once so vibrant and dominant, seen such decline in recent decades? What kinds of theism are now in the ascendant and how do they differ from the theism that seemed so thoroughly, sometimes angrily, rejected in the mid-20th century? And how is this seeming reversal to be understood in the wider context of changing scientific understanding and social realities?

4. The Transformed (Postmodern?) Context

One of the enduring characteristics of our liberal religious movement, especially the Unitarian side, has been our focus on human values and dignity, our engagement with the worldly concern for social justice and righteous living, and embrace of the spirit of modernity in all its scientific, philosophical, and methodological facets. We see this early in the trajectory of thinking among the Polish Brethren, as they interpreted elements of the Sermon on the Mount as a guide for social relationships, economic justice, and even political arrangements.21 In their philosophical theology, Fausto Sozzini and Johann Krell were ready to reformulate the doctrine of divine foreknowledge on the basis of a common-sense affirmation of the reality, responsibility, and practical inescapability of human free will—one of the keystones of what I earlier called inclusive humanism.

This humanistic spirit, along with the liberal religious embrace of modernity, scientific advance, and historical-critical study of the bible, was certainly alive and well during the sixty years from the appearance of Darwin’s Origin of Species to the outbreak of the “humanist-theist” controversy within Unitarian circles in the early 1920s. While Universalists were somewhat resistant to these developments,22 Unitarians were much more receptive. Minot J. Savage, for example, was a leader among Unitarian ministers in preaching a religion of evolution in the 1880s and beyond. Scholars in the newly developing social sciences were eager to interpret the meaning of evolution for their various disciplines. The scientific method was becoming more and more credible, often imperative, as an epistemological paradigm, and liberal religion was searching out the implications of all this for traditional areas of theology, anthropology, and Christology.

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20 Michael Werner, loc. cit.
21 Particularly in the field of international law and its setting within Poland-Lithuania’s multi-faith society, some of the Polish Brethren’s ideas seem likely to have been rooted in Poland’s tradition of Christian humanism going back to the late 14th century, a topic that I have discussed at some length in earlier papers presented to Collegium.
22 Witness the heresy accusation and trial of Universalist minister Herman Bisbee in Minneapolis, 1870-72.
The agnostic humanism of John Dietrich and Curtis Reese was explicitly grounded in this kind of thinking. Dietrich in particular was much taken with the scientific spirit and we see that aspect of his thinking, not only as it developed over the years of his ministerial tenure in Spokane and more fully in Minneapolis, but also as it emerged in the content and tone of the first Humanist Manifesto of 1933. The scientific spirit and the successes of its methodology effectively and unalterably undermined, in the minds of many, the whole idea of a supernatural realm. There was nothing explicitly atheistic in any of this, and indeed Dietrich was loath to equate his humanism with atheism, although others were quick to do exactly that. The God problem, as it was generally seen in that era among humanist thinkers, was that God was simply assumed to be, and almost universally conceptualized as, a supernatural entity. Naturalistic conceptions of God, as would be developed in later decades by Dewey, Otto, and Whitehead, were simply not at hand as theological options in the 1910s and 20s. The deeper problem that so exercised the humanists of this era was thus a revulsion against the very idea of a supernatural realm whose powers could intervene in the natural order or contravene the natural laws of physical reality. Thus the appeal of Unitarian humanism in its earliest phase, as articulated by John Dietrich and his ministerial contemporaries, can be seen as quite a reasonable response to the lack of any religiously robust and scientifically tenable God-concept in an era of inflated confidence in scientific understanding and progress such as prevailed in the pre-Barthian era of liberal optimism. As much as some might have wished to retain the moral and providential aspects of deity, they could find no way to do so that would be consistent with the scientific world view as it then stood.

But as we know, another funny thing happened to science, especially physics, on its way toward the widely expected outcome of tying up all the loose ends of what was then imagined as a nearly finished project. Previously held, soft-core common sense understandings23 of physical reality began to crumble, though not without much bewilderment and gnashing of teeth, with Einstein’s relativity and the onslaught of Schrödinger and Heisenberg against the previously assured predictability of the entire physical universe. Physics became much “fuzzier” than anyone in the early 20th century could have foreseen and the physical microworld appeared as much an arena of mystery as of conceptual clarity. Even the logical completeness of mathematics dissolved under the critical analysis of Kurt Gödel. All this has laid the groundwork for styles of theology that take a mystical turn or are more comfortable or satisfied with a corresponding “fuzziness” in their ontologies, as I will elaborate below.

In contrast, by far the most robust metaphysical response to this new state of affairs, conceptually begun prior to the full development of quantum theory, was the “philosophy of organism,” commonly known as process thought, of Alfred North Whitehead. Grounded in the growing evolutionary understanding of both biological and cosmic realms, Whitehead developed a detailed metaphysics of becoming, with “actual occasions,” understood as subjective “droplets of experience,” as the final and ultimate basic constituents of reality or actuality. I will presume some level of familiarity with Whitehead here and not go into any further explication of the metaphysical structure of his philosophy. What I will stress, however, is the concept of God that Whitehead found necessary for the internal coherence of his overall system. On Whitehead’s view, God exists as a necessary entity within the natural order of things, understood in its most general and inclusive sense. God’s action upon or influence in the world is not sporadic, interventionary, or coercive. Rather, divine providence permeates the cosmos at every point and every moment as a naturalistic and persuasive presence at the formative moment of every actual occasion. God and the World24 coexist in a mutuality of both influence and necessity.

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23 I use here David Griffin’s distinction between hard-core and soft-core categories of common sense. Human free will is an example of a hard-core common sense conviction in the sense that, despite intellectual or philosophical assertions of free will as an illusion, no one can actually go about one’s life in practice on the basis of such a conviction. The solidity of physical objects (like rocks) exemplifies a soft-core common sense belief that we have discarded without practical or logical contradiction as the atomic view of “solid” objects as mostly empty space has gradually taken hold. See David Ray Griffin, Reenchantment Without Supernaturalism (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000).

24 I capitalize “World” here to indicate that both God and the World, in process cosmology, are co-ordinate ultimates, neither proceeding ontologically from the other, yet neither having asity without the other. The third ultimate in Whitehead’s cosmology is Creativity, and all three together have sometimes been called or thought of as the process trinity.
Perhaps needless to say, all of this has, on its face, a very abstract character, and doubt about the “religious availability” of Whitehead’s God, that is, the extent to which one can feel oneself grounded in or spiritually connected to such a God in prayer or as a comforting presence in the ordinariness of life, continues to be a worry and a challenge. There has been frequent concern, even among process theologians, that the technical character and intellectual face of process metaphysics, as a formidably complex speculative system with its challenge to the dominant materialistic ontology of our time, renders its personal, everyday religious value to be elusive, if not inherently problematic.25

Nonetheless, process thought has found receptivity outside the academy, as witnessed by the more than 32% of UU ministers and 17% of UU laity who claim it as their primary theological orientation, as I summarized above in Sec. 3 (page 3) of this paper. Though I have no comparable data for clergy or laity in other communions beyond my own anecdotal awareness of such reception among personal friends and as expressed in a few essays, my impression is that the process God has religious appeal across a variety of Christian and Jewish denominations. And I note that Gary Dorrien has, on more than one occasion, identified process theology as “the leading option in liberal theology today” or “the major form of liberal or progressive theology in the United States.”26

In the space of a century, therefore, the situation has become somewhat upended. UUs in the 21st century are no less committed to a scientific world view, but the content of that world view has been transformed from what it appeared to be in 1915. The way that scientific understanding flows informatively into theology persists as before, but now it is a newly postmodern science that opens up a transformed constructive arena for postmodern theology. Possibilities for new forms of theism exist that were not available and could scarcely have been imagined by Dietrich and his contemporaries.

While process theology seems the most robust and fully developed of these new options, there is another tendency discernable in Unitarian Universalist circles that deserves attention for its contribution to enlarging the use of God language among us. This is a growing acceptance of the language of mystery, ambiguity, and polydoxy to speak about the ultimate nature and meaning of reality and of human existence within it. In some of the most popular and frequently sung selections from our hymnals, UUs seem increasingly comfortable with hymn texts such as “Gathered here in the mystery of the hour” and

Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going? Mystery. Mystery. Life is a riddle and a mystery.

In addition to this extreme of apophatic language, we find in our hymnody also an abundance of “oblique” God-language or substitutes for “God”—“Name Unnamed,” “Spirit of Life,” “Source of All,” “Lady of the Seasons’ Laughter,” and many other similar terms. Capitalization of these phrases in hymn texts indicates their function as grammatically second-person proper names, and thus quasi-personal terms of address. Similar usage is often found in the beginning phrases of address in our communal prayer. And then we have the polydoxy, or more accurately, the polynomial usages in a hymn like “Bring Many Names” with its multiple appellations: “Warm Father God,” “Strong Mother God,” and “Young Growing God.” The first two of these modulate familiar traditional images with unconventional adjectival reversals while the third, affirming divine growth, recognizes process ideas, not just in the UU hymnal, but also in hymn writer Brian Wren’s Methodist tradition.

While these somewhat poetic “intimations of deity” may be strong on imagery, they lack by themselves much identifiable content, that is, the ontology behind these alternative names remains mostly undeveloped and thus they have at best only the vaguest of theological implications, in contrast to the

more kataphatic ontology of process theism. It would be interesting to have some data on how this form of second-person, I-Thou usage serves to give people a psychic sense of connection to a higher power—relatedness to an embracing reality that is felt, understood, or at least addressed as a friendly or reassuring presence, thus providing, in a spiritually satisfying way, a filling up of the “God-shaped hole” that has recently become a frequent metaphor for spiritual longing or emptiness. The popularity of such usages suggests that they may well function in exactly that way.

Thus in addition to, or perhaps alongside of, process theism, we see a measure of mystical theology being embraced in UU liturgy and hymnody that seems to have a strong resonance of theism, whether accompanied by any explicit God language or not. The appeal of this language points to some of what visitors to our congregations come looking for. In all my years of ministry, meeting UU newcomers and talking with them about what most attracted them for a first visit or, having arrived, what now pleases them, I have never heard anyone mention “humanism” or any other specific theological label. Mostly they speak of spirituality, community, openness to diversity, and lack of any defining dogma. They are humanists, of course, in the inclusive sense, as are virtually all Unitarian Universalists, but rarely bring with them the kind of reactive anger against traditional religious language and liturgy that was so characteristic of the exclusive humanists who heavily populated the newly formed UU fellowships of the 1950s and shaped the form of humanism that dominated our movement in the 1960s and 70s. It’s a telling reflection on the present era that, as the social and economic conditions of our lives become ever more inhumane or un-humanistic in their value systems, newcomers to our congregations, and some longer-term members as well, increasingly seek spiritual sustenance in the broader and often theistic form of expansive or inclusive humanism rather than in the narrower forms and totality of exclusive humanism.

We see here what may be interpreted as a wish to embrace the psychic and emotional resonance of God language but without much interest in delving deeply into any kind of precise or formal theology. This style of religiosity is not new, of course, and indeed has important roots in 16th-century mystics or mystical spiritualists like Sebastian Franck, a contemporary of Michael Servetus. Mystical theology was probably mediated more through German pietism into the Universalist tradition27 than from the Unitarian side of our history. But even among Unitarians, Earl Morse Wilbur remarked how concern for ethical living has long had primacy over confessional precision as the major focus of Unitarian piety:

> In the few and brief periods when this [Unitarian] movement has been suffered to exist free from persecution or from the necessity of defending itself against attack, doctrine has almost invariably retired into the background, and the emphasis has by preference been laid on conduct and character. Its primary psychological character is thus best described in terms not of the intellect or of the emotions, but of the will.28

The elements of conduct and character have likewise been prominent in the evolution of American Unitarianism. Central to William Ellery Channing’s conception of religion generally and of “Unitarian Christianity” as “most favorable to piety” was his conviction of the moral sense within the soul of every human being that enabled one to respond to the supreme moral glory of God and to strive toward its perfections.29 Later in the nineteenth century, the move to ground Unitarianism solely on an ethical basis likewise bespeaks the essential and definitive role that moral behavior and right living was perceived to have among Unitarians. This was particularly focused within the Western Unitarian Conference, whose rallying cry, “freedom, fellowship, and character in religion” resonates still today for many UUs. And all the way to the present day, continuing activism in social and economic justice

29 See particularly in Channing’s Works (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1886), his sermons, “Likeness to God” (291-301), “Unitarian Christianity” (367-83), and “Unitarian Christianity Most Favorable to Piety” (384-400).
(civil rights, LGBTQ equality, anti-oppressive and anti-racist education, and striving against income inequality) as well as environmental sustainability as a moral imperative all testify to our collective determination to bring ideals of right relationship with one another and with the natural world into the public square as moral principles for progressive legislation and the shaping of public policy.

Even though many UUs today refer to themselves simply as “Unitarians,” and those of Universalist background often express fear that their heritage has been marginalized or lost, my impression is very much the opposite. The traditional Universalist proclamation, “God is Love,” coupled with its ethical corollary for social justice, “Standing on the Side of Love,” and the metaphysical image of the “interdependent web,” have become such popular catchphrases in our churches that they alone may comprise as much of the imagery and substance of relational theology or theological ethics that many UUs feel the need for, thus providing our movement with a minimal framework for undergirding a newly satisfying theism that, although sometimes vague, is clearly relational and ethical at its core, and as much, if not more, rooted in the Universalist than the Unitarian side of our tradition.

**Conclusion**

We can identify several intervals over the centuries when the dominant theological center of our liberal religious movement has undergone decisive evolutionary change. On the Unitarian side of the tradition, major examples of such shifts can be seen in the emergence of Arminianism (1740-80), Transcendentalism (1835-50), ethical theism (1870-95), and non-theistic humanism (1920-60). Seen against the long-standing perception, in the middle decades of the 20th century, of humanism as the solid and growing core of UU theological identity, the advance of theism that I have discerned here bids fair to rise as a major new wave in our long history of theological exploration and discovery.

I do not intend this paper in any way to be a triumphalistic brief for theism, or a hope for the demise of atheism among UUs. Indeed I think theological vitality within the UU movement will be enlivened by retaining a sturdy atheist presence among us that, along with an equally vibrant theistic presence, will continue to raise questions and encourage dialogue that will deepen exploration, among laity as well as clergy, of the nuances of both of these fundamental theological stances, along with their more particular expressions in Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, paganism, and several others.

Beyond this, there are salutary implications for UU presence in the public square. In recent years Unitarian Universalism has stood too much outside the most vital conversational circles of religious liberalism. The return of robust theology among some of us gives us individually and as a movement a stronger platform from which to enter into dialogue with a broader range of religious communities. In addition, I do wonder whether the remarkable embrace of process theology, especially among our clergy, might mean that our UU movement as a whole could become a significant ecclesial home for process theology—which, located chiefly in the academy, process thought has heretofore lacked.

Although the new UU theism that I have described in this paper is rather different from that to be found among either Unitarians or Universalists in the early 19th century and before, it has facilitated some measure of return to God language and to other traditional vocabularies of piety that have been in abeyance and thought passé in our movement for many decades. With a bit of déjà vu, therefore, we seem on our way to recovering appreciations of deity and holiness in the world that are resonant in form and language with Western religion and our own liberalism within it, but with reimagined and reinvigorated substance, leading us to a surprisingly new or renewed fidelity to that tradition.
The Rev. Dr. Jay Atkinson — Bio Blurb

Jay Atkinson retired in June 2011 from 32 years of full-time service in Unitarian Universalist parish ministry, most recently twelve years in Studio City (Los Angeles) and, before that, thirteen years in Davis, Calif. During those ministries he also served at various times on the adjunct faculties of our UU seminaries in Chicago (Meadville Lombard Theological School) and Berkeley (Starr King School for the Ministry). Before turning to professional ministry, he did research in nuclear physics for eleven years. Currently he is a Research Scholar at Starr King with a focus on UU history.

Abstract

We can identify several intervals over the centuries when the dominant theological center of our liberal religious movement has undergone decisive evolutionary change. On the Unitarian side of the tradition, major examples of such shifts can be seen in the emergence of Arminianism (1740-80), Transcendentalism (1835-50), ethical theism (1870-95), and non-theistic humanism (1920-60). In this paper I argue that our Unitarian Universalist movement is now on the rising swell of another such transformative wave marked by the waning of twentieth-century forms of humanism and a growing embrace of mystical and process theologies.

I support this thesis by recent commentary, liturgical language, and theological survey data, and elaborate it through the lenses of three intersecting and overlapping human needs—community, cosmology, and axiology—and the evolving ways in which competing theological options have met or failed to meet these needs in the context of changing scientific understanding and social realities. In particular, the appeal of Unitarian humanism in its earliest phase, as articulated by John Dietrich and his ministerial contemporaries, can be seen as quite a reasonable response to the lack of any religiously robust and scientifically tenable God-concepts in an era of inflated confidence in scientific understanding, and is to be contrasted with the way that the more ambiguous worldview of modern scientific uncertainty and relativity in the 20th century has increasingly made room for corresponding theological ambiguity.

In addition, growing acceptance of the metaphorical understanding of religious language coupled with the spread of process thought from the academy through the clergy and into the pews has offered a conceptual and metaphysical structure that leaves behind the untenable attributes of the classical God and provides a new way of understanding the universalist God of Love that has shown great appeal to Unitarian Universalists in recent decades. Neoclassical theism, now embraced by 30% of our clergy and 20% of our laity, according to survey data from the early 2000s, has enabled a renewal of God-language among us and affords a naturalistically tenable ontology to undergird the poetry of the “interdependent web,” so imaginatively popular in our current liturgical language, while supplying the theological sustenance needed to assuage the gnawing emptiness of that “God-shaped hole”—the spiritual lacuna that is bringing a new generation of seekers into our congregations.

With a bit of déjà vu, I see us on our way to recovering senses of divinity and sacrality in the world that are resonant in form and language with Western religion and our own liberalism within it, but with reimagined substance, leading us to a surprisingly new kind of fidelity to that tradition.