

Being is Becoming:  
An Ethnography of Unitarian Universalist Conversion

by

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*“If you’ve got questions, we’ve got answers.*

*...No, that’s not right.*

*If you’ve got questions, we’ve got more questions.”*

*– Reverend Dr. Anthony P. Johnson, “I Would Not Stultify Myself,”*

*The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden, February 20, 2011.*

## Introduction

*There's an old anecdote about some of us of liberal persuasion coming to a fork in the road. On one sign are the words, "To Heaven." On the other, "To a Discussion about Heaven." Without hesitation, the Unitarian Universalists choose their course. They wouldn't think of missing a discussion! (Mendelsohn 1997).*

In the lectures that compose Varieties of Religious Experience, William James takes a particularly individualistic perspective on the nature of religion. He views it as divided by “one great partition...on the one side of it lies institutional, on the other personal religion” (James 1994[1902]: 34). Even though he frames religion in these dual terms, he asserts the primacy of the individual side of religion, utilizing “immediate personal experiences,” and “hardly consider[ing] theology or ecclesiasticism at all” (James 1994[1902]: 36). For James, the essence of religion is “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine” (1994[1902]: 36). As such, James locates the individual (man) prior to social phenomena, arguing “that out of religion in the sense in which we take it, theologies, philosophies and ecclesiastical organizations may secondarily grow” (1994[1902]: 36). For James, the social could only grow out of the primary unit of the individual.

According to Emile Durkheim, by contrast, the individual is the product of its surrounding social world. As opposed to being generated internally, the religious individual's beliefs, actions and feelings are shaped by external society. Nothing of the person is wholly original, for society determines the very terms through which one understands and represents oneself. Durkheim writes, “society...does not limit itself to moving us from without and affecting us for the moment; it establishes itself

within us in a durable manner. It arouses within us a whole world of ideas and sentiments which express it but which, at the same time, form an integral and permanent part of ourselves” (1926[1912]: 262). Society is therefore both external and internal; at times experienced as a coercive, restraining force, it is also an internalized, strengthening system that enables individuals to have meaningful experiences, including that of the divine.

In the following chapters, I draw upon the frameworks of both James and Durkheim to examine the intricate connections between the Unitarian Universalist (“U.U.”) person, community, and broader societal influences. Specifically, I explore the phenomenon of conversion to Unitarian Universalism, or “becoming Unitarian Universalist,” at three levels: the personal, the congregational, and the spatial. My underlying goal in examining the creation of a Unitarian Universalist identity is to complicate and eventually dismantle the common assertion, made ubiquitous by James himself and discussed in depth in Chapter 1, that conversion or, as the Oxford English Dictionary puts it, a “change in character, nature, form, or function” (“conversion” def. II) is an overnight, sudden, all-in-a-moment transformation. Instead, I suggest that persons and places mark themselves and/or become marked by others as Unitarian Universalist over a lengthy, protracted period, through processes of active reflection, discussion, and ritualization.

As will likely become apparent, Unitarian Universalism is a highly individualistic religion; thus, a Jamesian analysis could be most appropriate in order to better understand members of this tradition. Nevertheless, I submit that for the Unitarian Universalists I have come to know, it is crucial for personal growth to occur

within a local congregation, which can be understood best as an association of other individuals on a similar journey. I aim, therefore, to avoid the binary James and Durkheim have created between the individual and the social. Unitarian Universalist religious institutions are not created out of a collection of pre-fabricated Unitarian Universalists, nor are individual U.U.s simply the collective product of the Unitarian Universalist Association. Rather, Unitarian Universalist individuals, Unitarian Universalist congregations (and the spaces in which they worship), and the Unitarian Universalist Association are part of a dynamic relationship in which all are constantly shaped and re-shaped by each other. For that reason, while describing both individual religious experiences and congregational activities, I consistently travel between the person and the community, the singular and the plural.

In no way do I wish to suggest, however, that for an individual to be considered a Unitarian Universalist, he or she *must* belong to a church labeled as Unitarian Universalist or be a member of the Unitarian Universalist Association. One can consider oneself Unitarian Universalist without any denominational attachment - although not everyone is happy about the individualistic nature of this tradition. Paul Rasor, an ordained Unitarian Universalist minister who received his Ph.D. in theology from Harvard Divinity School, critiques the continued emphasis on the individual within Unitarian Universalism. In “The Self in Contemporary Liberal Religion: A Constructive Critique,” published in Meadville Lombard Theological School’s online *Journal of Liberal Religion*, the author shares and analyzes the results of a survey sent to members of the Unitarian Universalist Association in 1998. He argues that

Unitarian Universalists overly emphasize the importance of an *individual* search for meaning:

One question asked, “what role has your congregation played most importantly in your life?” By far the largest single response was “it supports my views and upholds my values,” the most individualistic of the possible choices. This pattern is repeated in other responses. When asked what factors most influenced your decision to join a Unitarian Universalist congregation, for example, more than sixty percent said “searching for a belief system and faith community that made sense to me.” When asked what values the congregation should instill in children, seventy percent selected “a sense of their inherent worth, self-respect” as their first choice. And to the question “what do you expect to happen for you when you attend a Unitarian Universalist worship service,” the largest number chose “to remember with gratitude and celebrate what is most important in my life” (Rasor 1999).

It is true that one could choose to read that excerpt simply as evidence that a Unitarian Universalist congregational structure exists to promote and facilitate individualistic values. At the same time, one must recognize that these Unitarian Universalists have made the conscious choice to belong to a church, to align themselves with other individuals, to search for personal, spiritual fulfillment in relation to other people and to do so with the aid of external tools. I argue, therefore, that Rasor’s analysis shows in spite of itself that Unitarian Universalists do in fact believe their transformative personal journey should take place *within a congregational structure*. As F. Forrester Church, long-time Senior Minister of the Unitarian Church of All Souls in New York City and leading theologian of liberal religion, writes in *A Chosen Faith*:

[f]or us, religious experience is direct and personal... [and] deeply inward. But often it is dependent upon the agency of others whose insight, courage, or love helps expand our idea of what human life can be. This is why Unitarian Universalists choose to gather in religious communities, where other individuals and, yes, a whole tradition, help



us to keep heart and conscience and mind receptive (1998: 37).

Based on my own methodology, I have spoken primarily to Unitarian Universalists who are members of a particular church, specifically The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden, Connecticut. Over the last two years, I have grown to recognize the importance that this specific church has had in its congregants' personal spiritual growth, discussed in depth in chapter 2, "Taking and Leaving." In the following pages, as I unravel Unitarian Universalist conversion narratives and explore the process of becoming Unitarian Universalist, I take special care to keep the individual and the community intertwined with one another: one cannot be considered primary to or separate from the other, particularly when exploring the transformative process of conversion.

### **Finding The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden**

My academic interest in Unitarian Universalism began in the fall of 2009, when I was enrolled in a course entitled "The Anthropology of Religion." Cross-listed in both Anthropology and Religion, the course's final research project entailed writing a brief ethnography of any religious group or organization in the area. I wanted to write about a religion that defied the boundaries generally attributed to American religious groups and first proposed a study of Messianic Judaism, as something that seemed both Christian *and* Jewish. When I realized that there was not a local Messianic Jewish community, I quickly revamped my project.

Growing up outside Boston, the city in which the Unitarian Universalist Association is currently headquartered, Unitarian Universalism was a permanent part

of my landscape as a child.<sup>1</sup> Even though I had been introduced to Unitarian Universalism at a young age, I was still confused by its intricacies, by the fact that adherents to the religion were encouraged to associate themselves with a wide variety of beliefs and theological attachments. Embarking on the research necessary to write my first ethnographic text seemed like a perfect opportunity to learn more about this religion that I only vaguely understood. When I first began my exploration into the world of Unitarian Universalism, in no way did I expect that my research would eventually serve as the foundation for this senior thesis. As my junior year at Wesleyan progressed, though, I kept thinking back to the congregation, to the issues of community and self-identity formation I had briefly touched upon in my mini-ethnography. It became slowly apparent to me and to those around me that this project deserved serious further attention.

There are currently nineteen active Unitarian Universalist congregations in the state of Connecticut. I chose to study the church in Meriden, which is located six miles away from the Wesleyan University campus, where I was enrolled as a full-time student during the months that I engaged in ethnographic research.<sup>2</sup> To gain a

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Religious Congregations and Membership in the United States 2000 survey, orchestrated by the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies, Massachusetts holds the honor of highest percentage adherence rate to Unitarian Universalism of all fifty states. As of 2000, there were 141 Unitarian Universalist congregations and 25,834 adherents in Massachusetts, which correlates to about .4% of the population. While this may not sound that impressive, the second highest state with respect to adherents was California with only 15,173 and the second highest state with respect to adherent percentage was Vermont, which also had .4 percentage but with only 2,139 adherents (Jones et al. 2002).

<sup>2</sup> According to the Religious Congregations and Membership in the United States 2000 survey, orchestrated by the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies, Connecticut had a total of 19 congregations (21<sup>st</sup> overall) and a total of 4,022 adherents (sixth overall) (Jones et al. 2002).

nuanced understanding of what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist in Meriden, I became involved in congregational activities and engaged in extended, formal interviews with members of the church. Given the time constraints inherent in being a full-time student, I quickly realized that I would not be able to regularly attend meetings and events held during the workweek. Therefore, I made the explicit decision to limit my ethnographic research at the church itself to Sunday morning worship services. For this reason, I fully acknowledge that I did not get a complete picture of the life of this congregation. In a way, however, my attendance method may have paralleled that of many members of the congregation.

Meriden, Connecticut is described as the “Crossroads of Connecticut,” as it currently sits at the juncture of two of the state’s major freeways (I-91 and I-691) and is located at the half-way mark between both Hartford/New Haven (both 20 miles away) and Boston/New York (both 115 miles away) (City of Meriden 2011a). First settled in 1661 and recognized as a town in 1806, what became the City of Meriden in 1867 thrived in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a manufacturing hub:

The 1800s saw the beginning trickle of what would become a flood of manufacturing in the city. Belts, hoops, pewter, guns, cutlery, nails, buttons, lamps, ivory combs, tin ware, organs, coffee grinders, and silver, the product that would lend its luster as Meriden became the “Silver City,” were all manufactured here. Stately mansions were built as manufacturers became prosperous...Hotels, banks and businesses grew, electric lights arrived, schools were built, parks were added, more churches and a synagogue were built (City of Meriden 2011b).

Although the mid-twentieth century brought hardships to the city, as many businesses closed or relocated, over recent decades the city has made a concerted effort in the sphere of urban development: “[i]n the past few years, Meriden's downtown has undergone a facelift, a new hospital has been erected, and many corporate

headquarters have located to the east side of town on Research Parkway... The City is proud of its past and yet looks eagerly towards its future” (City of Meriden 2011b).

A nuanced demographic profile of Meriden’s contemporary population can be obtained from the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2005-2009 American Community Survey. According to this report, Meriden’s total population for this period was 59,078 and the median age of the city population was 37.9 years old. The median income of households in Meriden was \$54,155; 16% of people living in Meriden were considered to be living in poverty. Of people above the age of 25, 81% percent had graduated from high school and 20% had a bachelor's degree or higher, while 19% were neither currently enrolled in school nor had ever obtained a high school diploma. 28% of Meridenites spoke a language other than English at home; 76% of those people spoke Spanish. In terms of racial and ethnic makeup:

For people reporting one race alone, 71% was White; 7% was Black or African American; less than 0.5% was American Indian and Alaska Native; 2% was Asian; less than 0.5% was Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, and 15 percent was Some other race. Three percent reported Two or more races. Twenty-seven percent of the people in Meriden city was Hispanic. Sixty-one percent of the people in Meriden city was White non-Hispanic. People of Hispanic origin may be of any race (U.S. Census Bureau).

From the brief historical account and demographic figures above, one obtains a better understanding of the social and economic landscape in which The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden is currently situated.

From the middle of the nineteenth century until about five years ago, The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden was located in a grandiose building on Norwood Street in the center of the city. As the community decreased in size over the previous few decades, it became necessary to sell the building in 2006. After a

several-year-long process of fundraising and building renovations, The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden moved to a renovated house on Paddock Avenue. This move continues to affect the congregation's identity and sense of purpose, which will be discussed at length in Chapter 3, "Sacred Space(s)." Paddock Avenue could be considered a road of religious institutions. There are several churches, all of different denominations, along this otherwise residential street. As one turns onto Paddock Avenue from East Main Street, a heavily commercial road with several fast food restaurants, chain pharmacies, and cheap hotels, The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden is on the left. Behind the church building is a small descent into a forested area; in the not-so-far distance, one can easily recognize I-91.

The meeting room where services and discussions are held is on the first floor of the church building, in what seems to have originally served as the living room. The kitchen, front parlor and study/office remain used for their original purposes. The upstairs bedrooms have been converted into offices and the basement has been turned into classrooms for the religious education school. Brochures, pamphlets, books and posters about Unitarian Universalism, published by the Unitarian Universalist Association, are ubiquitous in the public spaces on the first floor. Both reusable and disposable nametags are available in the foyer, as congregants are encouraged to know the names of all members, friends, and visitors. Two greeters stand in the doorway before services, ensuring that all participants have a hymnal and program. Rainbow flags, peace signs, and drawings created by children in the religious school hang on the walls of the meeting room. The community treats the room as a flexible

space; chairs and the pulpit are often moved to face a different direction and posters on the wall change with ease.

In order to find members of the church to interview, I initially struck up conversations with congregants sitting near me before services or during casual interactions after services had concluded. Once I made the decision to turn this project into a thesis, I made a public announcement at the end of a service, introducing myself and my intended research: I asked anyone in the congregation who was interested in talking to me about their religious identity and their relationship to Unitarian Universalism to approach me after the service had finished.

I generally began interviews with simple questions regarding my informants' employment and family. I then transitioned to questions about their journey to Unitarian Universalism, inquiring about their childhood religious experiences, how they originally learned about Unitarian Universalism, and the factors that may have prompted their conversion. I followed with questions about their relationship to the church in Meriden and their level of involvement with this particular community. I also touched upon their understanding of Unitarian Universalism more broadly, asking about their feelings towards the principles of the religion, the qualities they associate with their fellow Unitarian Universalists, and the pieces of the religion with which they particularly agree and disagree. I tried to structure these encounters, which generally lasted between one and two hours, with an informal tone, creating the feel of a conversation as opposed to a formal interview. Almost invariably, at some point during the conversation the focus would switch, as the person with whom I was speaking would inquire about my own religious background and whether I considered

my relationship to Unitarian Universalism to be more personal or academic. While I insisted that it was the latter, many seemed unconvinced. I suspect this skepticism can be attributed to the fact that during these conversations, all were actively reflecting on their own journeys towards Unitarian Universalism, discussed in depth in Chapter 1, “(Signing) The Membership Book.”

At times throughout the following chapters, I will utilize my analyses of particular interactions at The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden to make broader generalizations about Unitarian Universalist individuals or Unitarian Universalism as a whole. I should caution, however, that all Unitarian Universalist institutions possess unique personalities. As the Commission on Appraisal of the Unitarian Universalist Association writes in Belonging: The Meaning of Membership:

Some are more extroverted, others less so. Some are pulpit-centered, even minister-centered; others make high demands for active committee or social participation; still others are focused on music or religious education for children or social action. The point is that every community has *its own ways of being... Congregations are cultures* (2001: 3-4, italics added).

While one could make this argument for *any* secular or religious institution, given the lack of doctrinal unity of Unitarian Universalism I suspect it is particularly true within this religious tradition. Traits I have come to expect at the church in Meriden may not necessarily be visible at other Unitarian Universalist congregations. As James Clifford remarks, “[e]ven the best ethnographic texts – serious, true fictions – are systems, or economies of truth. Power and history work through them, in ways their authors cannot fully control. Ethnographic truths are thus inherently *partial* – committed and incomplete” (1986: 7).

### **Developing a Portrait of Unitarian Universalism:**

In 1961, Unitarian Universalism was born out of the merging of two independent denominations of Protestant Christianity: the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America. The names of these denominations referred to two specific religious doctrines; Unitarianism believed in the unity of God, as opposed to the Trinitarian God, and Universalism insisted on the salvation of all human beings, as opposed to salvation being provided for just some. As F. Forrester Church writes in *A Chosen Faith*, “these two come together to form the most doctrinally free of all denominations which, ironically, has two doctrines in its name” (1998: 42). As of 2009, the Unitarian Universalist Association was composed of a total of 1,048 churches, 1,752 ministers and 221,367 members in the United States (Unitarian Universalist Association 2010b). With the U.S. population currently estimated at approximately 300 million, this correlates to about .07% of the American people. “Unitarian Universalists are a mere handful...in a huge sea” (Mendelsohn 1995: 134). Although Unitarian Universalism grew out of Protestant Christianity, it is now an independent religious tradition and individuals and congregations can choose to align themselves more or less closely with Christian practices and beliefs.

Histories of the religion stress the extent to which the theology behind Unitarianism in particular cannot be considered a modern phenomenon. In the earliest centuries after Christ, Arian thinkers disputed emerging Trinitarian doctrines, “finding them not to be scripturally based, and believing that elevating Jesus to the



stature of God made Jesus as a person inaccessible and thereby spiritually distant from believers” (Chapman 2004: 308). Following the Council of Nicaea in 325 C.E., at which “the godhood of Jesus ... became the official orthodoxy of the Christian religion,” and the Council of Constantinople in 381, at which “the assembled dignitaries added the Holy Spirit to their formula, thus completing the Trinity” (Mendelsohn 1995: 49), those who questioned the Trinity were branded as heretics and persecuted.

Over a millennium later, the Protestant Reformation prompted revivals of Arian thought throughout Europe; George Chryssides argues in The Elements of Unitarianism that “the best way to understand the Unitarians is to view them as products of the Protestant Reformation” (1998: 10). Michael Servetus (1511-1553), or the “first strong voice of radical Protestantism” (Parke 1963: 1-2), was troubled by the lack of a biblical basis for much of Christianity’s tightest-held stances, particularly that of the Trinity. Servetus, who should perhaps be considered an “anti-Trinitarian,” (Mendelsohn 1995: 57), rather than a Unitarian, wrote in On the Errors of the Trinity (1531): “[b]ut may this blasphemous and philosophical distinction of three *beings* in one God be rooted out from the minds of men” (Servetus 1531, quoted in Parke 1963: 6). Servetus had originally hoped that his writings might convert leaders of the Reformation to adopt his stance on the Trinity; instead “they were shocked by his effrontery and insults...Servetus, while intending the opposite, forced the Protestant leaders to embrace the Trinity ever more zealously” (Parke 1963: 6). In 1553, Servetus was burnt at the stake in Calvin’s Geneva.

Eight years later, John Sigismund (1540-1571) ascended to the kingship of Transylvania. An adherent to Unitarianism, King Sigismund “fostered a policy of open discussion and broad toleration of all viewpoints which made Transylvania the freest country in Europe in religious matters” (Parke 1963: 19). In 1568, King Sigismund issued an Act of Religious Tolerance and Freedom of Conscience, in which he stated:

In every place the preachers shall preach and explain the Gospel each according to his understanding of it, and if the congregation like it, well, if not, no one shall compel them for their souls would not be satisfied, but they shall be permitted to keep a preacher whose teaching they approve. Therefore none of the superintendents or others shall abuse the preachers, *no one shall be reviled for his religion by anyone* (Sigismund 1568, quoted in Parke 1963: 19-20, italics added).

The support granted to religious freedom in general, and Unitarian philosophy specifically, by King Sigismund prompted the establishment of Unitarian churches throughout Eastern Europe, most notably in Transylvania and Poland. By 1571, Unitarianism was officially protected by Transylvanian law and there were almost five hundred Unitarian congregations in the country (some of which still exist in contemporary Romania) (Parke 1963: 22). Simultaneously to this resurgence of Unitarian theology, Universalist thought was developing in direct opposition to Calvinist principles. Chapman explains, “Universalists rejected the Calvinist doctrine of Election – whereby God arbitrarily chooses a few righteous souls for eternal salvation – and taught instead that God’s salvation was available to all believers” (2004: 306).

In the United States, Unitarian communities began to emerge within Puritan New England. According to Parke, “liberal Christianity in New England developed

within Puritanism as a threefold assertion: (1) of human goodness and free will against the Calvinistic doctrine of original sin; (2) of the unity of God against the prevailing doctrine of the Trinity; and (3) of the necessity of employing reason in interpreting Scripture” (Parke 1963: 51). The earliest decades of the nineteenth century within New England churches were marked by an internal debate regarding a revival of Puritan orthodoxy, particularly with respect to these three issues (Harris 1998). Those who opposed a return to Puritan ideals became known as Unitarians.<sup>3</sup> In 1782, the First Episcopal Church in Boston invited James Freeman (1759-1835) to serve as its interim preacher; after Freeman expressed his disagreement with the congregation’s Trinitarian creeds and prayers, the church, now known as King’s Chapel, became the first in America to explicitly uphold Unitarian beliefs (Chyrssides 1998: 27; Parke 1963: 60). In the following year, the First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia was founded: the first to explicitly use the term Unitarian in its name (Tapp 1973: 5).

In 1819, William Ellery Channing (1780-1842) delivered a sermon in Baltimore, Maryland called “Unitarian Christianity,” which has been called “the most important Unitarian sermon ever preached anywhere” (Parke 1963: 88). In it, Channing summarized Unitarian conceptions of the Trinity and Scripture:

We regard the Scriptures as the records of God’s successive revelations to mankind, and particularly of the last and most perfect revelation of his will by Jesus Christ...Our leading principle in interpreting Scripture is this, that the Bible is a book written for men, in the language of men, and that its meaning is to be sought in the same manner as that of other books.... We believe in the doctrine of

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<sup>3</sup> Originally, this group referred to itself as “rational Christians” or “liberal Christians.” The term Unitarian was developed by its opponents and later appropriated by the growing movement (Wright 1970: ix).

God's unity, or that there is one God, and one only... We object to the doctrine of the Trinity, that, whilst acknowledging in words, it subverts in effect, the unity of God... We believe in the unity of Jesus Christ. We believe that Jesus is one mind, one soul, one being, as truly as we are, and equally distinct from the one God. We complain of the doctrine of the Trinity, that, not satisfied with making God three beings, it makes Jesus Christ two beings, and thus introduces infinite confusion into our conceptions of his character (Channing 1819, quoted in Parke 1963: 89-93).

Today, Channing is respected as the father of modern Unitarianism; it was he who "began a new epoch by proclaiming [Unitarian] faith fearlessly and unmistakably to the world... The 'Baltimore sermon' gave the Unitarians a platform and a spokesman. It placed them for the first time on the offensive in relation to the orthodox" (Parke 1963: 88). In 1825, the American Unitarian Association officially came into being in Boston, Massachusetts.

John Murray (1741-1815) is often recognized as the father of American Universalism. An Englishman and zealous preacher, Murray came to the New World following a short stint in prison and the death of his wife and child. Murray traveled throughout the United States proclaiming a doctrine which "laid stress on the act of salvation performed by Jesus Christ in his role as Son of God... Whereas the Calvinists insisted that the Son died to save relatively few souls predestined by God before the creation... Murray... insisted that the Elect were all mankind" (Cassara 1971: 13). By 1781, there existed a congregation of Universal Baptists in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and the Universalist Church of America was officially created in 1793.

The 1961 merger of the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America was the result of decades of growing relations between the two groups:

During the 20th century the two groups grew increasingly aware of one another, and passed more than a dozen resolutions calling for union. Finally in 1947, a joint commission was established to lay the groundwork for Federal Union, and by 1951 it presented a recommendation for immediate union in the fields of religious education, publications, and public relations, with a gradual trend toward complete merger, which was effected in Boston in May 1960. Total consolidation was completed in May 1961 (Mendelsohn 1997).

Both the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America were vociferous members of the social justice movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; famous Unitarians and Universalists included Horace Greeley, Clara Barton and Dorothea Dix. Today, the Unitarian Universalist Association promotes this shared interest in social justice as one of the major reasons for the 1961 merging. Mark Harris suggests in a pamphlet entitled “Unitarian Universalist Origins: Our Historic Faith” that “[b]y the middle of the twentieth century it became clear that Unitarians and Universalists could have a stronger liberal religious voice if they merged their efforts (2011).

Chyrssides remarks that it took until the twentieth century for this merger to occur because the Universalists were “theologically more conservative than the Unitarians. They believed in the authority of scripture and...were more inclined than the Unitarians to give Jesus a central position...as a divine being” (1998: 35). Additionally, while Unitarianism took hold within the educated, wealthy class of New England elites, Universalism, in contrast, attracted lesser-educated individuals from a lower socioeconomic stratum (Cassara 1971: 5). Josiah and Laile Bartlett write: “[t]hough both were fiercely independent and critical minded, the Unitarians were more urban, business-oriented and academic; the Universalists were more rural, village, farming-oriented and lower middle class” (1990: 8). These demographic

differences led to tensions both before the merger and after 1961, as will be referenced in chapter 3, “Sacred Space(s).”

A half century after its union, the Unitarian Universalist Association describes the religion as the following:

Unitarian Universalism is a liberal religion with Jewish-Christian roots. It has no creed. It affirms the worth of human beings, advocates freedom of belief and the search for advancing truth, and tries to provide a warm, open, supportive community for people who believe that ethical living is the supreme witness of religion... Unitarian Universalism is a theologically diverse religion, in which members support one another in the search for truth and meaning. Individual Unitarian Universalists may also identify as Atheist, Agnostic, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Humanist, Jewish, Muslim, Pagan, or with other philosophical or religious traditions (Unitarian Universalist Association 2011a).

While Unitarian Universalism does not have a set creed or beliefs to which members must adhere, the Unitarian Universalist Association has declared seven principles that Unitarian Universalist individuals and congregations affirm and promote. These are:

1. The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
2. Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
3. Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
4. A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
5. The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
6. The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all; and
7. Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Additionally, the Unitarian Universalist Association encourages the active creation of a personal religious identity by providing six sources to which individuals should look:

1. Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the

- spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;
2. Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;
  3. Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;
  4. Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;
  5. Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit; and
  6. Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

The provision of these sources and the emphasis on theological diversity does not mean that Unitarian Universalists are members of more than one religious organization at the same time. Signing the membership book – the ritual associated with joining a Unitarian Universalist church – is a deeply personal and significant act that should be taken as seriously as any other rite of conversion. Instead, they mean that individual members of Unitarian Universalist congregations are encouraged to look beyond the boundaries of any particular institution or organizational structure in determining their own religious leanings and personal beliefs.

In “A Look at U.U. Goals,” Robert Tapp, a leading scholar on Unitarian Universalism, asks: “where do Unitarian Universalists fit within the variegated religious life of our culture?” (1967: 515). He argues that Unitarian Universalism, an “unusual religious group,” (Tapp 1967: 515) is best described as a “post-traditional religion,” (Tapp 1967: 515) given that “a maximum of intellectual and religious freedom operates within this movement” (Tapp 1967: 518). In his model, “post-traditionalists” - in this case, Unitarian Universalists - question the existence of God

and the significance of Jesus. Most members are “come-outers,” (Tapp 1967: 515) or people who were raised in other religions but ceased to find meaning in those traditions by high school and college; thus, they actively search for a community in which they are allowed to discover and create their own beliefs. Unitarian Universalists understand church to be an educational process for participants of all ages and a congregational minister to serve as an “education and change facilitator” (Tapp 1967: 518). Part of their religious identity revolves around “strong concern for facing modern social problems,” and their social and political activism “draws together the education and action functions of the church” (Tapp 1967: 517). Tapp describes the theology of a post-traditional religion by saying that “in slogan form, we could say that ‘the holy is wholly secular, but the whole of the secular is not holy’” (1967: 516).

In “The Religious Value System of Unitarian Universalists,” Robert H. Miller, a professor of Religion at Tufts University, seeks “to discover whether there is a distinctive value system for Unitarian Universalists which distinguishes them from other religious groups” (1976: 189). Miller distributed the Rokeach Value Survey and a supplemental questionnaire to 5,057 members of the Unitarian Universalist Association. A total of 1,979 surveys were returned fully; “the final sample encompassed 1,850 laypersons, 94 ministers, and 35 Directors of Religious Education” (Miller 1976: 191). Miller writes:

The [Unitarian Universalist] value system differs from that of Christians, Jews, and persons claiming no religious affiliation....The study identified a distinctive Unitarian Universalist paradigm of values marked by a high ranking of the terminal values (self-respect, wisdom, inner-harmony, mature love, a world of beauty, and an exciting life) and the instrumental values (loving, independent, intellectual,



imaginative, and logical) which, taken together, show an orientation towards competence rather than morality and stress personal realization, individual self-fulfillment, and self actualization (1976: 189).

This study demonstrates that individuals who consider themselves Unitarian Universalists share similar values. What connects Unitarian Universalists most broadly is an individualistic way of looking at the world, marked by compassion for others and a questioning mind. Unitarian Universalist values differ markedly from those of individuals affiliated with other religious denominations: whereas Catholics and Protestants value “a world at peace” above all other values listed on the survey, Unitarian Universalists rank it eighth. Self-respect, the highest ranked value for Unitarian Universalists, is listed as seventh for Protestants, fifth for Catholics, ninth for Jews, and sixth for people with no religious affiliation (Miller 1976: 192). As Miller summarizes:

Clearly there is, at best, a low to moderate correlation between the rank ordering by Unitarian Universalists and Protestants (.37 and .33) or Unitarian Universalists and Catholics (.50 and .35). As might be expected, there is a somewhat higher correlation between the same group and Jews (.62 and .65) and non-believers (.71 and .72) Such data establish the fact that Unitarian Universalists differ markedly in their value pattern from traditional Christians, as expected, and that there may be important differences between them and Jews and/or non-believers as well (1976: 193).

In 2008, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life published Religious Affiliation: Diverse and Dynamic and Beliefs and Practices: Diverse and Politically Relevant. Drawing upon the same nationwide survey of over 36,000 adults, the former “includes reliable estimates of the size of religious groups in the United States as well as detailed information on their demographic characteristics, religious beliefs and practices, and basic social and political values” (Lugo 2008a: 2) and the latter

“examines the diversity of opinion that exists on a variety of political and public policy issues among and within the country’s various religious group” (Lugo 2008b: 2). Taken together, the publications allow for a nuanced demographic profile of contemporary Unitarian Universalism. The Association of Religion Data Archives, located at The Pennsylvania State University’s Department of Sociology, has compiled such a profile.<sup>4</sup> They assert the average Unitarian Universalist to be highly educated (70.5% “have a B.A., B.S. or other 4-year college degree”), wealthy (82.3% have a “family income of over \$40,000 a year”), Caucasian (90.1% identify as “white”), and living in an urban or suburban environment (only 9.2% described their home as being in a “rural area”). Unitarian Universalists are socially and politically liberal: 1.4% believe that “abortion should be illegal in all cases,” 1.8% believe that “‘homosexuality’ is a way of life that should be discouraged by society,” 8.2% believe that “the government should do more to protect morality in society,” 5.3% percent believe that “the best way to ensure peace is through military strength,” 6.4% think that “stricter environmental laws and regulations cost too many jobs,” whereas, by contrast, 74.9% think that “the government should do more to help needy Americans.” Although 93.5% are registered to vote, a mere 2.5% consider themselves Republican and only 4.9% describe themselves “conservative or very conservative.” Over 80% voted for John Kerry in the 2004 Presidential election.

While the socio-political beliefs and practices of Unitarian Universalists may be fairly consistent, no such statement can be made with respect to religious beliefs and practices. Given what I have come to learn about theological diversity within

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<sup>4</sup> The following statistics come from this profile, found at [http://www.thearda.com/Denoms/D\\_1403\\_p.asp](http://www.thearda.com/Denoms/D_1403_p.asp).

Unitarian Universalist communities, this comes as no surprise. While 80.9% “believe in God or a universal spirit,” 57.2% percent “view God as an impersonal force.” Only 8.5% “believe in hell,” compared to the 18.1% who “believe in heaven” and the 20.5% percent that agree that “angels and demons are active in the world.” 49.5% believe in “life after death” and 82.3% believe that “*many* religions can lead to eternal life.” Only 30.4% say that “religion is a very important part of their life” and 58.2% “mostly or completely agree that religion causes more problems in society than it solves.” 20.8% think that there is a “natural conflict between being a devoutly religious person and living in a modern society.” 23.3% “attend religious services at least once a week,” 34.6% “pray at least once a day,” and 57.1% “meditate at least once a week.” 15.5% “read scripture outside of religious services at least once a week,” 68.4% “send their children to Sunday School or another religious education program,” 70.9% perform “community volunteer work through their place of worship,” and 10.3% “share their faith with ‘non-believers or people from other religious backgrounds’ at least once a week.”

As I completed my field research in The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden and tried to piece it together into the present ethnography, I was at times perplexed by the inherent complexities of Unitarian Universalism. How, I wondered, could a religion have no creed or authoritative text? Why did it have no set beliefs? What did it mean that so many individuals came to it from other religious traditions? How could Unitarian Universalists also identify themselves using other religious labels? Coming from a background of Reform Judaism, I had never thought about the possibility of feeling tied to multiple religious identifications. If that were possible,

could Unitarian Universalism be considered a religion? While it may be impossible for anyone to fully answer the above questions, exploring past scholarship and the history of Unitarian Universalism helped me to better understand the ways that Unitarian Universalist individuals and congregations are currently linked together. The convergence of the Unitarian Universalist Association's self-description with outside scholarship on the religious group allowed me to see that while Unitarian Universalism may be embedded in its relationships with other religions, Unitarian Universalists have their own unique elements and value systems. In light of my upbringing in American religious norms, I originally may have questioned Unitarian Universalist religiosity. It is often assumed that American religious identities must fit neatly into taken-for-granted categories – that individuals must be Jewish *or* Christian *or* Muslim *or* any other one-word label. The fact that Unitarian Universalism accepts and embraces its members identifying with multiple labels does not, as I originally thought, disallow it from being an independent religion. Rather, it showcases part of its unique nature.<sup>5</sup>

In the following chapters, I explore conversion to Unitarian Universalism, or the process of “becoming U.U.,” within three interrelated spheres: individuals, communities, and their sacred spaces. In Chapter 1, “(Signing) The Membership Book,” I introduce the reader to past scholarship on the nature of conversion,

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<sup>5</sup> It turns out I am not the only person to have wondered about Unitarian Universalist religiosity. In 2001, the Red River Unitarian Universalist Church in Denison, Texas was denied tax-exempt status because, according to the state comptroller, it “does not have one system of belief.” Jesse Ancira, the comptroller's lawyer, said in an interview that to qualify as a religion, members must have “simply a belief in God, or gods, or a higher power.” The tax-exempt status was reinstated in 2004 when the situation drew media attention (Camp 2004; Dyer 2004).

highlighting the myriad ways in which the conversion narratives of individuals at The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden depart from the normative understanding of the phenomenon. In creating a conversation between academic theories and lived experiences, I present the concept that conversion to Unitarian Universalism should be understood as a protracted process embedded within a matrix of external social and cultural factors. I conclude with a discussion of the dichotomy between religion and spirituality, arguing that Unitarian Universalists in Meriden thirst for spiritual fulfillment, as opposed to religious hierarchy.

In Chapter 2, “Taking and Leaving,” I submit that one method of developing an internal spirituality is through involvement in congregational activities. I place the individual within the context of a Unitarian Universalist community, exploring how Sunday morning worship services at the church in Meriden promote the development of a particular Unitarian Universalist identity through sermons, readings, and discussions. One way service leaders sculpt Unitarian Universalism is in (oppositional) relation to other world religions and secular traditions, utilizing the pulpit to engage in negative rhetoric. In other instances, service leaders direct their attention to Unitarian Universalism itself, crafting sermons that prompt members of the congregation to better understand the history and principles of Unitarian Universalism. In both of these instances, the Sunday morning services become an opportunity for continued reflection on one’s own religious and/or spiritual identity.

In Chapter 3, “Sacred Space(s),” I continue my exploration of the creation of a Unitarian Universalist identity but in relation to places. I unpack the tension that has recently arisen in The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden with respect to the

question of whether or not the building in which they currently operate should be considered sacred. I explore the ways in which sacredness can be discerned and constructed, working to complicate the binary held between two common theories of this issue. I ultimately argue that whether it is an individual, a congregation, or a building that is *becoming Unitarian Universalist*, one must consider this development a lengthy process that involves acts of ritualization, discussion and reflection.

## 1. (Signing) The Membership Book

*When did you fall in love with Unitarian Universalism? Maybe it was the first time you visited a Unitarian Universalist worship service, and it felt like a breath of fresh air, and you realized you weren't being force-fed ideas about God and sin and hell and salvation that didn't make any sense to you, but instead you were invited to ask your own questions and chart your own course with the support and respect of the congregation and minister, wherever those questions and course might lead, provided you treat others with respect as well (Small 2009).*

*Ours is a creative compromise for many, a solution to the dilemma of those who seek significant institutional moorings, but are confronted by the untenable alternatives of orthodoxy on the one hand, and the cold world of secular interest on the other (Bartlett 1990: 31).*

It was a cold evening in late November 2009; Christmas lights were twinkling down Main Street and the crisp smell of the coming winter surrounded me. As I walked briskly towards Javapalooza to meet Caitlin, a member of The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden, I realized I was nervous and slightly uneasy: this was the first “interview” I would conduct with an “informant.” Several anthropology professors had already imprinted upon my mind that one cannot be taught fieldwork, that reviewing publications on methods can only go so far. Instead, they had encouraged me to jump into the “field.” I thought about the Sunday morning a few months earlier when I had entered The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden for the first time. I remembered how out of place I had felt, how I thought everyone in the congregation had perceived me as an outsider. “I fumbled my way through that service,” I thought to myself. “I can figure out how to get through an hour long conversation now.” I arrived at the café a few moments early and decisions that usually seem unimportant struck me as crucial, as the factor determining whether I would prove my worth as a budding ethnographer. “Should I order a drink? Where

should we sit? Is the music too loud? Do I take notes? Where do I put the piece of paper with my questions? How much do I tell her about my project?”

A few weeks earlier, I had attended a Sunday morning worship service at The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden that Caitlin had led. The title was “Gratitude” and her sermon, which touched upon her complicated relationship with her deceased mother, had brought me (and many other members of the congregation) to tears. I was struck by her self-awareness, her willingness to talk about deeply personal facets of her life, and her ability to narrate publicly a slightly negative version of her life history. I had also been present at another service when she announced to the congregation that she and her husband were expecting their first child. It was evident that she felt at home in the community, that she acted as though she was with family when she was there. It was clear from those two experiences that Caitlin would be the right person to talk to if I wanted to start to get a sense of what Unitarian Universalism was all about. Although she and I had never spoken before, she responded to my email immediately and seemed touched that I wanted to interview her.

I realized afterwards that I need not have been so nervous. Caitlin answered my questions honestly and thoughtfully and turned what I had envisioned as a formal interview into a comfortable conversation between friends. We talked about her relationship with her husband and their anxious excitement about their coming baby, about her Catholic childhood and her continual search for a community like the one she had experienced at sleep-away summer camp as a young girl, about her estranged sister. Woven through all the stories she told was her growing sense of connection to



Unitarian Universalism and how becoming a U.U. has helped her come to terms with the issues, both positive and negative, in her life. Joining The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden had been a pivotal step for Caitlin, prompting personal growth in ways and directions she had never before thought possible.

In “Some U.U.s are More U Than U: Theological Self Descriptors Chosen by Unitarian Universalists,” James Casebolt and Tiffany Niekro report that Unitarian Universalism is “unique in America’s religious economy [because]...it appears to be a faith<sup>6</sup> *dominated by converts*” (Casebolt and Niekro 2005: 240, italics added). In this article, Casebolt and Niekro analyze the results of a survey sent in June 1999 to 500 randomly selected members of the Ohio-Meadville District of the Unitarian Universalist Association, which covers all congregations in West Virginia, western Pennsylvania, and all but the extreme south-west corner of Ohio. The list of potential recipients, which was generated by the Board of Trustees of the District, only included people who had previously participated in a District function, such as a conference or workshop (Casebolt and Niekro 2005: 236). Of the 500 surveys circulated, 207 usable surveys were returned, resulting in a response rate of 42% (Casebolt and Niekro 2005: 237). On average, respondents were 55.4 years old and had been members of a Unitarian Universalist church for 21.5 years; 63.8% of respondents were female (Casebolt and Niekro 2005: 237). In the section on their method, Casebolt and Niekro stress that the surveys’ respondents represent people who are deeply involved in Unitarian Universalist community structures, as

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<sup>6</sup> The Unitarian Universalists with whom I have spoken may resist Casebolt and Niekro’s usage of the word “faith” here, given that such a term may drag Unitarian Universalism back into its Protestant roots. They may associate the word faith with something they *have*, as opposed to something to which they adhere.

respondents included “seven parish ministers, one community minister, five ministerial students, four lay directions of religious education, two commissioned lay leaders, thirteen members of a District board or a District committee, and 46 congregational officers” (2005: 237). One must be cognizant of these demographic factors when reviewing Casebolt and Niekro’s analysis.

Quantitative analysis of the survey results determined that only 9.7% of respondents were raised Unitarian Universalist (Casebolt and Niekro 2005: 237).

Casebolt and Niekro argue that this:

is consistent with previous surveys, which typically find that ‘born-and-bred’ U.U.s represent only about 10% of membership. Based on the religious affiliation of their family of origin, the three largest categories of members were raised as moderate Protestants (79 respondents), Catholic or Orthodox (35 respondents) and fundamentalist Protestants (25 respondents) (2005: 237).

According to Casebolt and Niekro, therefore, 90% of Unitarian Universalists joined the religion after being raised in a different, generally Christian, denomination.

Casebolt and Niekro’s finding was no news to those who study Unitarian Universalism; in 1973, Robert Tapp wrote that “religious mobility – the movement of persons into, out of, and between churches – is on the increase. The Unitarian Universalist denomination exemplifies this to an almost extreme degree since 90% of its members are converts” (Tapp 1973: ix).<sup>7</sup> These purely quantitative data beg the question: how does someone *become* a Unitarian Universalist? Although these analyses use the language of “conversion,” I argue that the process needs to be

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<sup>7</sup> Recall that Tapp asserted that one common characteristic of post-traditional religions is that most members are “come-outers” (1967: 515).

defined and conceptualized differently from the way it has traditionally been described.

### **Theorizations of Conversion**

Common to much of the Western theological and academic imagination is a particular notion of what religious conversion must entail. Conversion has been most commonly understood to be a *sudden transformation* of a *single individual*, facilitated by the influence of a *supernatural figure*, after which the individual finally feels *content*. William James' lectures on the subject of conversion promulgate this very view, as he argues that before conversion, an individual is internally conflicted but that following an intervention from a divine being, this "self, hitherto divided, and consciously wrong, inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right superior and happy, in consequence of its former hold upon religious realities" (1994[1902]: 210). James uses the story of Saint Augustine as an emblematic case:

You all remember his half-pagan, half-Christian upbringing at Carthage, his emigration to Rome and Milan, his adoption of Manichaeism and subsequent skepticism, and his restless search for truth and purity of life; and finally how, distracted by the struggle between the two souls in his breast and ashamed of his own weakness of will, when so many others whom he knew and knew of had thrown off the shackles of sensuality and dedicated themselves to chastity and the higher life, he heard a voice in the garden say, "*Sume, lege*" [sic.] (take and read), and opening the Bible at random, saw the text, "not in chambering and wantonness," etc., which seemed directly sent to his address, and *laid the inner storm to rest forever* (James 1994[1902]: 191, emphasis added).

This infamous conversion scene highlights the four characteristics that James delineates. Saint Augustine's internal self starts out divided: in James's words, he is both "half-pagan, half-Christian" and "distracted by...the two souls in his breast."

After hearing an unknown, possibly divine, voice tell him to open the Bible, Saint Augustine happens upon a passage that speaks “directly” to him, as if through an act of supernatural intervention. Immediately he is transformed, becoming internally unified and fully content.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to drawing upon the case of Saint Augustine, James also contends that Saint Paul’s experience of conversion typifies the phenomenon. He views Saint Paul’s case as one of the most “eminent” examples of conversion because in it, “a complete division is established in the twinkling of an eye between the old life and the new” (1994[1902]: 240). It is important to note that here the word “division” refers to the complete change between an old and new being, whereas in Saint Augustine’s story, it had referred to the state of his internal self *prior* to conversion. In any event, Saint Paul’s story is one of a total transformation: after converting, he lives a life completely different from the one he had previously led. While James does not cite the text of Saint Paul’s conversion, this story is foundational to his definition of conversion—a definition that has since become normative in contemporary scholarship. I therefore quote it at length from the Book of Acts:

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples . . . As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” “Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked. “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied. “Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what

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<sup>8</sup> After reading Saint Augustine’s Confessions for myself, I have come to question the adequacy and accuracy of aligning James’ four characteristics with Augustine’s own conversion experience. A close analysis of Saint Augustine’s own language showcases a conversion that was not solely an individual process, was not a sudden transformation, did not immediately allow him to become fully internally content and may not have been the product of a divine intervention. James may have overlooked the specifics of Saint Augustine’s story in order to produce his theory of conversion.

you must do.” The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing . . . In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, “Ananias!” “Yes, Lord,” he answered. The Lord told him, “Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.” . . . Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. All those who heard him were astonished and asked, “Isn’t he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn’t he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?” Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah (Acts 9:1-22, New International Version).

According to this story, while Saint Paul was on the road to Damascus to persecute Jesus’ disciples, he communicated with God and became a believer after briefly losing his sight. Saint Paul transformed from someone who had demonized Jesus’ followers into a preacher of Jesus’ word, working to convince others that Jesus was the Messiah. Saint Paul’s conversion was sudden and complete, in that he instantaneously became a wholly different person: he changed his name from Saul to Paul and, in James’ words, his “inner storm was laid to rest forever” (James 1902[1902]: 191). James’ understanding of conversion, which utilizes the experiences of Saint Augustine and Saint Paul as emblematic cases, makes up what I have come to understand as its “traditional” definition, marked by the four characteristics outlined above: conversion as a *sudden transformation* for a *single individual*,

facilitated by the influence of a *supernatural figure*, after which the individual finally feels *content*.

Following James, other scholars have understood conversion similarly, particularly when analyzing it from the point of view of Christian believers. Louis Rambo, a prominent figure in the social-scientific study of religious conversion, has argued that the Christian imagination has been underwritten by “the Pauline model of conversion,” which “combines notions of an unexpected flash of revelation, a radical reversal of previous beliefs and allegiances, and an underlying assumption that converts are passive respondents to outside forces” (2003: 213). Henri Gooren agrees with Rambo: “[t]he Pauline conversion is spectacular, a one-in-a-lifetime experience, fraught with miracles and brought on by a higher authority... Many of its principle elements – especially the bright light and the idea of surrender – still turn up in the conversion stories of believers all over the world” (2010: 11). Andrew Buckser and Stephen Glazier, similarly, write that conversion is:

The time when the hand of the divine is most plainly visible; conversion narratives overflow with expressions of supernatural agency, in which the individual feels guided, or coerced, or enraptured by a divine presence... Conversion marks a moment of epiphany, when a traumatic or seemingly chaotic past is revealed as the subtle handiwork of a benevolent God” (Buckser and Glazier 2003: xii).

In reproducing the beliefs of their Christian informants, these scholars have dismissed the possibility of conversion as being a subtler, active, wholly human decision.

Following James’ model, conversion has instead traditionally been understood as a passive event, a momentary temporal irruption during which individuals feel the presence of a divine force. It necessarily requires the simultaneous relinquishing of a

previously accepted religious identity and the acceptance of a new one or, in the case of a non-believer, a dramatic transformation into a religious person.<sup>9</sup>

Recently, social-scientific explorations of the nature of conversion have complicated the traditional Western, Christian understanding described above. While Rambo argues that “‘genuine’ conversion” is a “radical,” “foundational, “pervasive,” and “total transformation of the person” (1993: xii), he has reinterpreted conversion to be a process, rather than a single moment in time. “My choice of the word *process* over *event*,” he writes, “is a deliberate distinction resulting from my personal interpretation that, contrary to popular mythology, conversion is very rarely an overnight, all-in-an-instant, whole transformation that is now and forever” (Rambo 1993: 1). Rambo’s scholarship has therefore complicated James’ understanding of conversion as being both sudden and a complete internal transformation. Diane Austin-Broos takes a similar approach to Rambo’s, arguing that conversion is a “form of passage, a ‘turning from and to’ that is neither syncretism nor absolute breach....It involves a process of continual embedding in forms of social practice and belief, in ritual dispositions and somatic experience” (2003: 1-2). In the same way, Gooren suggests the implementation of an analytic model of a “*conversion career*, [which] includes all episodes of higher or lower participation in one or more religious

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<sup>9</sup> This traditional framework of conversion is still used in many discussions of the subject. One example, of which there are countless, is Elizabeth Brusco’s *The Reformation of Machismo*; in her study of Colombian evangelicalism, Brusco highlights the conversion moment as a transformative instant for a particular individual in which “machismo is replaced by evangelical belief as the main determinant of husband-wife relations...a transformed domestic realm becomes the center of life for both women and men” (1995: 122-3). Brusco showcases one particular moment of divine epiphany as having ultimate significance, after which a particular individual views his or her surroundings through a completely different lens.

organizations during a person's life" (2010: 3). Conversion, in Austin-Broos and Gooren's frameworks, is not a sudden moment in time but, just as Rambo contends, a passage and a process. Thomas Kingsley Brown similarly questions the fullness and immediacy of conversion, calling the very "concept of conversion as a 'shift in one's system in belief' ...problematic" (2003: 143) Instead, he argues that conversion is "a series of stages," (Kingsley Brown 2003: 143) noting that "the fact that belief waxes and wanes, even for longtime members [of the Spiritualism movement], throws doubt on the completeness of the shift in beliefs that is assumed....the exchange of 'one ordered view of the world for another' (Heinrich 1977) may not be as neat as the definition suggests" (Kingsley Brown 2003: 142).

For these more contemporary authors, the process of conversion cannot be neatly located within a particular moment in time, does not necessarily align with a simultaneous rejection and acquisition of particular religious affiliations, and should not be described as a complete, one hundred and eighty degree transformation. *Being* is a part of becoming, as converts continue to acquire and become comfortable with their new religious identities through particular embedded and embodied experiences. As Peter van der Veer writes, "it is only through the learning of a Christian discourse, a particular set of rules that determines what can be said and what not, what can be done and what not, that one gets converted" (van der Veer 1996, 17). Van der Veer shows that an event of conversion can only mean so much; it is, in reality, the living of a particular way of life that allows an individual to attach oneself to and truly become a particular identification label.



Scholars have also cautioned that an anthropological examination cannot treat conversion solely as an individual experience, contrary to James' insistence that conversion occurs to man in his singularity. Rambo writes that "all conversions (even Saul's on the road to Damascus) are mediated through people, institutions, communities, and groups" (1993: 1), thus placing the individual within a broader system of social phenomena. Similarly, Buckser and Glazier argue that conversion "occurs within a context of institutional procedures and social relationships" (2003: xi). The local community and social groups in which conversion occurs play a crucial role in the ways through which converts acquire religious affiliations and the particular placement of converts within the group:

That transformation takes place...within a social matrix, as converts detach themselves from one group of believers and affiliate with another. In many cases, that matrix has considerably more impact in motivating the conversion than any individual religious experience. In all cases, the social group structures the intellectual and experiential process through which conversion occurs (Buckser and Glazier 2003: xiv).

Likewise, Gooren expands on his notion of the "conversion career" by saying that "it is a tool to analyze the interplay of factors between the individual actor, the religious organization, and the wider social and cultural context" (2010: 3). I agree fully with these authors: there can be no account of conversion without an understanding of the social group in which the convert is situated.

Like the contemporary scholars quoted above, I aim to push the boundaries of James' meaning of conversion. The Unitarian Universalists whom I have encountered would disagree wholeheartedly with the application of the traditional Christian understanding of conversion onto their own experiences. No one I spoke with claimed

to have been influenced by a divine or supernatural spirit, nor did anyone recognize a particular moment in time when he or she spontaneously became a Unitarian Universalist. Instead, they represent their becoming Unitarian Universalist as a protracted process that included multiple steps. Nor was this transition a purely individual progression. Their conversions were influenced by their social, cultural, economic and political surroundings and took place within a particular Unitarian Universalist church. The one component of James' understanding of conversion which they would perhaps see reflected in their own stories is the extent to which becoming involved in a Unitarian Universalist church allowed them to feel content in a religious institution, particularly when juxtaposed with the unhappiness linked to their childhood religion. However, as we will see, I would caution against viewing their conversion as an immediate change to total bliss. In the following section, I trace their conversion narratives, exploring specifically these stories' relationship to James' understanding of the phenomenon.

### **The Moment of Realization and Disillusionment**

As noted above, the traditional notion of conversion revolves around the theory that it is instantaneous, or that the moment of accepting a new religious identity occurs simultaneously with leaving an original childhood religion. The Unitarian Universalists with whom I have talked, however, assert that they abandoned their childhood religious identification label years or even decades before they decided to join a Unitarian Universalist community. They did so by acknowledging that they no longer felt aligned with their childhood religions' teachings, values, and

structures. Many of them shared with me a particular moment when they became fully aware that they no longer wanted to be a part of this religion; while telling me their stories, they stressed how important it was to live for a prolonged stretch of time without feeling an attachment to any religious group. They did not leave their childhood religions for the direct purpose of joining a new one.

When I met with Caitlin, she shared with me the story of her confirmation into the Roman Catholic Church. She has vivid memories of that day:

I stood in the back of my church, 18 years old, and looked at my friend and said: "I don't really believe in God." Then I walked down and got confirmed, because that's what you're supposed to do. I had no ill will towards Catholicism, but I knew I felt like a hypocrite because I didn't subscribe to their way.

Matthew had a surprisingly similar encounter with the Roman Catholic Church on the day of his confirmation:

As I knelt to be anointed by the local Bishop and he offered his ring to be kissed, I remember asking myself why. Why should I be on my knees in front of this guy paying homage, as he didn't really strike me as being exceptional; he was just another overweight old person in a fancy dress sitting in an ornate chair looking bored...I had formally entered into the body of the religion but in the process had lost a significant element of my faith and from that time on I found it difficult to attend services. My body would be there but my spirit was absent.

Caitlin and Matthew's realizations both came during an intensely liminal period, as they stood between the status of Catholic youth and Catholic adult, and then issued in another one between Catholicism and Unitarian Universalism. It is not surprising that they would suddenly realize their disalignment with Catholicism during their confirmations, as it is one of the sacraments that demonstrate one's deepening commitment to the Roman Catholic Church. This communal ritual gave them the

opportunity – the excuse, even - to reflect critically upon themselves as members of their religious community.

Sheryl, like Matthew and Caitlin, experienced a similar moment of realization, although hers came during a period of national trauma, as opposed to during a religious rite of passage. She was also raised Roman Catholic and attended Catholic schools through college. As she sat in church on September 12, 2001, the priest leading the service compared what had happened the day before to an abortion, “like the towers falling were like a baby being ripped out of a womb.” This connection to abortion, she felt, was entirely inappropriate and offensive, given the tragedy of the day before. Instead of listening to the priest, she “walked out of the service.” Catholicism was “so engrained in [her],” though, “that [she] felt guilty” about coming to terms with the fact that she found it “closed-minded.”

Despite the extent to which I argue that their conversion narratives differ from the normative Christian template, perhaps it is the case that Sheryl, Caitlin and Matthew *were* internally divided before they joined Unitarian Universalism, as James suggests is true of the “soul” before conversion. Both Caitlin and Matthew went through with a ritual they did not believe in, partially because they knew they were supposed to and partially because of the importance their families placed on their being Catholic, a tension which will be discussed in more detail below. Likewise, even though Sheryl was disgusted by the offensive words of her priest, she had trouble leaving the Catholic religion behind. All three felt that their internal selves were incompatible with the external expressions of Catholicism, yet it took them some time to fully come to terms with such a realization. In this sense, perhaps their

decisive moment, their moment of ultimate significance, was not of conversion but of *unconversion*.

The experience of Stuart, however, shows a conversion narrative that in no way begins with an internally divided self. He too was raised Catholic, but thanks to the influence of a “bible-toting friend,” became an evangelical Protestant in junior high. As a freshman in high school, he decided that there “was no God.” His realization occurred during a revival meeting at Yankee Stadium led by Billy Graham. Waiting for a revelation that never came, he originally thought that “the devil was holding [him] back.” Soon, though, he realized that he “felt fooled” by the promises of what would happen if he gave himself to Christ. The rest of the stadium erupted into Halleluiahs, while all he felt was that he was surrounded by “mass hysteria.” For several years after that afternoon, he was content with belonging to no religious institution and having no religious identity.

In one case, I did come across an individual who left Catholicism simultaneously with joining Unitarian Universalism and for whom dissatisfaction with the Roman Catholic Church served as the direct impetus for such a decision. Julie calls herself a “recovering Catholic,” and believes “that is the path that led [her] directly to Unitarian Universalism.” In 1992, as a young mother searching for an inviting community and a spiritual connection, Julie no longer found the Roman Catholic Church “stimulating or fulfilling or living up to its own principles,” but she “wanted to have some religious connection, so [she] tried Unitarian Universalism.” She learned about the church in Meriden from a friend who had gone through a similar process and with whom she attended her first service: “I went and liked it. The

one thing that immediately attracted me was that you could laugh during the service.” Julie’s unhappiness with the Roman Catholic Church, juxtaposed with the humanity she felt at Unitarian Universalist services, convinced her to join the church in Meriden. She immediately began attending services regularly and has since served in many leadership roles in the church. To her, Unitarian Universalism means “freedom, compassion, stimulating conversation and connection. It means [she] feel[s] very happy in this particular religion and [she] sure could not have ever said that about Catholicism.” Julie’s strengthening relationship with Unitarian Universalism therefore occurred in direct opposition to her growing dislike of and discomfort with Catholicism.

### **Becoming a Member**

While traditional theories of conversion represent the moment of conversion as a complete transformation of one’s old self into a new self, it is not expected within this particular religion that individuals will necessarily reconstruct their inner being to become Unitarian Universalists. The ritual act of becoming a member of a Unitarian Universalist church is called “Signing the Membership Book,” and it is discussed in a pamphlet entitled “Becoming a Member” that is published and circulated by the Unitarian Universalist Association:

Inscribing your name does not transform you into an instant or born-again Unitarian Universalist. Our religious way of life is not so much an arriving as a becoming--an ongoing process of thought and life experience. Joining for you may mean fresh steps along a familiar path. It may mean venturing in uncharted territory. In either case, the initiative is yours. You do not sign on someone else’s dotted line of spiritual development, and there is no fine print. Your signature is your affirming symbol of commitment to an open-minded, inclusive,

reasoned, seasoned, compassionate and contemporary approach to life  
(Laughland Guild 1996)

Becoming a Unitarian Universalist only requires the signing of one's name and a financial pledge, whereas Judeo-Christian traditions may require immersion in water, confession to one's sins, circumcision, or public declaration of belief. While signing the Membership Book is a hugely significant and deeply personal act, its symbolism lies in its status as an agreement "to share your gifts, your talents, and your time as well as your own personal needs and limitations" (Laughland Guild 1996). As a functional ritual, signing the Membership Book is most literally a contract with the particular Unitarian Universalist church with which one has become involved. Signing the Membership Book, as the rite of passage into Unitarian Universalism, is not supposed to represent the transformation of the self; rather, it acknowledges a self that *already* existed. This sentiment is reflected in Jack Mendelsohn's Being Liberal in an Illiberal Age, in which he claims "'I've been a Unitarian Universalist for years without knowing it' is a familiar refrain" (2006: 32). Similarly, George Chyrssides writes in The Elements of Unitarianism: "Notice that I have said that I *was* a Unitarian, not that I *became* one. Many people who find their way into the Unitarians will say, like me, that their decision to join was not a conversion, but more of a recognition of what they already were" (1998: 7).

This process of becoming a member is reflected in Caitlin's story. In 2005, she logged onto Beliefnet.com, which she describes as "find your religion online." After filling out a lengthy questionnaire, she discovered that she should be "either a U.U. or a Jew." She knew she was not interested in Judaism, but kept Unitarian Universalism in the back of her mind. From 2006 to 2008, she lived in Arizona with

her husband. During this time, she began attending services at a few Unitarian Universalist churches, but “never got totally ingrained in it.” In September 2008, her mother passed away and she moved back to Connecticut. By January 2009, she “needed something fresh” and began attending services at The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden. Caitlin actively sought out a Unitarian Universalist church after a questionnaire had told her that she was aligned with its principles and values.

Helen, like Caitlin, realizes now that she felt that she was a Unitarian Universalist before even discovering that such a community existed. Helen was raised Catholic - “like all Catholic girls, I wanted to be a nun when I was a girl” - and attended a Catholic college. During these early years, she believed strongly in God and considered herself extremely spiritual. In her eyes, joining a Unitarian Universalist church was not a rebellion against her family or the Roman Catholic Church itself. Over time, her beliefs in God and Jesus had declined in importance and the Roman Catholic Church simply no longer had a presence in her life. She became pregnant in 1992 and decided that she wanted to join a religious community in which she felt comfortable that her son, Peter, would receive a quality religious education.

Helen works in mental health and, over water cooler conversations at her office, began to learn more about churches in the area and how others like her got their “spirituality needs met.” Her husband considered himself “vaguely Methodist,” (although he also identifies as Buddhist) and the two of them (three, once Peter was born) began attending services at The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden. Even without Peter’s birth, though, Helen believes strongly that she would have begun attending the church. She was ready for involvement in a community in which



she could express her spirituality and develop her own beliefs; as a place for exploration, The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden fulfilled - and continues to fulfill - those desires. Even with this level of comfort, she did not immediately sign the membership book. Although she had become extremely active in the community and considered herself a member, it took “a year or two” for her to sign the book. In fact, she had made a conscious decision not to, but eventually a vote came before the congregation that she felt strongly about. Before signing the membership book, she would not have been allowed to vote. In this sense, signing the membership book did not change Helen’s internal self. She felt that she already *was* a Unitarian Universalist, simply without officially being a member of a church, and signing the book confirmed what she had already become. Sheryl followed a similar pattern. Six months after attending her first Unitarian Universalist service, she decided to sign the membership book. She wanted to get more involved in the religious education program, but to teach in classrooms, one has to have been a member for at least six months.

The reasons that Stuart joined The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden align in many ways with these stories. Two decades after becoming disenchanted with religion at Yankee Stadium, Stuart saw an ad in the paper stating that the church in Meriden was hiring a humanistic values teacher for the religious education program. He applied and while he did not get the job, he began attending Sunday morning services. He appreciated that the congregation did not use “god language” and loved the intelligent discussions that were held each week following services. Despite this comfort, it took him twelve years to sign the Membership Book. He

considered himself an atheist and had no desire to be a part of an established religious organization. Eventually, though, his involvement in the community grew to such a level that he “grew tired of people asking [him], as a leader, to join.” He determined that he could join a religious organization of this kind, given that it was essentially independent with respect to ministry, worship structure, and organizational policies.

Stuart, Helen and Sheryl officially joined The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden because they had already become so involved that it no longer made sense not to. All three of these individuals became members because they wanted to stake their claims in the community and take on expanded roles in its leadership. Signing the Membership Book did not *create* their Unitarian Universalist selves, nor did it necessarily align with the particular moment that they began calling themselves Unitarian Universalists. Rather, this ritual act indicated that these individuals *already* felt connected to the Unitarian Universalist community and considered themselves Unitarian Universalists.

Sheryl explained that tension has recently arisen at The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden over the significance of the ritual act of signing the membership book. Some long-standing members of the congregation have asserted that “membership used to mean something,” such as “speaking out during congregational meetings or becoming involved in congregational activities.” Now, though, “if anyone wants to sign, they can with a financial commitment.” These older members have asserted that “Friends,” or people who attend services at and are involved with the Unitarian Universalist Church but have not yet signed the membership book, should not be allowed to speak or even be present at these meetings. They resent the

notion of membership as a financial contract. Instead, they want signing the membership book to become, once again, a pledge “to share your gifts, your talents, and your time as well as your own personal needs and limitations” (Laughland Guild 1996).

### **Conversion’s Social Significance**

We recall that according to William James, conversion occurs to a single individual and is facilitated by a supernatural agent. As outlined above, only recently have scholars of religion come to accept that conversions occur within a particular social matrix. This has been reflected in Sheryl’s story, in which the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> played a significant role in convincing her she could no longer be Catholic, and in Stuart’s, in which the words of Billy Graham and the feeling of being surrounded by mass hysteria convinced him he was not an evangelical Protestant. Additionally, for nearly all the individuals discussed above, the decision to join the Unitarian Universalist Church was influenced by the urging of other, more active members or by congregational rules such as length of membership needed to teach in the religious school or participate in congregational votes. Therefore, it would be a mistake to treat these conversions simply as having occurred individually or through the intervention of a divine agent.

Additionally, one should not assume that these conversions occurred solely within the confines of the church. Implications and consequences of conversion transcend the boundaries of the Unitarian Universalist community. For example, the process of conversion may have come across as an insult to the individual’s nuclear

and/or extended family, exacerbating or creating intrafamilial strains. For Caitlin, this tension manifested itself between her and her in-laws. Caitlin describes her husband's parents as "die-hard Catholics" and she shared a story about a difficult encounter that took place while she and her husband were living with his parents, shortly after their move back to Connecticut from Arizona:

We had a dance after the gay marriage laws passed and I volunteered to make banners, and so I asked my mother-in-law if I could use the computer and she said absolutely. I was printing rainbow chalices. She asked what it was for and I told her. She didn't say anything and a week later, in true fashion, my husband said, "I'm not supposed to tell you this, but my father was very offended and had to go to confession because you used his computer ink to print out rainbows for your dance."

Caitlin was asked to not use her in-laws' computer or printer for anything involving The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden. She reflected on the tension: "I am not going to change their minds and their beliefs. I was in their house, if they don't want their stuff used, that's fine. I recognize it as a difference and I move on. To me, it speaks to a big population of people who are, I don't know what the word is, I'm not trying to sound judgmental, but closed-minded, uninformed, afraid."

Caitlin and her husband recently had their first child. Her husband does not identify as a Unitarian Universalist because he feels that there is "not enough Christ" in the religion. Caitlin has agreed to allow her husband to baptize their child in the Catholic tradition, to "give [him] full peace of mind." However:

In terms of a religious upbringing and education, it looks like it'll be [Unitarian Universalist]... We both want our child to make their own decisions when they're at the point to be able to do that. At this point, I wouldn't send them to a Catholic C.C.D. class because there's no reason to do that for me. It's not wide enough of an education.

Caitlin, who became a member of The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden in early 2009, was still dealing with the repercussions of this choice when we talked a year later, as evident in the tensions that have manifested between herself and her in-laws. While she accepts her husband's refusal to join Unitarian Universalism, discussions of how they would raise their child have forced each to claim a particular religion and to argue for it.

Julie dealt with similar repercussions when she joined the church in Meriden. While she originally attended services alone, after a short while she began to bring her daughter, Anna. After a few years, Julie and her husband gave Anna the option of either attending religious school at the extended family's Roman Catholic church or at The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden. Anna chose the Unitarian Universalist religious education, which brought Julie "in direct conflict with [her] spouse." When Anna reached fifth grade, she changed her mind and decided "she did not want to go to U.U. church." This greatly disappointed Julie, as she thinks the decision was "more about pleasing her dad." Interestingly enough, Anna, who is now a senior in high school, now loves coming to services and participating in discussions at The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden; as Julie put it, "she's a U.U. at heart." The conflict between Julie and her husband made Julie "adamant about going. Come hell or what, I was going to that church." The situation between Julie and her husband is similar to that of Caitlin, in which religion has manifested itself as a particular point of contention in their marriage, particularly in relation to raising their daughter.

Matthew had to handle the consequences of his conversion when he and his wife got married, now almost a half-century ago. Matthew's grandparents lived in Poland and were once Jewish but converted to Catholicism "as a survival tool in Europe." To him, Unitarian Universalism and Judaism have "philosophical concepts in common," and he still greatly relates to that part of his family history: "being Jewish was a great part of my heritage that [his] parents wouldn't discuss." His leaving the Roman Catholic Church "was devastating to [his] family." Their grief came to light when "[his] family wouldn't attend [his] wedding because it wasn't held in a Catholic church." His wife's family is "fundamental Baptist" and they, too, "were infuriated by her being a Unitarian Universalist."

Interestingly, Matthew regrets the fact that he raised his daughter as a U.U.: "We have one child and we brought her up in the U.U. Meriden Religious Education System. This was a big mistake. It was the late 1960s," he explained, "and the Religious Education system was dedicated to converting children into atheism. They taught that spirituality was a joke, that there was no god, that nothing mattered but the human element of religion. [Our daughter] thinks the church provided nothing." Matthew's daughter has since had a son of her own, but despite the fact that Matthew has had a large influence in his grandson's upbringing, he has "stayed out of his religious life." Matthew may have been suggesting here that Unitarian Universalism is better left as a conscious choice to be made by (self-realizing) adults, as opposed to being imposed onto children by their parents. Matthew mentioned during our conversation that his great-grandson was due to be born that week. Rather than give advice as to how this child should be raised, he said, "I can only offer my own life as

inducement.” Clearly, religious choice has created a degree of turmoil in Matthew’s relationships with his family members.

While I have highlighted above that conversion often provokes conflict and tension within familial relationships, there are, of course, exceptions. Stuart and Sheryl represent their conversions as having had little effect on their relationships with their family. Stuart believes that neither his leaving Catholicism nor his joining Unitarian Universalism had implications for his natal family. “My parents sent me to Church but we never talked about anything in the house, and my sister is a born-again Christian.” Stuart’s parents did not stress the importance of religion; both he and his sister felt comfortable enough to choose their own religious path. Similarly, Sheryl expected that her parents “would freak” when she joined the Unitarian Universalist church; however, they were very understanding and accepted her choice with no tangible repercussions.

When I first began research at The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden, Reverend Maureen Simms served as the congregation’s minister. The story of how Reverend Simms became a Unitarian Universalist highlights a particularly interesting relationship between an individual’s conversion narrative and external social factors. Reverend Simms was a practicing Catholic until the age of 15, when she ceased involvement in any religious community. In 1983, at the age of 28, she became extremely involved in the nuclear weapons freeze movement, eventually serving as the chair of the town freeze committee in Brunswick, Maine. In this position she was asked to speak at the congregational meeting of a nearby Unitarian Universalist church that was in the process of determining its level of involvement with the

movement. The meeting was to be held immediately following the church's worship service, so she decided to attend the service to ensure that she would be on time for her presentation.

Reverend Simms was struck by the level of involvement that church members had in the service: "in that church, in those days, they had a response to the sermon during the service....it was like, what thing are you responding to or resonating with that the minister said in the sermon? People speaking their own thoughts in a church? Very, very different. It just appealed to me immediately." Reverend Simms started going to Unitarian Universalist services occasionally and, over time, became involved in the church's community. When the community minister left the church in 1984, she assisted during the interim period by helping to plan Sunday morning services. She officially became a member in February 1986, a month after leading her first service.

Three years later, Reverend Simms was looking to make a new step professionally. She had an epiphany while sitting in church and realized she wanted to be a minister: "I felt like I was standing on solid ground for the first time in my life. I had found something that really made sense. I could combine all my activism and volunteerism and my wanting to serve people in many different ways under one umbrella and get paid." By the following fall, she was enrolled at Andover-Newton Theological Seminary. She graduated from Seminary in 1994 and received her credentials from the Unitarian Universalist Association in February 1996. Reverend Simms was called to The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden within weeks of getting approved and was the community minister there for fourteen years. At the



time of our conversation in December 2009, she was actively searching for a job at a new church, a process that she had undergone for the previous three years, and has since moved to New York.

Reverend Simms' journey towards becoming a Unitarian Universalist minister would not make any sense without an understanding of the wider social, political, and cultural factors surrounding her. She first entered a Unitarian Universalist church in the 1980s to give a presentation on her involvement in a nuclear weapons freeze committee. In no way did she expect that this involvement with a time-sensitive social justice issue would prompt a new religious identification – or a new career. Furthermore, she became more involved in the community following the departure of the congregation's minister, a factor over which she had no control. To view Reverend Simms' conversion as solely an individual process would be to overlook the details of her story. Additionally, while it is true that Reverend Simms' conversion narrative includes a moment of individual epiphany, as William James argues is integral to conversion, that moment was both preceded by years of buildup and followed by a long journey towards her current position as a Unitarian Universalist minister.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Interesting to note is the extent to which Reverend Simms' life story reflects broader patterns with respect to other Unitarian Universalist ministers. As Josiah and Laile Bartlett write, "U.U. ministers have the same profile as their people. Most began life in other churches. Most switched to the ministry from a previous occupation: business, law, teaching, etc....The average age of those preparing for ministry today is 33-plus...Over half of those in training and thirty percent of those now in U.U. pulpits are women" (1990: 24-5)

## Unraveling the Religious-Spiritual Dichotomy

One recurrent theme that the Unitarian Universalists with whom I have spoken articulate is a distinction between having previously been *religious* and now feeling *spiritual*. To them, being religious, which I read in these cases as synonymous with being Roman Catholic, implies following strict rules and being discouraged from expressing their true inner beliefs. Helen equated “religion” with a hierarchical, institutional structure, while she stated that “spirituality” is “that thing deep in our souls...feelings, experiences.” Both Helen and Caitlin stated that the lay-led services at The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden are the “most spiritual” because they represent the humanity and interconnected nature of the members of the congregation. When Caitlin was younger, Catholic services were uninspiring: she felt pressure to sing when others were singing or pray when others were praying. At Unitarian Universalist services, by contrast, her spirituality is unleashed: she feels that others affirm her beliefs, whatever they may be, and accept her desire to pray or sing when and how she wants. Julie’s comments had similar undertones. “The Catholic religion is extremely structured and my impression was that you would find God through the structure,” she said. “And I didn’t.” She appreciates that she is now allowed to understand “God, or a universal power, as everywhere and everything and between everyone, and [she] doesn’t have to feel a connection or adherence to a structure.”

Matthew articulated his thoughts most bluntly when he answered whether he regards himself as religious: “What does religion mean? Nothing much. Faith is everything – it’s the thing that makes me holy...Faith keeps me focused on what is important, not the trivial or every day.” His faith, which he also referred to as his

“personal spirituality” is “nonnegotiable,” as it belongs to him and no one else. What he values most about being a part of a Unitarian Universalist community is that “*no one has the right to tell me what to believe.*” After being affiliated on-and-off with The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden for over fifty years, as will be discussed in depth in Chapter 3, “Sacred Space(s),” Matthew feels that his role in the community is to make “other people feel comfortable with the term spiritual – [his] mission is to make it okay.”

I suggest that for the Unitarian Universalists in Meriden, this sense of continual discovery and shaping of their own personal spirituality serves as a step towards becoming internally content or, as James would say, “laying [their] inner storm to rest” (1994[1902]: 191). Despite James’ insistence to the contrary, such a dramatic change did not happen overnight for these individuals. Rather, it is an ongoing process. The people I have talked to discovered in The Unitarian Universalists Church that their desire to discover their own personal beliefs, as opposed to blindly following what others have taught them, is not a sign of being internally divided, but rather a crucial part of the journey towards being truly at ease. They appreciate The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden as a tool in this journey, as it serves as a place for people with different ideologies to come together and share. Along the same vein, they view the community’s minister as a “spiritual leader” who can provide them with resources, as opposed to creeds. Caitlin, for instance, lit up when she talked about an upcoming course held at U.U. Meriden called “Build Your Own Theology.” She hoped taking the class would help her gain a clearer understanding of her own beliefs about God and the afterlife. After being a member of the Church for a year,

she felt that she had found a group of close friends and thus had filled her “community needs...Now, [her] next step is the spiritual journey and this group is an avenue for that.” As I show in the next chapter, and as Caitlin’s comments about “Build Your Own Theology” begin to demonstrate, church membership is a tool that can be used to explore one’s own internal spirituality.<sup>11</sup>

The emphasis placed on spirituality for members of The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden is part of a broader societal transformation in which spirituality, as opposed to religiosity, is becoming a desired norm for individuals living in the late-capitalist United States.<sup>12</sup> In Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion, Wade Clark Roof argues that the “the boundaries of popular religious communities are now being redrawn, encouraged by the quests of the large, post-World War II generations, and facilitated by the rise of an expanded spiritual marketplace” (1999: 10). Despite theories of modern secularization, of a quantitative “loss of faith,” he sees the “current religious situation in the United States...as a qualitative shift from unquestioned belief to a *more open*,

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<sup>11</sup> As should already be clear from the conversion narratives told above, I wholeheartedly resist a Jamesian analysis of religion in which one’s religious or spirituality identity is solely created from within.

<sup>12</sup> Perhaps this broader emphasis on spirituality is not, in fact, a wholly new development for Unitarian Universalists: “The note of spirituality that Unitarian Universalists have heard over this past decade has become a distinct melody. It has entered our congregational life as new rituals and liturgies, and it has entered our personal lives as practices and experiences. We have heard its sound before. We heard it in the voice of William Ellery Channing: ‘I call that mind free which discovers everywhere the radiant signatures of the infinite spirit, and in them finds help to its own spiritual enlargement.’ We heard it in the Transcendentalists. Ralph Waldo Emerson said, ‘Within us is the soul of the whole; the wise silence, the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related, the eternal One.’ Margaret Fuller stated, ‘I accept the universe.’ We heard it in the words of Humanists like Clinton Lee Scott: The continuing mission of human beings is to learn how to live decently together. The universe responds!” (Smurzynski 1993).

*questing mood*” (Roof 1999: 9-10, italics added). We have become part of a “quest culture” (Roof 1999: 10) in which individuals gather and utilize tools to piece together spiritual identities that are uniquely their own.

While spirituality is difficult to define, Roof identifies themes around which his understanding of spirituality revolves: “a source of values and meaning beyond oneself, a way of understanding, inner awareness, and personal integration” (1999: 35). Spirituality involves a “degree of searching for that deeper level of encounter with the sacred, that deepest ‘ground of being’ – yearnings that are among the most deeply rooted of all human responses and the means by which humanity becomes defined as human” (Roof 1999: 34-5). This type of quest culture, involving a shift “from a world in which beliefs hold believers to one in which believers hold beliefs” (Roof 1991: 41), is necessarily intertwined with a particular understanding of the individual self. Roof argues that cultivating an individual spiritual identity allows for the resistance of the “fragmentation and commodification of the self in modern society” (1999: 34). In this sense, “contemporary quests for spirituality are really yearnings for a reconstructed interior life, deliberate and formative efforts aimed at forging an integrated self and transcending the limits of the given” (Roof 1999: 35). The Unitarian Universalists with whom I have spoken reflect the American desires articulated by Roof when they discuss their quest to develop an internal spirituality. They aim to find an internal balance, previously thought unattainable, by discovering and coming to terms with their innermost beliefs.

Richard Cimino and Don Lattin echo Roof’s argument in Shopping For Faith: American Religion in the New Millennium, stating that “[i]n the new millennium,

there will be a growing gap between personal spirituality and religious institutions” (1998: 11). Cimino and Lattin highlight the 1960s as a decade of transformation in this realm: “[t]he 1960s, which brought the sexual revolution and the breakdown of millions of American families, were also the turning point in this bitter divorce between religion and spirituality...The social revolution of ‘the sixties’ elevated the values of free choice and experimentation in the religious marketplace” (1998: 12). Perhaps it should come as no surprise that Unitarian Universalism itself, conceptualized as a bounded religious entity that promotes these particular tendencies, is a product of this decade.

Taking Roof’s usage of the term “marketplace” literally, one understands that every-day Americans have become consumers in a constantly expanding marketplace of purchasable products devoted to this search for spiritual fulfillment:

Nowhere is this greater emphasis upon the seeker more apparent than in the large chain bookstore: the “religion” section is gone and in its place is a growing set of more specific rubrics catering to popular topics such as angels, Sufism, journey, recovery, meditation, magic, inspiration, Judaica, astrology, gurus, Bible, prophecy, Evangelicalism, Mary, Buddhism, Catholicism, esoterica and the like (Roof 1999: 7).

One may also interpret Roof’s usage of the term to be more metaphorical, as Americans are increasingly able to consume and discard theologies and philosophies in a variety of both actual and virtual settings:

The discourse on spiritual “journeys” and “growth” is now a province not just of theologians and journalists, but of ordinary people in cafes, coffee bars, and bookstores around the country. Interest in the spiritual is voiced both inside and outside the religious establishments: in growing Pentecostal, Charismatic, and Evangelical churches; in old-line congregations as they struggle to overcome the malaise that has settled upon them; in innovative religious forms such as “seeker churches” and “refreshings”; in spiritual seminars and popular

lectures at retreat centers; in house churches, prayer cells, women's ritual groups, and support groups of all kinds; in courses on spiritual formation in seminaries; in an expansive psycho-spiritual culture of best-selling books and videos; on the World Wide Web and in the chat rooms of the Internet; in business and corporate worlds; in medical schools examining the impact of prayer and meditation on health (Roof 1999: 7-8).

The provision of these sources allows for an adequate placement of the religious individual within wider social groups. While it is true that spirituality need not be created or defined by hierarchical structures, as the Unitarian Universalists insist, external tools and factors necessarily play a significant role in its development for all individuals. This do-it-yourself, pick-and-choose understanding of the contemporary religious marketplace has been reproduced in popular culture: in his best-selling novel The Da Vinci Code, Dan Brown writes: "Do you really wonder why the Catholics are leaving the Church? Look around you, Cardinal. People have lost respect. The rigors of faith are gone. The doctrine has become a buffet table. Abstinence, confession, communion, baptism, mass – take your pick – choose whatever combination pleases you and ignore the rest" (2003: 545).

Although one's spiritual identity is often created and defined in opposition to a religious identity, as "the quest is for something more than doctrine, creed, or institution" (Roof 1999: 33), Roof is careful not to imply that an individual's spirituality implies a refusal of membership in religious organizations. Rather, these are necessary to "regularize religious life around a set of practices and unifying experiences, to mobilize people around causes, or even to sustain personal religious identity....*Individual religious identity is itself rooted to a considerable extent within*

*community*” (Roof 1999: 39, italics added).<sup>13</sup> Following Roof, I argue that being a member of a Unitarian Universalist church is one mode of developing this “individual” spirituality. Congregational activities and workshops allow individuals to cultivate a sense of internal awareness that was formerly thought to be impossible.<sup>14</sup> In the following chapter, I look at how The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden strives to serve these purposes.

In the previous pages, I have presented the conversion narratives of multiple members of The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden, Connecticut. I have worked to create a conversation between dominant theories of the phenomenon we call conversion and the experiences of real-life individuals. In doing so, I have tried to dismantle the theoretical foundation on which most narratives of conversion generally rest. I have showcased that for Unitarian Universalists in Meriden, Connecticut, their conversions cannot be understood as sudden transformations for single individuals,

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<sup>13</sup> Cimino and Lattin disagree with Roof’s claim. They argue that the emphasis on spirituality increases the presence of isolated individuality in American culture: “[F]or many Americans spirituality has become a private affair. Rather than gathering in religious congregations, millions of seekers curl up at home with the latest self-help book or inspirational tome. Instead of coming together Saturday at the synagogue or Sunday at church, they pray and mediate in their own private temples. Private religion and our dizzying array of spiritual choices can put us all in ‘little boxes,’ isolated from one another” (1998: 5).

<sup>14</sup> One should note that there *are* multiple ways to develop a personal Unitarian Universalist spirituality that does not include membership in a particular Unitarian Universalist church organization. For example, Skinner House Books, a publishing house run by the Unitarian Universalist Association, caters to a growing niche market of Unitarian Universalists, as its explicit goal is to publish books to aid individuals in their search for personal truth and meaning (Unitarian Universalist Association 2011b). Additionally, the Unitarian Universalist Association website includes a “Meditation of the Day,” “U.U. Planet” (a database of Unitarian Universalist sermons,) and a collection of “Unitarian Universalist podcasts.” Access to these online resources is freely available and requires no financial commitment to a congregational structure.



facilitated solely by the influence of a supernatural being, after which they felt wholly, internally content. Instead, I have represented the process of becoming a Unitarian Universalist as protracted, involving multiple steps and as occurring within a matrix of external social and cultural factors.

## 2. Taking and Leaving

*Our congregations need to be places where connections can be made, networks that connect people to each other in meaningful ways. In contemporary American culture, the dislocations of traditional sources of rootedness are well known: the breakdown of the close-by extended family, the suburban sprawl replacing local neighborhoods, the mall replacing the corner store. No wonder individualism is rampant! People seek out a congregation because they need a place to belong—to be rooted, to work out questions of value and meaning, to have a spiritual life (Commission on Appraisal of the Unitarian Universalist Association 2001: 13).*

*The heart-and-soul of the denomination is its self-governing congregations. Their working method is democratic; their status, individually independent. We make much of this cornerstone of “congregational polity.” Each society calls its own minister, run its own program, and administers its own funds. No hierarchy or council, no bishop or outside agency has power over it (Bartlett 1990: 21).*

On a Sunday morning in early September 2010, after spending the previous summer abroad, I attended services at The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden for the first time since the spring. I was struck by how natural it felt for me to make the half-dozen mile journey from Wesleyan’s campus in Middletown to the church building on 328 Paddock Avenue in Meriden, by how comfortable I felt entering a building I had not entered for several months. My ritual acts of preparing for fieldwork remained unchanged: I rolled out of bed as my housemates continued to sleep, put on clothes appropriate for a religious service, gathered my folder of notes and assorted brochures and pamphlets, and drove away from campus on a silent Sunday morning. I needed no directions or maps; the turns were subconscious, the landscape unchanged. As I had completed my earlier fieldwork during the fall 2009 semester, the combination of the crisp autumn air and the scattered vibrant leaves, visible for miles in all directions, made it seem as if no time had passed. The

congregants were recognizable, the building and its layout familiar. I knew the order of the service and how to act.

As the autumn progressed, I looked forward to my Sunday mornings at the church. They became my own time, distinct from a busy week, from a sometimes draining college schedule. The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden remained a place of ethnographic fieldwork, but it also became a site of personal reflection. In this way, my experiences at the church began to parallel those of my informants. For members of The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden, Sunday morning worship services serve as a time to create and re-create their own distinctive Unitarian Universalist identity. Through sermons and readings, they are presented with a wide range of resources and opinions through which they are encouraged to sharpen their ideas about themselves, their beliefs and their community. Attending Sunday morning worship services is a key component of the lengthy process of conversion to Unitarian Universalism. In this sense, part of becoming Unitarian Universalist is *acting* as a Unitarian Universalist.

Despite their level of congregational commitment, the Unitarian Universalists in Meriden pride themselves on their refusal to subscribe blindly to doctrines or rituals, regardless of their origin or the authority that others have attributed to them. Instead, they take a very active approach to creating and practicing their own religious identity and, accordingly, their religion. Under no circumstance do these Unitarian Universalists think it is acceptable to believe or observe something that they themselves have not tested, critiqued, and examined from all angles. When I asked what Unitarian Universalism meant to her, one woman answered “freedom” –

freedom in the sense that participants are encouraged to create their own unique religious identities, instead of following what has been passed down for hundreds or thousands of years, as they might have been in their previous religious communities. At the same time, though, Unitarian Universalism is intimately and intricately linked with other religious traditions, particularly mainline Christianity and Judaism. As discussed in earlier chapters, Unitarian Universalism both grew out of and draws upon these religions, and many of its members were raised within them.

In this chapter, I argue that one way the Unitarian Universalist individuals and congregations I have encountered during my research have created – and continue to create – a distinctive identity for themselves is through a two-fold practice of appropriating and abandoning different aspects of various world religions and secular traditions. Put most simply, there appears to be a constant battle within the world of Unitarian Universalism between accepting and discarding others' beliefs, rituals, stories, and practices. At times, this slippage between *taking and leaving* is disrupted by the presence of judgmental rhetoric directed towards the rituals and beliefs of other religious groups. In the following chapter, I demonstrate how the active creation of individual and congregational identity, specifically through the examination of multiple religious traditions, is encouraged, practiced, and reflected upon during Sunday morning worship services at The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden.

### **Worship Service Structure**

The structure of the Sunday morning worship service at The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden encourages participation and provides members of

the church with tools to think critically about their own identities. Each service has a broad theme around which its various components revolve. Themes of services that I have attended include “Gratitude,” “Wabi-Sabi: Imperfection in Our Daily Lives” and “Mark Twain: Humanist Hero.” The titles of these three services alone demonstrates the diversity of ideas that are discussed, critiqued, and appropriated at services within the Unitarian Universalist tradition. No topic is too specific or obscure, as long as it can be related in some way to Unitarian Universalism. When I originally began my fieldwork in Meriden, the church switched off every other week between its minister, Reverend Simms, and a lay-person leading the service. As Reverend Simms has since left the congregation, the church now employs an interim minister who is based in New York City and comes to lead services and guide the congregation twice a month.<sup>15</sup> The leader of a particular worship service determines its theme and has free rein to do what he or she would like with it. Nearly all of the individuals from the church in Meriden I interviewed had, at some point in their lives, led a Sunday morning worship service and many recognized that the process of preparing to lead a service had strengthened their relationship to Unitarian Universalism and the congregation in Meriden.

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<sup>15</sup> The engagement of an interim minister at The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden is part of a broader denominational trend: “in recent years, U.U. congregations have discovered that the period between ministers is an invaluable time for review and stock-taking. As a result, the denomination has called into being a whole new group of ‘interim ministers’ who are specially trained to assist in this process. They are usually limited to a single year in any one church, since their effectiveness depends upon their not being candidates for an ongoing position. About two-thirds of all churches seeking new ministers now apply for an interim minister as their first step in the process” (Bartlett 1990: 26).

According to Julie, The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden conducts a larger proportion of lay-led services than do other Unitarian Universalist churches. She links that to the fact that this community is “very independent from [its] minister.” Due to financial constraints, Reverend Simms’ position was half-time, so the practice of alternating lay and ordained leaders had tangible financial benefits for the community. For Julie, the personal nature of the services in Meriden is integral to creating a sense of community and humanity within the church. Caitlin expressed similar sentiments. Because of their personal nature, she finds lay-led services more powerful and inspiring than clergy-led services, and experienced Reverend Simms’ services to be based too heavily on literary or historical references.<sup>16</sup> Caitlin’s first introduction to Unitarian Universalism was at a much larger church in Arizona, at which the minister led a vast majority of the services. While she attended this church occasionally, she did not feel drawn to the community and did not sign their membership book. It was not until moving to Meriden that Caitlin was ready to become a member of a Unitarian Universalist church.

Both Caitlin and Julie found in the services at The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden qualities that they had been searching for: a religious community that felt more personal and not hierarchically structured. In this chapter, I discuss both ministerial and lay-led services at The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden. I tend to identify with Caitlin and Julie, in that I find myself more engrossed in lay-led services than ministerial-led services. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, I was

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<sup>16</sup> When I formally interviewed Reverend Simms, she used academic and philosophical language to describe her religious identity. Before talking to Caitlin, I would have attributed this to the fact that she was well aware of my academic interest and background in the subject.

prompted to interview Caitlin after attending a Sunday morning worship service that she had led.<sup>17</sup>

The beginning of the service is marked by the sound of chimes, which are stored in the front left corner of the meeting room. At this time, members of the community know that the service is about to commence and they quickly finish their conversations and sit down. There is a great deal of socializing that occurs both before and after the service and the room is often bursting with chatter. A member of the Board of the Trustees then gives a welcoming address, which is essentially the same from week to week. I quote it at length, as it reflects both the broad principles of Unitarian Universalism and the way that Unitarian Universalists actively work to create their religious identities by examining many different practices and beliefs:

Unitarian Universalism is a liberal religion with roots in Jewish and Christian traditions. We are open to the religious questions that people have struggled with throughout history. We believe that personal experience, conscience and reason should be the final arbiters in matters of faith, rather than books, persons, or institutions. We uphold

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<sup>17</sup> The Unitarian Universalist worship service is structured in such a way that this sense of community can be created regardless of whom specifically is leading the service. For example, Joys and Concerns is a time in the service during which anybody in the congregation can stand, light a candle, and share the current highs and lows of their lives. These tend to be significant announcements; I was present at a service when a member of the congregation used this time to announce that he was transgender and had legally changed his name to reflect his new gender identification. As is the case with most Unitarian Universalist traditions, Joys and Concerns have been the focus of internal debate. An article on the U.U.A. website states: “[d]one well, they show that we’re a caring and reverent religious community. Done poorly, they embarrass us. Joys and Sorrows, or Joys and Concerns, our Sunday morning sharing of the highs and lows of our lives, can be a rich and rewarding experience that builds community. Or it can start the week on a sour note as speakers take off on political and commercial tangents, give too much vacation detail, and share their weight-loss successes” (Unitarian Universalist Association 2000). Multiple people from U.U. Meriden with whom I have spoken stated that one of their favorite parts of the service is Joys and Concerns; the small size of the congregation may allow this to be the case.

a free search for truth and meaning and do not subscribe to a fixed creed. We believe wisdom and human understanding is constantly changing so, very often in this church, people's ideas and beliefs are in flux and they are very often willing to discuss that... We're glad you're here with us.

This address is more than just a welcome to those participants who are already members of the church. It is also a way of making individuals who are new to the Unitarian Universalist tradition comfortable in the church and aware of the principles of the religion. It immediately introduces the fact that Unitarian Universalism is intricately connected to other religious traditions and that it is perfectly acceptable – encouraged, even – for individuals to constantly re-define their own beliefs. It also shows that Unitarian Universalism is not a creedal religion, as it does not require adherence to any set of doctrines. Rather, one's own experience and intellect should create religious sentiments. The welcoming address is followed by a lighting of a candle within a chalice. The chalice serves as the symbol for the Unitarian Universalist Association and when the candle is lit, congregants know they are in a space and time dedicated to something other than their busy lives outside of the church. “[The chalice] unites our members in worship and symbolizes the spirit of our work... The flaming chalice, like our faith, stands open to receive new truths that pass the tests of reason, justice, and compassion” (Hotchkiss 1994).

A central part of the worship service is the reading, a time during which the leader reads quotations related to that week's theme. At the first service I ever attended at The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden, Reverend Simms shared a quotation from a member of a Unitarian Universalist congregation in Virginia that had been published on an online message board. At the service entitled “Mark Twain,



Humanist Hero,” the reading was a passage from Eusebius, at “Adult Education Sunday,” it was from Adlai Stevenson, and at “The Five Tasks of Interim Ministry,” it was by a Unitarian Universalist minister. A lay member of a Unitarian Universalist church, a fourth century father of the Christian church, a twentieth century politician, an ordained minister: all have something to offer to the members of the Unitarian Universalist community in Meriden. All of them have written something that Unitarian Universalist individuals can and should muse over, examine from all angles, critique, qualify, accept, alter, and internalize. There was no notion that some of these readings were more valid than others or that some could be related to one’s religious identity while others could not. Rather, all were equally legitimate. The reading by Adlai Stevenson, “if we value the pursuit of knowledge, we must be free to follow wherever the search may lead us. The free mind is not a barking dog to be tethered on a ten foot chain,” speaks directly to the underlying focus of this chapter. This passage was a reminder to participants that they must be held responsible to learn more about the world around them. In short, to assert one’s Unitarian Universalist identity requires active thought and critical reflection.

For the service entitled “Days of Awe,” the readings, sermon, and teachings were centered on the idea of sin in Jewish, Catholic, and Unitarian Universalist traditions. This theme was chosen because the service was held on the morning of the day of the Kol Nidre service, the evening service that begins the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur. Reverend Simms, the leader of the service, was aware of the significance of the holiday and used the pulpit to examine the intricate connections between Unitarian Universalism and other religious traditions. Reverend Simms

incorporated a reading written by Mel Harkrader Pine, a member of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Loudoun, which is located in Leesburg, Virginia. Harkrader Pine serves as the moderator of an online discussion board dedicated to issues of worship within Unitarian Universalist congregations and Reverend Simms shared a passage he had recently posted to the board. Harkrader Pine was not in attendance at the service and it was unclear whether he was aware that his contribution was being read aloud and, ultimately, critiqued. The reading for the Days of Awe service was the following:

[Pine] writes: “I grew up Jewish and I’ve always been intrigued by the collective confession Jews make on Yom Kippur... In 2004, I did a Yom Kippur sermon that included a brief part of this ritual. I had people stand and read together, lightly tapping their chest with their fist for every sin. I included some from a Jewish prayer book and added some of my own. Here’s my list...[list of sins read in the Jewish tradition] and [my] additions: we have not listened compassionately, we have not cared for others, we have not cared for the earth, we have denied the worth of others, we have dehumanized others, we have devalued ourselves, we have failed to speak out, we have failed to take a stand.”

Harkrader Pine’s passage demonstrates both the Unitarian Universalist concept of experimenting with different religious practices to discover what fits with one’s own personal theology and the constant tension between taking and leaving that exists within Unitarian Universalist congregations. Harkrader Pine, the original author of the reading, found it perfectly acceptable to perform elements of a Jewish ritual within a Unitarian Universalist worship service. He was “intrigued” by this ritual and altered it to make it align both within his own Unitarian Universalist community and with his own beliefs. Although his church did not normally perform rituals surrounding sin, Harkrader Pine’s decision to do so was perfectly justified, as

it was a part of a broader Unitarian Universalist project of identity and ritual formation. He asserted his authority to introduce the ritual to his congregation in two ways. For one, he mentioned that he “grew up Jewish.” He therefore had knowledge of the ritual’s meaning and understood the significance of the collective confession within Jewish tradition. Secondly, the sheer fact that he was the leader of the service gave him the opportunity to do whatever he wanted with it. Even if members of the congregation were uncomfortable with the appropriation of a Jewish ritual, particularly one as significant as a collective confession of guilt, simply being the leader of a service gives one free rein to do what he or she would like. During a later part of the service, Reverend Simms used this reading as a springboard to expound her own notion of sin, which will be discussed in depth below.

In the following pages, I primarily highlight moments at The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden when service leaders critiqued other traditions or Unitarian Universalism itself. In this sense, I focus less on the *taking* and more on the *leaving*. I do not want to negate the fact, though, that I have experienced many moments over the course of my research that did involve true *acceptance* of others’ beliefs and rituals. During “Four Life Goals and Four Noble Truths,” for example, the service leader discussed how his own Unitarian Universalist identity has been heavily influenced by his study of the history and practices of Hinduism and Buddhism. Likewise, one congregant revealed in a conversation with me that one of her most positive memories as a member of The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden was the knowledge she obtained during the congregation’s Passover Seder the previous year. Additionally, recall from the previous chapter that Helen’s husband identifies

strongly with both Buddhism and Unitarian Universalism. In no way do I wish to give the impression that *all* services at The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden are marked by negative, judgmental rhetoric or that all Unitarian Universalists whom I have encountered exhibit these tendencies.

### **“Days of Awe”**

The crux of the Unitarian Universalist service is the sermon, as it allows the service leader an opportunity to flesh out the service’s theme and reflect on his or her own personal experiences and religious identity. It also creates an opportunity for members of the congregation to relate to the service leader, someone whom they have likely known for months or years, on an extremely personal level. As Wayne Arnason and Kathleen Rolenz write in Worship That Works: Theory and Practice for Unitarian Universalists:

As inheritors of the Calvinist Protestant emphasis on the spoken word as the central sacrament of worship, [Unitarian Universalists] have always accepted that preaching holds the key to how a worship service will be experienced. Nevertheless, [Unitarian Universalists] believe that the meanings to be found in a transformational worship experience stems from the care and creativity that shapes every element of the service, not just the sermon....The most satisfying worship experiences...[are] ones where the sermon wove together many of the images, texts, and stories we had experienced in other elements of the liturgy (2008: 87).

In this section, I explore how Reverend Simms’ sermon from “Days of Awe” encouraged the creation of a unique Unitarian Universalist identity by carefully discussing, appropriating, and abandoning aspects of other religious traditions, namely those of Judaism and Catholicism. As Arnason and Rolenz suggest, this

sermon was successful in part due to Reverend Simms' ability to relate it to other parts of the service structure, most noticeably the reading.

Reverend Simms carefully constructed her "Days of Awe" sermon in such a way that allowed her to define Unitarian Universalism in oppositional relation to other religious systems, while simultaneously clarifying and constructing her own belief system. To begin, she reminded congregants of two ritual practices surrounding sin in the Jewish and Catholic traditions. She first invoked memories of her days as a Catholic youth reciting the words "mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa" on a weekly basis and discussed how inspired she was when she found Unitarian Universalism, as it did not have such a ritual. She even made a joke about the weekly emphasis on sin in Catholic traditions, as opposed to the annual ritual in Judaism, as being the way "they get people to keep coming back to Church." She then shared a story she had heard on National Public Radio about the practice of Orthodox Jews swinging chickens over their heads before watching them get slaughtered so that "sins will be transferred to the bird and [Jews] will escape the divine punishment [they] deserve." There was an audible gasp in the room and look of disgust on most people's faces when she shared this story. Reverend Simms added that she "kind of woke up to that story and was a little disturbed, to say the least"; in telling such a story, Reverend Simms clearly constructed a situation in which the congregation was encouraged to pass negative judgment upon Orthodox Jewish ritual practice.

In order to understand the Unitarian Universalist understanding of sin, she first created a space that removed it from other religious traditions. Her underlying message seemed to be that the congregation should be grateful for this separation,

given the negative tone of the stories she told. For her, Unitarian Universalism was explicitly *not* Catholic, nor was it Jewish. Yet she admitted later that she thought it was “quite odd” that Unitarian Universalism is silent on questions surrounding atonement and sinfulness, since the religion came “from Jewish and Christian traditions.” As I later learned from my one-on-one conversations with members of The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden and as I discussed in the previous chapter, the majority of congregants at this particular church were raised Catholic. Drawing the Unitarian Universalist tradition both away from and near Judaism and Catholicism, Reverend Simms reminded members of the congregation of their own earlier experiences as members of other traditions and implicitly encouraged them to recall the critiques they may have had of those traditions. Many of the people listening to this sermon, therefore, could have experienced parallel sentiments towards the Catholic confession ritual. Likewise, regardless of a particular congregant’s relationship with Judaism, the particular story Reverend Simms told was strong enough to negatively influence one’s attitude towards the religion.

For the second portion of her sermon, Reverend Simms lauded Unitarian Universalists and their tendency towards just social action, thereby bringing into question the necessity of a collective confession of guilt for members of this religious tradition. She evoked William Ellery Channing’s notion of “self culture,” which refers to the idea that humans have the ability to improve both themselves and their surrounding social systems. According to Reverend Simms, Unitarian Universalists have been “reformers of social conditions that demonstrated their compassion and feelings of justice and equity towards their fellow human beings” and thus, “were

punished *by* sin rather than *for* it.” She understood Unitarian Universalists as those people who have the natural tendencies and abilities to improve the unethical and inhumane conditions on earth that have been created by other human beings. She then went back to the list of sins Pine had confessed on Yom Kippur and, after each of them, said something along the lines of “I can’t cop to that one,” “nope, not my style,” “definitely not,” and “I don’t think so.” The underlying assumption, therefore, was that while Jews and Christians have a need for a collective confession, Unitarian Universalists hold themselves to such a high standard that such a ritual would be unnecessary. In fact, Unitarian Universalists are those people working to improve conditions that others have created through sin.

By this point of the sermon, Reverend Simms had created a wide-open space for Unitarian Universalism defined in opposition to Jewish and Christian traditions. She had critiqued Jewish and Catholic rituals and beliefs revolving around sin, based both on their own substance as well as the Unitarian Universalist lack of need for them. It was only then that she could return to the possibility of creating a unique Unitarian Universalist ritual around sin and atonement. She did so by repeating the second Unitarian Universalist principle: “we covenant to affirm and promote justice, equity, and compassion in human relations” and relating the principle to the fact that humans “are interdependent beings. We are social animals. We need each other in a give and take way.” For Reverend Simms, the necessity for a collective confession was diminished due to the existence and significance of *covenants* within the Unitarian Universalist tradition. The connections between humans come not from a shared confession or experience of guilt, as they might in the Jewish or Christian

tradition. Rather, covenants allow individuals to create bonds with each other and feel comfortable sharing their innermost sentiments. Covenants can exist between any number of individuals and further the human dimension of Unitarian Universalism. Reverend Simms ended her service by saying that if anyone “would like to explore the creation of a ritual for atonement or forgiveness for yourself or this congregation, please let [her or the Board of Trustees] know.” After spending a half hour discussing and critiquing previously existing rituals, she created an opportunity for individuals to create one for themselves. In this sense, she both dismissed other traditions and encouraged the appropriation of certain elements of them. I wonder, though, if any congregants would have felt comfortable doing so after hearing her critical interpretation of Pine’s rituals. Additionally, given the Jewish foundation in the Covenant (Genesis 15-17), there is a certain irony in the way that she simultaneously dismissed a Jewish ritual of confession and suggested creating covenants instead.

In a way, the juxtaposition of Harkrader Pine’s original rhetoric with Reverend Simms’ subsequent unraveling of his collective confession ritual reveals the extent to which Unitarian Universalist congregational practices may seem, at least at times, strangely arbitrary. I would venture to guess that the Unitarian Universalist congregation that was listening to Harkrader Pine probably found something soothing in his ritual. Perhaps they felt that they were creating a more close-knit community as they confessed their sins as a collective unit or that they were tightening the bonds between themselves and Harkrader Pine himself. Perhaps they were gaining respect for an ancient Jewish tradition and contemplating how they could incorporate a similar confession ritual in their future practice. Perhaps they were acknowledging the



power of group confession rituals, despite their childhood experiences in other religions. The congregants at The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden, by comparison, likely felt no such connections with each other, Reverend Simms, other religions, or Unitarian Universalism itself. If anything, they probably felt more distanced from these things thanks to Reverend Simms' negative interpretation of the collective confession ritual. In a situation like this, the power a single individual has to shape another's experience of Unitarian Universalism becomes extremely apparent. In this specific example, both ordained ministers and lay leaders demonstrate that power.

As an outsider who considers myself Jewish, it should not come as a surprise that Reverend Simms' sermon caused me a great deal of discomfort. I had grown up with the stereotype of Unitarian Universalism as being warm and welcoming towards all people, regardless of axes of social difference (including religious affiliations), and "Days of Awe" marked my first entrance into the world of Unitarian Universalist services. When I had looked online a few days earlier and discovered the service's theme, I was actually quite excited. Experiencing Yom Kippur, a holiday for which I had attended services at my synagogue for the previous 20 years, from another religion's perspective seemed like a uniquely positive opportunity. In reality, I was horrified as I listened to Reverend Simms, as I heard broad generalizations and bloody stories. As hard as I tried, I could not recognize any part of my own religious upbringing in what she was saying. Furthermore, I found her judgmental rhetoric, specifically her line about Jews escaping the "divine punishment they deserve," to be in complete contradiction with the Unitarian Universalist principle of honoring "the

inherent worth and dignity of all people.” After that service, there was a strong part of me that wanted to abandon my ethnographic research in this particular church. If this was my first experience at a Unitarian Universalist worship service, I could hardly imagine what the following months might look like. I chose to continue, though, and over time, as I spoke to other members, I realized that many of them had shared my discomfort as they listened to the “Days of Awe” sermon—even those who had not been raised Jewish. Such a realization allowed me to better understand the individualistic nature of this religion and the wide range of beliefs and affiliations that individual members may have. The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden (or any Unitarian Universalist church, for that matter) cannot be defined by the beliefs of any one minister or congregant, no less than any other religious institution can be. It was unfortunate, though, that my introduction to the religion was marred by this judgmental tone, particularly on a day as significant to my Jewish identity as Yom Kippur.

### **“Adult Education Sunday” and “The U.U. Seven Principles”**

In the previous section, I explored a service during which Reverend Simms openly critiqued Jewish and Catholic traditions and, in doing so, defined Unitarian Universalism in oppositional relation to those religious groups. I have also been present at a number of Sunday morning worship services at The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden during which lay leaders have taken the opportunity to stress the importance of undergoing such a critical process with respect to the Unitarian Universalist tradition itself. This has been done in a number of different

ways, ranging from brief anecdotes and call-and-response quizzes to longer sermons, and have revolved around the principles and practices of the Unitarian Universalist Association and individual Unitarian Universalists.

At a service held in November 2009 entitled “Adult Education Sunday,” three lay leaders of The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden critiqued Unitarian Universalism from within and, in doing so, encouraged congregants to focus their attention on making themselves “better” Unitarian Universalists. “Adult Education Sunday” was led by the leaders of the Meriden Adult Education team in response to what it saw as a growing need within the church. In the team’s eyes, the fact that people could be members of Unitarian Universalist churches and identify as Unitarian Universalists without ever being introduced to the religion’s history and principles or being strongly encouraged to define their own spirituality revealed a gap that needed desperately to be filled. In this sermon, three male leaders of the team addressed this issue through three “sermonettes,” with the overall goal of familiarizing the congregation with their idea of developing a thorough adult education curriculum. I focus on the first two sermonettes in this section, as the third spoke primarily about the logistics and timeline of the program.

Alan, a former Anglican priest who joined Unitarian Universalism in 2008, was the first to speak. He opened with a story from his initial encounter with a Unitarian Universalist church:

At my first day of attending the Unitarian Universalist Society of Hamden, I drove up to the parking lot. As I was driving up to the parking lot, I noticed that only about 20 cars were there and the rest of parking lot was empty. Granted, it was during the summer time, so of course there were not a lot of cars, but seeing that it was my first time, I had no clue. As I was making my entrance, I asked the greeter, ‘why

is [sic] there only 21 cars there?’ – yes, I counted 21 cars – and I was greeted with an unexpected answer. The answer was that Unitarian Universalism is the only denomination whereby God trusts us to take the summer off.

As Alan got to the punch line of his story, the congregation erupted into laughter. Originally, I heard a few, far ranging potential interpretations of Alan’s story: that being a Unitarian Universalist is easy? That one can come and go as they please and still “count” as a Unitarian Universalist? That, according to God, members of other religions are not as trusted to perform, honor, or adhere to their religious identities from afar as those of Unitarian Universalism?

As I heard more of his sermonette, however, I came to a different interpretation. For Alan, being a Unitarian Universalist has less to do with the number of times one enters a particular church building and more to do with the quality of one’s attendance when one is there. To be a Unitarian Universalist is to utilize a church’s resources, including its other members, in cultivating one’s own personal theology and spirituality. Specifically, Alan talked about being impressed by the Hamden congregation’s programs in “social justice and gender identification,” as well as “book discussions and a course called ‘Build Your Own Theology.’” Through his sermon, he aimed to call attention to the fact that unlike the congregants in Hamden, congregants of The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden had “taken shortcuts” while building their own Unitarian Universalist identities: “at times we have failed...to build our spiritual relationships.” Through his sermon, Alan critiqued this particular Unitarian Universalist church by comparing it to another. His suggestion was that, while developing their programming, The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden needed to look outwards to another Unitarian Universalist church.

Over time, such efforts would result in deeper, stronger Unitarian Universalist identities. Interestingly, Alan briefly mentioned during his sermonette that one of the aspects of Unitarian Universalism he most respected, particularly in contrast with his Anglican past, was the extent to which Unitarian Universalists were encouraged to learn from other religious traditions. In the past, if someone “did not share [his] beliefs, [he] would have nothing to do with that person.” Through Unitarian Universalism, in contrast, he was able to discuss his faith with “individuals who were atheists, humanists, who were Christians, who were Jews.” Just as Reverend Simms had distanced Unitarian Universalism from other religions in her sermon, Alan distanced his past Anglican self from his current Unitarian Universalist identity during his.

Matthew, the second leader to give his sermonette, included a brief call-and-response survey during his talk. He read a yes or no question aloud and asked members of the congregation to raise their hand if their answer to the question was yes. He introduced the survey as “painless” and declared that “its purpose is to illustrate, perhaps, why we need an adult religious education program here.” Members of the congregation looked around and chuckled nervously as he began to read: “How many of you were born into the U.U. religion?” To this question, a few people scattered around the room raised their hand. Matthew continued: “out in front of this building is a decorative willow tree dedicated in memory to Hosea Ballou – would you raise your hands if you know who he was or what he contributed?” At this, a more significant number of people raised their hands, to which Matthew commented “Now that’s a good group!” As Matthew progressed, fewer and fewer

people were able to raise their hands and one person even exclaimed in response to a particularly difficult question, “you made that up!” Matthew asked:

Please raise your hands if you know how King Sigismund of Transylvania relates to U.U. and what impact he had on its development? How many people have read the Declaration of Turda? How many people know who Michael Servetus was? How many people are aware of the proceedings of the Council of Nicaea and how it affected Universalism? How many of us are familiar with Ralph Waldo Emerson’s Harvard Divinity School address and how it changed Unitarian thought?

Ostensibly, Matthew did not perform this survey to embarrass his fellow members of the congregation. On the contrary, he performed it to gather information about the knowledge level of his fellow congregants and, in doing so, found the exercise extremely enlightening. As he mused afterwards, “the point of this is very simple. We come together as a religious institution; we share common practice, worship, and community. But how many of us understand what happened to bring us to this point?” According to Matthew, it is crucial for members of The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden to know the history of Unitarian Universalism and the fact that most do not demonstrates a real failure on the part of the church. Matthew’s brief survey revealed what he had already suspected to be true: a dearth of knowledge. Like Alan, Matthew believes that all Unitarian Universalists should work to understand their own theological and spiritual leanings. Unlike Alan, however, Matthew introduced a common historical foundation to this process: “we should offer opportunities for each person to develop a unique spiritual model, which will provide an anchor point for their life. We should offer a chance to grow, to flourish, and to fulfill our needs and aspirations. But before that can happen, there’s a *need for*

*knowledge.*” Matthew proved his point through a critique of both the structure and the members of The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden.

In the previous chapter, I discussed that the majority of current Unitarian Universalists were not born and raised in the Unitarian Universalist tradition. For Matthew, that fact alone constitutes one of the most pressing reasons as to why The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden needs to improve its educational programs. Although he was only a member of the Roman Catholic Church for 13 years, “much of what [he] was taught there still remains. They did a good job...in constructing [him].” He juxtaposed this with the state of Unitarian Universalist education: “shouldn’t we provide the same opportunity for our members? Shouldn’t our memberships be given the knowledge and understanding required to solidify the practice of their faith? I believe that unless we do this, we will see a continual turnover of members – people who enter our congregation in search and leave, not finding them.”<sup>18</sup> Like Reverend Simms, Matthew compared Unitarian Universalism to the Roman Catholic Church – only, in this case, the Church came out ahead. In order for The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden to succeed, they need to improve their religious education program, as apparent through comparisons between this church and others.

About a year after “Adult Education Sunday,” Alan and Matthew, accompanied this time by Jeffrey, presented a service entitled “The U.U. Seven Principles.” During this service, like in “Adult Education Sunday,” the men used

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<sup>18</sup> Recall from the previous chapter that Matthew was the same person who was disappointed with his daughter’s religious education at The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden.

three sermonettes to explore the seven principles of Unitarian Universalism. Also like in “Adult Education Sunday,” this service critiqued the members and structure of The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden. Both the subject matter and the arguments of the sermonettes connected this particular church and its congregants to the broader denominational structure of the religion, the Unitarian Universalist Association.

Matthew was the first to present his sermonette. He spoke about the process of developing the Adult Religious Education curriculum and his underlying dissatisfaction with the fact that many Unitarian Universalists have not engaged critically or analytically with the seven principles.<sup>19</sup> For example, he remarked that when the seven principles are taught to children in the church’s religious school program, the most that is said about them is “gee, that’s nice.” The principles are “mentioned, but not necessarily studied or analyzed.” Matthew was also disheartened by the fact that when he began the process of developing an Adult Religious Education curriculum, other members of the congregation thought his interest stemmed from a desire to attack the principles; to this, Matthew countered that desires came from his thinking of himself as “lazy,” and having “missed the point” of being a Unitarian Universalist. Matthew explained that as he researched the background and significance of the seven principles, he felt his ignorance exposed and the principles’ hidden meanings, powers and depth clarified and conveyed. The principles set an

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<sup>19</sup> As a reminder, the 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; and respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.



extremely high bar for Unitarian Universalists. For example, the first principle, which speaks to the “inherent worth and dignity of *all* persons” commands one to respect those who “disagree with [him], dislike [him], who [he’s] never met, who would take [his] life.” Unlike other religions, he noted, Unitarian Universalism does not provide “one easy way, guru, or messiah” to follow. Rather, these principles are vague, prescribing a way of life and of viewing the world as opposed to specific action. Therefore, “people who came from mainstream religions may still find them difficult.”

Next to speak was Alan. Like Matthew, he focused less on the specifics of the principles and more on the idea of them. As should not be surprising by this point, Alan began with a comparison between the Unitarian Universalist tradition and other religions. For “over forty years,” he said, “[he] looked to the Bible” for inspiration and insight. Upon reading the principles of Unitarian Universalism, though, he immediately found what he had been looking for. All that he appreciated in the Bible “was included in the principles.” He then discussed how he often finds it difficult for Unitarian Universalists “to agree with each other,” as it is unclear how Unitarian Universalists individuals and congregations are connected. He brought up a series of common questions: is Unitarian Universalism a single entity or association of independent congregations? What is it that makes an individual a Unitarian Universalist? What do Unitarian Universalists believe? To him, the principles served as the answer to these questions. For Alan, the principles connect Unitarian Universalist individuals and congregations throughout time and space, as they are both “timeless” and “not specific.” He also traced the history of the development of

the principles and how they have been expanded to include all peoples, particularly regardless of gender. For him, love, as expressed through the principles, unites all people.

Finally, Jeffrey, a member of The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden for over twenty-five years, spoke. He was critical of many of his fellow Unitarian Universalists, saying that when asked, most do not have an answer to the question of what Unitarian Universalism stands for. When he asked questions, he got “perplexing answers.” Instead of answering him, Unitarian Universalists would engage in “intellectual debate” and “were fuzzy about the specifics of their beliefs and principles.” To combat this widespread lack of knowledge both about oneself and one’s religion, Jeffrey has created a “handy-dandy system” he uses whenever asked about his Unitarian Universalism. He passes out business cards that state the seven principles so that he never appears “fuzzy” about the specifics of his own belief system. He appreciates the principles because they are not “mystical or spiritual,” but rather, are grounded in the human and serve as “talking points that outsiders can understand.” He considers the principles the “backbone of the denomination” and for an individual to be an “evangelical Unitarian Universalist,” one must learn the principles. With time and with enough discussion, he hopes that members of The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden will come to better understand the seven principles.

While leading “Adult Education Sunday” and “The U.U. Seven Principles,” Alan, Matthew, and Jeffrey both critiqued The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden and worked to foster a better understanding of Unitarian Universalism itself.

They consistently compared the practices of the church in Meriden to those of other Unitarian Universalist churches and of other religious traditions. Woven throughout their critique was an explicit emphasis on the importance of Unitarian Universalist identity formation. According to the Adult Religious Education team, to be a “good” Unitarian Universalist, particularly as a member of the church in Meriden, is to consistently reflect on the history and principles of the religion. One should not consider oneself a Unitarian Universalist without having a strong intellectual foundation, which can be gained both by attending services and engaging in congregational programs.

At the beginning of this thesis, I introduced the reader to the differences between James’ individualistic and Durkheim’s socially oriented conceptions of religion (and human culture more generally). One could consider Unitarian Universalism to be a particularly individualistic religion – just think, for a moment, of the first principle: “the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” In his “The Self in Contemporary Liberal Religion: A Constructive Critique,” Paul Rasor makes this argument in his discussion of freedom, reason and tolerance as the three characteristics of Unitarian Universalism: “freedom implied no bondage to creeds or confessions; reason meant no blind reliance on authority or tradition; and tolerance implied no insistence on uniformity in doctrine, worship, or polity” (Rasor 1999). Recall, too, that in U.U. Meriden’s welcoming address, the service leader stated: “[w]e believe that personal experience, conscience and reason should be the final arbiters in matters of faith, rather than books, persons, or institutions.” From the earliest days of Unitarianism and Universalism in the United States, these

individualistic tenets have been held near to the hearts of followers. In this chapter, I have tried to also demonstrate the importance of wider social and denominational factors in the process of individual identity formation. While it is important to reflect personally upon one's own self, it is also important (at least for Matthew, Alan and Jeffrey) to understand common Unitarian Universalist history and shared philosophical principles.

It is also important to recognize here the relationship that exists between individual and community identity formation. I have been focused throughout this thesis on the different ways that a particular individual becomes Unitarian Universalist. As a part of that project, I introduced this chapter to better convey how an individual's conversion to Unitarian Universalism takes place within the confines of a local congregation. I argued that attending Sunday morning worship services allowed the formation of a more full Unitarian Universalist identity for particular individuals within the church. It should have become clear over the last several pages, however, that this individual identity formation is closely intertwined with a *community identity* formation. Through these services, one can discern a particular tone of the congregation and get a better sense of its changing theological and social alignments. Just as an individual goes through a process of becoming, so too does a congregation.

### **Future Movement**

In an earlier section, I recalled my discomfort while listening to Reverend Simms' "Days of Awe" sermon and noted that over time I came to realize that others

in the church had shared my concerns. In recent years, there has been a broad internal critique of the way Unitarian Universalists appropriate aspects of other religious traditions and define their own practices and beliefs in opposition to other religious groups. In 2001, for example, a workshop entitled “Cultural Appropriation: Reckless Borrowing or Appropriate Cultural Sharing” was held at the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly meeting. Reverend Danielle Di Bona, Vice President of the Diverse Revolutionary Unitarian Universalist Multicultural Ministries and member of the Wampanoag tribe, spoke at the workshop, saying that “[Native American] cultural symbols and practices form the community and are formed by the community, over millennia... When Unitarian Universalists pick and choose from these things, it trivializes their spiritual practices....If it’s not in context...if the user is not part of our struggle, then it is presumptuous” (Ernest 2001). Another speaker pointed out that “[Unitarian Universalists] sort of pick and choose from among wildly unrelated pieces of Buddhism: a little from Tibetan, a little from Chinese, a little from here, a little from there” (Ernest 2001). They encouraged Unitarian Universalist individuals to honor and respect different practices both by educating themselves about their history and context and by forming more intimate relationships with different communities (Unitarian Universalist Association 2007). According to these individuals, Unitarian Universalists should not be able to simply *take and leave* as they choose, as it negates the long history and traditions undergirding other peoples’ practices.

Matthew expressed an understanding of these concerns towards the end of his “Adult Education Sunday” sermon. He said:

I've become very disturbed when I hear someone, including myself, describe our religion in terms of things we don't believe in. It sets off alarm bells and it cries out negativism. Wouldn't it be so much better if when we're questioned, we could respond with a series of elements that describe what we DID believe in? Wouldn't it be better when asked about my religion, or faith, I'm able to give a personal view, point by point, in a positive and constructive way? Wouldn't it be more productive if I could put forth a picture of my belief system without having to attack someone else's? That's what we do quite often. Well, I finally think I can. So how did that happen? Simply – I educated myself with a great deal of immensely important help from some others who cared enough to guide me.... I have the luxury at my point in time to research, to read, to evaluate, to personalize what I read. I have the capacity to read the words of others and reconcile them with my beliefs and my personal value systems. I've gained the courage to change my beliefs as they prove inadequate. I've been able to accept and integrate that what I find to be true. And I have the will to discard the past when it proves no longer useful. And I'm still learning... To put it simply, this church is not the objective. It's a tool. Its task of greatest importance is to serve the needs of its members, emotional and spiritual, to help you define your personal theology and spiritual development.

To consider oneself a Unitarian Universalist and to belong to a Unitarian Universalist congregation is deeply complicated, as Matthew articulated in his sermon. The fact of the matter is that it is a religion entangled with elements of other religious and secular traditions, a religion that encourages its members to create a unique spiritual identity for themselves by, at least in part, learning about and reflecting upon multiple external sources. There seems to be no way, at least at this point in time, to disentangle Unitarian Universalism from the other traditions to which it related. Therefore, I have suggested that at least currently, Sunday morning worship services at The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden are marked by a conscious and simultaneous borrowing and discarding of other religious traditions, as well as a critically reflexive turn towards Unitarian Universalism itself.

I have also come to understand, however, that such practices do not need to be an inherent part of Unitarian Universalism. I hear in Matthew's sermon, as well as more anecdotal conversations and formal interviews, a deeply held desire to change these tendencies. This may reflect a difference between individuals who have been a part of the religion for longer versus those who have joined recently. Caitlin, who joined Unitarian Universalism about a year ago, adamantly denied that her current religious identity is created by looking at other religions, while Julie, who has been a member for almost twenty years, constantly compared Unitarian Universalism to Catholicism. With time, I believe that the current Unitarian Universalist mode of determining one's religious identity can perhaps be more focused on reflecting upon oneself and one's community, rather than critiquing and appropriating difference. I offer no program towards this end, but can only hope that Unitarian Universalists recognize this potential for change. This may involve significant action, for example, editing of the six sources from which Unitarian Universalists are supposed to draw.<sup>20</sup>

In the following chapter, I examine another component of The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden, namely, the community's recent move into a new

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<sup>20</sup> As a reminder, these are: direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life; words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love; wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life; Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves; humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit; and spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

church building. At first glance, one may see no direct linkages between personal identity formation and a change in address. However, I suggest that the two issues both deal with Unitarian Universalist tendencies of constant comparison, between old/new and us/them, as well as the process of becoming. Whereas previously I have discussed the process of becoming Unitarian Universalist, in the following chapter, I discuss the process of becoming *sacred*.



### 3. Sacred Space(s)

*I envision the Unitarian Universalist church as a sanctuary in the broadest sense, a place to experience healing from the 'dis-ease,' the lack of ease, that characterizes modern life. The church and its living tradition provide a creative alternative to the powers and principalities, a holy ground where people can disarm and be truly human. I think that the first step in creating such a space is to listen actively to one another and to God (Burke 1990).*

*A church is people. It is not a body of belief, a set of principles, or an impressive structure of stone, wood, and glass. A church has roots in the past, no longer how recently the congregation was organized. A church represents a long procession of people willing to work with others toward shared goals, worship with others of similar belief, and hold in honor the wise and courageous people who have gone before them (Bowering 1990).*

It was a dark and cold October morning. Fall break was to begin in a few hours and all I could think about was how excited I was to spend a few days relaxing with friends in a cozy New Hampshire cabin. I rolled over in bed, hit my alarm's snooze button, and wished I could leave campus immediately: the combination of Friday evening traffic, predictions of torrential downpours, and the impending four-plus hour drive worried me. I couldn't begin my journey yet, though. I had an interview scheduled with Matthew, an elderly member of The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden.

An hour later, I found myself in the parlor of the Church, the building deserted except for the two of us. Perhaps I should have been concerned that there was no one else around, but Matthew was warm and welcoming. Within minutes, I was impressed by his knowledge, by how quickly terms such as "Council of Nicaea" and "Michael Servetus" rolled off his tongue. Other Unitarian Universalists who had spoken with me had not made these historical references, and I had begun to question

whether they were common knowledge, particularly after attending the services described and analyzed in the previous chapter (especially those led by Matthew himself). Encouraged by Matthew's confidence, I shifted around, getting comfortable in my chair, settling in for what I could tell would be a lengthy interview. I would not be disappointed. Matthew, more than any of the other Unitarian Universalists with whom I have come in contact, has lived a life of constant self-reflection, spiritual searching, and thirsting for knowledge. He embodies the principles of Unitarian Universalism: he throws himself into community activities, mentors others on their own faith journeys, and shares his most personal thoughts during sermons at Sunday morning services.

At one point during our conversation, Matthew looked around the room lovingly, like a parent to an adored child, and remarked "I was responsible for the building of this structure." Perhaps it was the fact that this was the first interview I had performed at the church itself. Perhaps it was my anxious mood, searching for a moment of relaxation during what had been a busy week of midterms. Perhaps it was his knowledgeable nature, my respect for the way he carried himself. Probably it was my enrollment in a course that semester that touched heavily upon the relationship between space, place, and human societies. I will never know exactly why but at that moment, I finally began to see what for months I had been overlooking. For the previous year, I had dutifully taken notes when others discussed the community's recent move into a new church building but had not stopped to think of it as more significant than a simple change in address. As Matthew spoke, a light bulb went off in my mind. I realized that the relocation had created a deep rift in the identity of the

community and that it has had deep implications in their sense of place, of being grounded.

After my conversation with Matthew, I reflected on my yearlong fieldwork and thought about the significance of space and place to the members of this community. My interview notes reminded me that they believe that one of the strongest benefits of their religious or spiritual identity is its ability to transcend the boundaries of the particular building that houses their church. More specifically, they state that one thing they appreciate about Unitarian Universalism (particularly when juxtaposed with other religions) is that religious services can be held anywhere, that any space can be considered “sacred.” As I dug deeper, though, I noticed an underlying contradiction in this rhetoric. On the one hand, members of The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden value the concept of being able to create sacred space anywhere and everywhere, particularly in nature. On the other hand, they also often restrict this range of sacrality; in fact, a hotly contested issue has recently arisen in the community, revolving around the question of whether or not their new building can and/or should be considered sacred. In this chapter, I call upon this debate as a case study through which to unpack Unitarian Universalist conceptions of sacred space. In doing so, I argue that having a particular, localized sacred space may be much more significant for members of The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden than they often wish to admit and, furthermore, may be a crucial part of their personal spiritualities. I ultimately link the transformation of space to that of individuals; just as people “become Unitarian Universalist” through active reflection, discussion, and ritualization, so too can space.

## Theorizations of Sacred Space

In the introductory chapter of American Sacred Space, David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal summarize two opposing definitions of the term “sacred” in dominant academic discourse. The first line of thought, called “substantialism,” defines the sacred “as uncanny, awesome, or powerful manifestation of reality, full of ultimate significance” (Chidester and Linenthal 1995: 5). The second, by comparison, is called “situationalism,” and “locate[s] the sacred at the nexus of human practices and social projects....the sacred is nothing more nor less than a notional supplement to the ongoing cultural work of sacralizing space, time, persons, and social relations” (Chidester and Linenthal 1995: 5-6). Linenthal and Chidester argue that the divergence between substantialists and situationalists is most clearly seen in the study of *sacred space*. Using Mircea Eliade as a prime example of substantialism and Jonathan Z. Smith as a classic situationalist, they write:

Mircea Eliade held that the sacred irrupted, manifested, or appeared in certain places, causing them to become powerful centers of meaningful worlds. On the contrary, Jonathan Z. Smith has shown how place is sacralized as the result of the cultural labor of ritual, in specific historical situations, involving the hard work of attention, memory, design construction, and control of place. Not merely an opposition between “insider” and “outsider” perspectives, this clash between substantial and situational approaches to definition and analysis represents a contrast between what might be called the poetics and the politics of sacred space (Chidester and Linenthal 1995: 6).

In the following section, I unravel the different approaches to the understanding of sacred space, using Eliade and Smith as two focal points. I understand Eliade’s notion of sacred space as requiring some sort of divine intervention, while Smith’s is produced entirely by means of the social.

Mircea Eliade, a leading theorist of religion and religious experience at The University of Chicago until his death in 1986, argues that for religious individuals, all space is split into two oppositional categories: sacred (“the only *real* and *real-ly* existing space” [Eliade 1987: 20]) and profane (“all other space, the formless expanse surrounding it” [Eliade 1987: 20]). Sacred space is constituted through what Eliade terms a “hierophany,” or “an irruption of the sacred that results in detaching a territory from the surrounding cosmic milieu and making it qualitatively different” (Eliade 1987: 26). Hierophanies may be “elementary,” occurring in “a stone or a tree,” or “supreme,” like the incarnation of God in the person of Christ, but “in each case we are confronted by the same mysterious act – the manifestation of something of a *wholly different order*, a reality that does not belong to our world, in objects that are an integral part of our natural ‘profane’ world” (Eliade 1987: 11, italics added). Particular stones and trees are not worshipped as stones and trees, but rather because “they show something that is no longer stone or tree but the sacred” (Eliade 1987: 12). While nothing has visibly changed in these objects, they have become imbued with power, meaning, and being by virtue of their incarnating something that transcends them. As such, hierophanies constitute a center of the world, an *axis mundi* that connects heaven and earth. In modern societies, for example, church buildings are sacred places: “properly speaking, the temple constitutes an opening in the upward direction and ensures communication with the world of the gods” (Eliade 1987: 27). For Eliade, places of worship allow humans to have contact with supernatural beings. In his framework, churches are considered sacred, streets are seen as profane, and the threshold between a street and a church represents a passage

from the profane to the sacred (Eliade 1987: 25).

Whereas Eliade sees sacred space as the product of “a wholly different order,” Jonathan Z. Smith sees it as the product of the ordinary social order. In relocating sacrality to the social, Smith follows an explicitly Durkheimian line of analysis. According to Smith, Durkheim argues that “it is not their ‘natural’ composition that determines which items will be held as private and which held as sacred or communal. The same sort of ‘thing’ can be classified in either category” (Smith 2004, 104). In other words, nothing is inherently sacred; rather, people’s gestures, languages, and stories *make* particular objects, places, and activities sacred.<sup>21</sup> This can be understood as a directional shift from Eliade’s conception of sacred space; for Eliade, sacredness comes linearly, from above, whereas for Smith, sacredness comes laterally, from other human beings. Smith writes that “‘sacred’ is a product of human agency, this or that is made or designated ‘sacred.’ ‘Sacred’ is not the human response to a transcendental act of self-display” (2004: 111). With this, Smith passionately critiques Eliade’s view that the sacred should be understood as a manifestation of the divine. Instead, Smith offers the perspective that sacred space is that which *humans* mark as distinct:

The ordinary (which remains, to the observer’s eye, wholly ordinary) becomes significant, becomes sacred simply by *being there*. It becomes sacred by having our attention directed to it in a special way....That is, there is nothing that is inherently sacred or profane. There are not substantive categories, but rather situational or relational categories, mobile boundaries which shift according to the map being employed. There is nothing that is sacred in itself, only things sacred

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<sup>21</sup> Eliade would agree that nothing is inherently sacred – rocks and stones, for example, are not sacred *as* rocks and stones. The point of interest here is *how* something is made sacred: for Eliade, it is divine manifestation, whereas for Smith, it is social experiences.

in relation (Smith 1988: 55).

As the “ordinary” product of shifting social relations, sacredness for Smith is a fluid label that is applied at different times to different spaces or things. Through various acts of ritualization, humans transform ordinary objects or spaces from simply existing to being imbued with meaning.

To summarize, neither Eliade nor Smith submits that any space can be considered inherently sacred. Both understood that a space is transformed to *become* sacred. The crucial difference between these two scholars is *how* such a transformation occurs. According to Eliade, a space becomes sacred through the manifestation of the divine or superhuman within it. Following this line of thought, a space could become sacred solely for one individual. For Smith, on the other hand, sacred space is necessarily relational because it is only constituted as such through the irreducibly social act of ritualization. Human beings create sacred space together as they direct their energies onto a particular space. For Smith, in contrast to Eliade, sacred space necessarily requires a group of individuals working together.

### **Constructing Sacredness**

The members of The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden assert that sacred space is mutable and that their religious identities are not constricted to the building in which the Church is located. In this sense, Unitarian Universalist conceptions of sacred space could be understood as a reflection of Smith’s assertion that sacred space is fluid, relational, and created by human rituals. Specifically, a space is made sacred when the community holds a Unitarian Universalist service in it

or if it allows the performance of a Unitarian Universalist identity. When asked about her relationship to the church building, Julie responded that she doesn't "think we attach ourselves to that kind of concrete tradition." In her eyes, Unitarian Universalists are not all that connected to particular places. Therefore, they could hold services in places deemed unthinkable, completely profane, to other religions: "we could operate in the middle of Dunkin Donuts.... it's like, do it wherever you are." Stuart echoed these sentiments. To him, sacredness is "everywhere" and "experiential...I can go to the mall. Watching people, understanding the social dynamics of society...when I read a good book, in the Constitution." In my conversation with Sheryl, she shared a time when she felt a strong attachment to her Unitarian Universalist identity in the midst of the ordinary world: when she helped recycle used cups at a local Starbucks. These three individuals expressed that their Unitarian Universalist identities know no boundaries. Furthermore, some Unitarian Universalists specified that they feel *most* spiritual not within the confines of a physical church but in nature. Julie and Helen have extremely positive memories of Unitarian Universalist services that have occurred in untraditional locations, such as cliff dwellings and on a canoe trip. For the congregants of The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden, sacred space can be found anywhere. Sacredness is not inherent to a geographical location, but is moved and actively created.

This particular understanding of sacred space is not unique to the Meriden Unitarian Universalist community but rather part of a broader denominational understanding of it. While individual congregants may agree with the teachings of the Unitarian Universalist Association to varying degrees, the U.U.A. plays a large role in



shaping the resources available for local churches and thus, its values are reproduced, taught, and critiqued on a daily basis. For those reasons, I briefly share the ways the Unitarian Universalist Association promotes certain ideas about sacred space, hoping to expand further on exactly *how* sacred space can be created.

One of the Unitarian Universalist Association's main tasks is to provide religious education curricula for leaders and members of local congregations. One of its workshops, entitled "Sing In My Heart: Celebrations and Rituals," revolves around the creation of congregational ritual. The Association has provided a handout for this workshop with the following text:

As you create a sacred space or centering place for a ritual or celebration, you might like to consider these questions: What's the theme of your celebration? What mood do you want to evoke? Does a color speak to the feeling of the celebration? How about texture: smooth, rough, or ... ? Will you use any altar or centering table? What objects, such as cloths, paintings, photographs, rocks, branches, flowers, or candles, might enhance the ritual's theme? (Hamilton-Holway 2010)

The U.U.A has also put together directions to teach lay leaders how to successfully lead workshops. In one, the Unitarian Universalist Association encourages separating space as sacred through "an opening activity...such as a chalice lighting and saying a few words of welcome. Such an opening marks the conference as 'sacred space,' a special space, different from our daily lives, which every participant must care for and nurture" (Unitarian Universalist Association 2010a). These two handouts, which are intended to be shared with members of Unitarian Universalist churches, clearly demonstrate that the Unitarian Universalist Association views sacred space as flexible and that it can be constructed at one's will. Creating sacred space can be done in a number of ways. For example, sacred space can be produced through the inclusion of

particular objects, colors or textures in a space. Sacred space can also be formed through the lighting of a candle or speaking of a few key words at the beginning of a service. To make a space sacred requires the establishment of a particular *atmosphere* within a space. The specifics of what a space requires to be considered sacred depends on the particularities of that event, such as the audience or theme.

The two resources quoted above deal primarily with the construction of sacred space for congregational activities or worship. The U.U.A has also provided materials for creating sacred spaces on an individual level. In “Taking It Home,” a workshop meant to improve congregants’ spirituality outside of a particular church building, Erik Walker Wikstrom suggests “creat[ing] a special place for your practice. If you’re lucky enough to have a free room that you can devote to prayer, meditation, painting, or whatever it is you’re doing, great. But you can also just free up a corner of a room” (2010). In this workshop, the Unitarian Universalist Association promotes the idea of Unitarian Universalist individuals creating their own sacred space wherever possible. This can be done simply with a combination of the correct intentions and a small amount of energy. Taken together, these multiple resources provided by the Unitarian Universalist Association provide a clearer picture of the many ways that sacred space can be created. Objects, colors, textures, words, intentions: all can create sacred space. The notion that sacred space can be actively created anywhere is therefore not unique to the Meriden Unitarian Universalist community but part of a broader denominational understanding of it.

In Worship That Works, Wayne Arnason and Kathleen Rolenz, both Unitarian Universalist ministers, remind the reader that the bylaws of the Unitarian Universalist

Association declare “holding regular religious services” as one of the “three *sine qua non* requirements a group must satisfy to demonstrate that they are indeed a congregation” (2008: 9).<sup>22</sup> However, according to the Unitarian Universalist Association, “it doesn’t matter where you worship or whether others might recognize the space you use as sacred. It doesn’t matter what day or time you gather or whether the order of your worship has any elements rooted in Unitarian Universalist practices” (Arnason and Rolenz 2008: 9). What matters is “not the type of building; during our travels, we attended worship services in converted Safeway stores, church basements, and elementary schools” (Arnason and Rolenz 2008: 9). Instead, “the key issue is how the space is *transformed into sacred space when it is used for worship*. That change is emblematic of the transformative potential of the service that is about to happen and the tradition that it represents” (Arnason and Rolenz 2008: 9, italics added). In Worship That Works, Arnason and Rolenz assert the flexibility of Unitarian Universalist sacred space and the ability of Unitarian Universalists to construct sacred space at will. For them, what makes a space sacred is simply its ability to hold a Unitarian Universalist service. The handouts provided with the Unitarian Universalist Association, combined with Arnason and Rolenz’s analysis, clearly invoke Smith’s notion that sacredness is created laterally – through human beings directing their energy onto a particular space.

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<sup>22</sup> The other two are keeping membership records and holding an annual business meeting.

## **A Church History**

When I met with Reverend Simms, she graciously offered me the opportunity to read the various pieces of writing that she had recently spent a great deal of time collecting regarding the history of The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden. I gratefully accepted the offer; in my eyes, her gesture symbolized her support of my project and her acknowledgment of my desires to do the church and its congregants justice while writing my ethnography. In the following section, I trace the history of the church, drawing upon the several resources she provided me. Given the topic of my research, I approach this material looking for moments that showcase the congregation's relationship with its church building. Such a task has proven not to be difficult; in the histories themselves, this relationship is stressed, only furthering my suspicion that being grounded in a particular sacred space is more important than many Unitarian Universalists consciously admit.

In 1821, a man known today simply as Mr. Brooks preached the first Universalist sermon in Meriden. This service was held at the home of Noah Pomeroy, one of the earliest adherents to Universalist doctrines in the area, and there were approximately twenty to thirty people in attendance. Not enough enthusiasm was generated to continue these services on a regular basis, though, and it was not until 1824 that a second Universalist sermon was preached at the Pomeroy residence. This time, the service was led by Rev. Dodge, a former Baptist minister. It took six more years before another Universalist meeting was held. This service, held in 1830, was located at a tavern on the corner of East Main and Broad streets and, like the earlier services, generated an audience of about twenty people, mostly men. This service was

preached by Rev. John Boyden; he returned to Meriden a few times in 1833 to preach to the community. In 1835, the growing community made its first (unsuccessful) attempt at securing its own house of worship.

In the following decades, meetings of Universalist Meridenites occurred in more frequent intervals and with increasingly larger audiences. These services were generally held in Meriden taverns, schoolhouses, and private homes. On one Sunday in March of 1853, Rev. Abraham Norwood preached to over 200 people. This large audience was a clear sign to community leaders that Universalism had become firmly entrenched in Meriden and just a month later, a committee was formed to research the possibility of creating a permanent place for worship services. The committee reported back in mid-1854 that it had raised seven hundred dollars, which meant that the community had the resources to officially settle a minister. On May 30, 1854, the Constitution of the church was adopted, thus creating the formal Universalist organization of Meriden. The church was known as the First Universalist Society.

In the late 1850s, the focus of the community shifted back from ministerial issues to the creation of a permanent church building. On December 5, 1860, the congregation dedicated a wood frame structure on Norwood Street, creating the Society's first home. The church cost approximately \$9000 to build. Seventeen years later, the church building underwent renovations, doubling its pew space. It should be clear from the necessity of these renovations that the congregation was growing rapidly; by 1890, a committee was created to discuss the possibility of constructing an even larger building. Construction of this new building cost \$100,000, over ten times that of the original building. Nearly all of this money necessary to pay this hefty price

tag was donated by Isaac Lewis, one-term mayor of Meriden and son-in-law of Noah Pomeroy (at whose home the first ever Universalist service in Meriden was held).<sup>23</sup> The community recognized this period as a move from its initial “Wooden Age” to a permanent “Stone Age.” On September 27, 1893, the congregation held a dedication of the new church that was attended by a number of city dignitaries, possibly signaling that the larger Meriden community had become more accepting of the Universalist church (or, at least, that the community respected the Pomeroy/Lewis family).

On June 12, 1904, the First Universalist Society celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. The following day, the front page of the Meriden newspaper *The Morning Record* featured a story about the celebration, highlighting the steady growth of the church and its prominent position in the town. By 1910, the church membership had grown to 338. With such a large building, the congregation was able to serve the greater Meriden community. The Boy Scouts and Masonic orders held their meetings in Norwood Hall, a room in the church that also hosted plays and other forms of entertainment by outside organizations. When originally constructed, the church building had a seating capacity of over 700. In the 1960s, as the congregation had decreased in size, all of the balcony seats and the pews on the sides of the sanctuary were removed.

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<sup>23</sup> The history of the Universalist church in Meriden has been underwritten by this family: in 1927, Martha Lewis, Isaac’s daughter, donated a structure that would serve as the home for the congregation’s minister until it was sold in the 1980s. Noah Pomeroy’s children donated stained-glass windows to the church as a memorial to their father and Isaac Lewis’ wife gave thirteen bronze bells in his honor that would be rung every Sunday morning. Kate Lewis, Isaac Lewis’ daughter, married a minister of the church and the family donated a marble pulpit to the building in her husband’s honor after his death.

By the early 2000s, the old building had become much too large for the needs of the current congregation, which had decreased to around 100 people. Given that the number of Unitarian Universalist congregations or adherents in Connecticut has not changed substantially since the early 1980s, I would venture to guess that members had either stopped identifying as Unitarian Universalists (and their numbers replaced by incoming converts in other congregations) or had become members of another Unitarian Universalist church in the area. As the Commission on Appraisal of the Unitarian Universalist Association writes: “[a]nother characteristic of our congregations: Their membership is fluid. In net terms, nearly as many, in some places more, members are exiting by the back door as are coming in by the front....there is no evidence of any significant progress in increasing our retention rate” (2001: 5).

What was then known as The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden purchased six acres and an old house at 328 Paddock Avenue in Meriden. In 2003, blueprints were drawn for an addition to the house, creating adequate space for worship and religious education. Construction began in September 2004, following the initiation of a five-year capital campaign to raise \$250,000. As construction took longer than expected, there was a short period during which the Unitarian Universalist Church was forced to hold services in a temporary space, rented to them by another religious organization in Meriden. Today, the congregation is quite small; Sunday morning worship services generally attract a crowd of about 40 to 50 people, including children. There is, however, a wide range of congregational activities available to those who want it, from yoga and meditation to potlucks and movie

nights. Most of the congregational activities are locally-based; for example, the congregation donates a percentage of its money to Meriden-based non-profit organizations. Very few of the members I have spoken with have mentioned any involvement in Unitarian Universalist Association regional activities and none has discussed international Unitarian Universalist programs.<sup>24</sup>

In this chapter, when I discuss the congregational move, I mean the most recent move: from Norwood Street to Paddock Avenue. Unitarian Universalists have described the building on Norwood Street as “majestic” and as “massive.” Histories of the church highlight the beauty of the church’s stained glass windows, marble pulpit, bell tower, baptismal font, wall mural, and organ built into the structure. Important to note is that Norwood Avenue is located in the center of Meriden, near City Hall and the Amtrak train station. The move to Paddock Avenue was both a

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<sup>24</sup> Through the International Resources Office, the Unitarian Universalist Association articulates its expectations for Unitarian Universalist international engagement. The mission of the International Resources Office stems directly from the organization of which it is a part: “together, we work to support congregations as they respond to the call of the Association’s Sixth Principle: ‘To affirm and promote the goal of world community peace, liberty, and justice for all.’” Accordingly, the Office has developed what it calls “Sixth Principle Resources,” which are discussion guides and worship materials to be used within congregational structures. A second organization through which American Unitarian Universalism inserts itself into the global community is the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. The U.U.S.C.’s mission, which is guided by the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights and the seven Unitarian Universalist principles, is to “advance human rights and social justice around the world, partnering with those who confront unjust power structures and mobilizing to challenge oppressive policies” and its vision statement is “U.U.S.C envisions a world free from oppression and injustice, where all can realize their full human rights.” U.U.S.C is financially and administratively independent from the U.U.A, although it is an associate member of it.



move away from a particularly grandiose building and away from the center of the city.

### **Conceptions of Sacred Space**

In the first two sections of this chapter, we saw that there is continued denominational and individual insistence that Unitarian Universalists have the ability to create sacred space anywhere. However, as discussed in this chapter's opening, when talking with members and leaders of The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden, it became slowly apparent that the move to 328 Paddock Avenue has signified much more than simply a change in the physical building to which one travels for services and congregational activities. The move has had deep implications for the congregation, as many members of the community feel less tied to the space in which services are held and, in effect, do not consider it sacred. The move may have also had a negative impact on demographics and community involvement.

When I met with Reverend Simms, I inquired about what had changed most during her thirteen-year tenure as minister of The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden. She began to speak without a moment's pause. For Reverend Simms, the move to 328 Paddock Avenue had had positive consequences within the congregation. As she talked, she linked the change in church building with other changes: "having gone that whole six year process of deciding to sell that beautiful historic building and take a leap of faith and do something new and build something new that costs, you know, a fortune and we didn't raise enough money. The confidence in the congregation to do things that are risky have changed." She

believed strongly that the move was necessary given the changing demographics of the church: “we had a relatively small congregation...a lot of people who were the older people, who had been in the church for many years, had died.” Despite the underlying logic behind the move, Reverend Simms seemed saddened, both by the sheer necessity of it, but also by the congregation’s reaction to it. It was under her tenure that the congregation gave up a building they had occupied for a century; it’s impossible not to wonder if she wished she could have prevented such a drastic measure.

Julie, a member of The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden since 1992, brought up the move when I asked her about roles in which she served within the church. She was acting as the Church Moderator during the multi-year process of selling the old building, buying new property, and developing plans for renovations. She expressed that this leadership position was quite difficult, given that “we constantly had two agendas that we were running on – we had the building, the selling and the acquisition, and then we had the routine running of daily activities of the church.” The everyday activities of the church community had become relegated to being of secondary importance, given the financial implications for every additional day the building project continued. As Moderator, she wished she could have focused her attentions on the “normal” church activities, such as promoting social justice causes and creating new opportunities for worship.

As she reflected on it several years later, after the stress of running the church had subsided, Julie seemed vaguely positive about the move: “there was certainly a lot of discussion within the congregation in terms of letting go of the old building and

how attached some people were to it. But once we let go, we were definitely moving forward and keeping our eye on the goal.” This process of moving forward had positive effects, as well. For example, it led to the creation of a new Mission Statement, a process on which Julie reflected:

We worked for two years before the move. We developed a questionnaire...and then we analyzed the data...in an effort to come up with a broad general statement for what the mission of this church would be in this new building....There were different sentiments about specific things, but in general, we ended up in a very broad agreement about how we would move forward, how we would look forward. Most of it was about inclusion, community orientation, and creating a community within the church that was outwardly focused, in terms of how we would connect with the broader community.

Therefore, while the move may have added a great deal of stress to Julie’s life given the role in which she was serving, she was grateful for the opportunity it presented for the congregation to focus its efforts and gain a stronger sense of self-identity.

Interestingly, though, Julie currently considers herself to be much less involved with the Church and she no longer attends services as regularly as she used to. Perhaps the stress of the move changed the community from a place of spiritual development to a place of worry. Or, perhaps her notion of sacred space is not as liberal as she says it is: it is possible that she considered the building on Norwood Avenue to be a more fully sacred space than she is willing to consciously admit to herself and to others.

Like Reverend Simms, Julie linked the building change to demographic changes in the church. For her, this emerged as an obvious negative implication: “when we moved from the old church, some members left and so there, at the temporary space, we had fewer members. Certainly a solid core group, but we didn’t have the number of newcomers.” The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden

prides itself on being a warm and welcoming congregation. Every time I have attended services, I have been greeted at the door by a member of the congregation with a broad smile and open arms. The greeter always inquires about how I'm doing, encourages me to put on a nametag, and asks if I'll be able to stay after services for what they call Coffee and Conversation, or the time for snack and discussion after the service. To them, I am considered a "Friend," which means I attend services but have not signed the Membership Book and do not contribute financially to the church. This greeting has become ritualized for me – I come to expect it whenever I enter the doors of the church and it reminds me that I am entering a space and time quite different than my usual profane existence. I know I am not the only Friend at The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden; in my conversations with members, they often tell me that it took them months or even years to sign the Membership Book, as discussed in chapter 1. I recognize completely Julie's concern that residing in a temporary space could have had repercussions for membership growth. As a Friend myself, I could certainly imagine a situation in which I felt particularly uneasy attending services in the temporary space, in a space that wasn't theirs.

Helen brought up the move during our conversation when I asked about her relationship to the term "sacred." While she couldn't clearly define what she meant by it, stating that sacredness is "just known, felt deep within," she admitted that while she felt no sense of it in the new building, she had strongly felt that the old building was imbued with sacredness. For her, this sacred quality of the old building was the product of to the congregation's long relationship with it. According to Helen, sacredness is "created by people and history" and in the old building, she could feel

the “lingering presence of our fore-bearers.” She also mentioned that she appreciated the beauty of what was contained in the building: “the pews were vitally important, we maintained pieces of furniture.” While the old sanctuary “*felt* sacred, the new one is just a meeting room.” This difference has more to do with history than ontology; as she explains it, “the creation of sacred space hasn’t happened in the new building.” She seemed to sincerely hope that it someday would feel sacred, but couldn’t quite articulate what it would take for that to occur. Such a process simply might take time; over the years, as congregational events are held in the space, she admitted that she might begin to think of it as sacred.

At first glance, Helen seems to be an obvious example of Smith’s assertion that sacred space is that which is actively constructed by humans through ritual. The old space was sacred not because of an inbreaking of transcendence, but because forebearers had worshipped there. Additionally, she stated that her favorite Unitarian Universalist service was one held on a cliff dwelling, demonstrating that for her, sacred space can be constructed anywhere. However, I suspect that it is a bit more complicated than simply mapping Helen onto Jonathan Z. Smith’s formulations. Given her insistence that the new church building is not as “majestic” as the old sanctuary, I suspect that in reality, there is something more to her notion of sacredness than simply a place where a Unitarian Universalist service is held. Perhaps to be sacred, a space must possess hints of “inherent” beauty or power.

It would be a huge generalization to suggest that all members of The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden disapproved of the move or that they still wish they were in the old building, even if many of them do. For Sheryl, a member of the

Church who joined in 2006, the attachments that the community feels with the old building make her feel as though she is not as full a member as are the others. The attachment that the congregation has to a building with which she has no relationship makes her “feel awkward.” She wishes people could start to “think beyond the brownstone” and begin thinking about the new building as a church, not just a renovated house. As far as she is concerned, if people stay fully attached to the old building on Norwood Street, “they can’t move forward.” She hopes that in the next few years, as the congregation finds a new minister, the church will improve at “coming to terms with the past.” She recognizes, though, that this will be quite difficult. To her, the sacredness of the current church building is diminished by the negativity other members of the community feel towards it.

The newer members of the church are not the only ones who find sacred qualities in the current church building. In 1965, Matthew joined the Unitarian Universalist congregation in Meriden as a dedicated atheist. He “knew there never had been a God and there never would be.” From my conversation with him, which I presented at the beginning of this chapter, I gained a better sense of the social history of the church, quite different from the political and physical one that Reverend Simms provided. When he joined the church in the mid-1960s, the community was rigidly humanistic; “If you wanted to be excommunicated, you said the word God,” Matthew recalled. It was a “vicious, corrosive environment,” in which the Unitarians and the Universalists fought bitterly and in which “blacks, Hispanics, immigrants and the poor were definitely not welcome. We talked the talk of the civil rights movement of the time, but we walked the walk of intolerance inside our own house.”

After several years, empowered by his anger and disgust, Matthew left the church after giving a scalding sermon at a Sunday morning service. He spent the next 20 years wandering in the proverbial wilderness, searching for his own spirituality, while retaining the label of Unitarian Universalist. During this time, he dove deeply into a pursuit of knowledge. He read Thoreau and Emerson; he studied the Old Testament; he examined Greek and Roman mythology. None was the word of God; all were of humans, but there was still something spiritual about them: “I was still philosophically a humanist, but it seems that the secular part had become infected by what turned out to be an incurable spiritual virus...I did my best to ignore the voice. I avoided confronting it by burying myself in my work, or my music, or my studies – anything that would keep it pushed into a dark corner and out of sight.” Eventually, Matthew rejoined The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden. He felt empty without a community in which he could grapple with questions of spirit, soul, God, and holiness. He wanted a minister: not to provide him with answers, but as a person to hear with compassion and to act with empathy. He needed worship services through which he could pray.

Like all the other Unitarian Universalists I interviewed, Matthew discussed the implications of the move for the community. As I mentioned above, Matthew spent several years away from the community. He first began thinking about re-joining the congregation in 2000; he was tired of being in “unpopulated space” and realized that what he missed most about The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden was the physical building in which the community held its services. He cared deeply for the building, particularly for the custom-built organ that dated back

to the nineteenth century, and felt privileged that the community had allowed him to play and maintain it. He attended his (second) first Unitarian Universalist service on September 1, 2003. At that point, he had not yet decided whether he would re-join. However, the following week, the Building Committee approached him and asked whether he would be interested in playing a part in the process of moving and renovations. By the third Sunday of September, he was leading the group. He prides himself on the excellence with which he performed this work. At his request, our conversation took place in the church parlor room and, as I mentioned earlier, at one juncture, he looked around and stated proudly: “I was responsible for the building of this structure.”

Matthew, like Helen, brought up the issue of whether the new building is sacred. His understanding of sacredness is in sharp contrast to hers, though. Whereas she stated that “people and history” create sacred space, Matthew feels that they often interrupt it. He attends services for the purpose of cultivating a deeper relationship between himself and a higher power and, accordingly, finds the current meeting room wholly sacred. He is bothered by the way others treat this space which he considers inherently sacred. Interestingly, his irritation stems from exactly what Helen believes makes a space sacred. As he put it, other members of the congregation view Sunday morning worship services as “a social club.” He wishes others would use the space as he does, as opposed to a place to cultivate friendships: “U.U. Meriden gets chaotic before services. I resent this because it *intrudes upon the holy space*. My desire in this space is to leave all chaos beyond and find peace, tranquility, interaction with whatever is higher – that’s my only reason for being here.” For Matthew, a place is



sacred if it allows him to reflect and think about his relationship with a higher power; the discernment of sacredness involves nothing more and nothing less. Therefore, the church at 328 Paddock Avenue *is* sacred in Matthew's eyes.

Superficially, Matthew's conception of sacred space appears to be directly in line with that of Eliade. Matthew understands sacredness to be found wherever he is able to communicate with a higher power. In this sense, one could state that for Matthew, sacred space takes place wherever there is a manifestation of the divine. However, just as I struggled to place Helen into one particular category, I hesitate to create a perfect link between Eliade and Matthew. Perhaps without realizing it, Matthew had invoked the construction of sacred space during his conversation with me, when he went into great detail about how he played a large role in the renovation and building of the new church. While it is undebatable that Matthew considers this space sacred due to his ability to meditate and converse with a higher power, perhaps it is also true that he considers the space sacred because he, along with others, literally constructed it as such. Additionally, while Matthew appears irritated by the way others treat his sacred space, it would be too simple to say that Matthew's understanding of sacredness reflects entirely an individualistic stance. For example, he discussed with me how he feels that being at home with his wife is also sacred.

It may originally appear that Helen and Matthew take two oppositional stances in the debate between what Chidester and Linenthal call situationalism and substationalism. One asserts that sacred space is constructed through human activities; the other feels that sacred space allows a higher power to break into the world. One says sacrality is social; the other says it is individual. In taking a closer

look at what they assert about sacred space, though, I have worked to complicate the binary that I presented at the beginning of this chapter. Helen and Matthew's conceptions of sacred space cannot be easily categorized: both possess hints of both situationalism and substationalism.

In the above pages, I have explored the relationship between members of The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden and their conceptions of sacred space. In doing so, I have explored the gap between what is said about sacred space versus what seems to be felt about it. While theoretically, sacred space can be created anywhere, The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden had fully attached itself to its old church building and is struggling to maintain a sense of identity as it grows into its new building. I also investigated the active construction of sacredness, demonstrating how particular spaces become imbued with meaning through ritual processes and the formation of a Unitarian Universalist atmosphere within them. For this reason, I propose that space, just like people, can go through a process of conversion, of protracted transformation.

While specific definitions of sacred may vary from person to person, for all the individuals I have talked to, and particularly for those quoted in the previous pages, it is of the utmost importance to have some sort of space that one considers sacred. Entering a sacred space allows a deeper connection to one's self, community and Unitarian Universalist identity, while also allowing a reflection on experiences in "profane" space and time. Based on my interactions with Unitarian Universalists, therefore, I suspect that while the possibilities of Unitarian Universalist sacred space may know no boundaries, having some sort of fixed sacred space is nevertheless a

crucial part of a Unitarian Universalist spirituality. In this sense, it is part of the process of becoming Unitarian Universalist.

## Conclusion

*The only constant is change. In every moment of existence, we are influenced by the past and the possibilities available to us. The past includes our own individual past as well as that of the world around us. Using these factors, we become our own things. We sift through multiple experiences in order to decide or achieve or become one. As soon as we do this, our decision, action, or experience becomes part of the great world of experience. It is now available as a factor of influence in the world. We continually become part of the world, part of what influences others. This happens over and over again. We have new experiences moment to moment. There are ever-new possibilities available to us in each shifting circumstance. We can't stay exactly the same moment to moment. We are constantly changing (Coleman 2008: 73).*

In 2001, after four years of organizing focus groups and open hearings, circulating questionnaires, reading membership literature, and perusing online forums, the Commission on Appraisal of the Unitarian Universalist Association published Belonging: The Meaning of Membership. The Commission, which is instructed by the Association to review issues of interest or concern to the U.U.A. and develop approaches to solve such matters, asks in Belonging: “what is the meaning of membership, or more thoroughly, what are the meanings of membership? What is it that people seek when they affiliate with our congregations? What is it that congregations owe to their membership, and members owe to their congregation? Whom do we include as members of congregations?” (2001: xi). In seeking answers to these questions, Belonging presents a uniquely Unitarian Universalist “theology of membership” (2001: xii). Ultimately, the Commission on Appraisal concludes that “membership is a journey, both for the individual and the congregation. It is not just a technical or legal state, nor only a numerical measurement. It is a *process that engages human beings and takes us from a starting place to a new place*” (2001: xii, italics added). Towards the end of the text, the Commission expands on its

conclusion:

[b]oth individually and collectively we are in a constant state of change, of transformation. Transformation is the fundamental purpose of and reason for a religion of seriousness and depth. What we have called the process of membership is such a process, leading from superficial levels of identity and affiliation to deeper levels of commitment, to true membership (2001: 103-4).

In the previous chapters, I have sought to convey the specifics of this transformative process, to provide a fuller appreciation of the different ways a particular individual, community, or space travels from a “starting place” to this “new place.” In other words, I have explored the conversion to Unitarian Universalism for individuals and spaces. To understand the similarities between the conversion of an individual and the conversion of a space, I have begun to think of an unaffiliated body as a not-yet-sacralized space. Both become Unitarian Universalist through years of effort, of energy, of discussion, of reflection. The Unitarian Universalist identity, the U.U.ness, of a person and a place is constantly created and re-created, shaped and re-shaped, by a particular congregation, by the wider denominational structure guiding those congregations, and by broader social, political, cultural, economic, and religious factors.

I hope the impossibility of isolating any one of the three factors I have discussed in this thesis – individuals, communities, and spaces – from the others has become clear. One cannot discuss the significance of a Unitarian Universalist individual without understanding the congregation in which he or she is situated. One cannot appreciate the nuances of a particular congregation without taking into consideration the individuals that make up the community. A space cannot be fully explored without an inclusion of the bodies that fill it and make it sacred. Throughout

this project, I have worked to make clear the interconnectedness of these three groups. I have presented analyses of particular experiences at The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden and with Unitarian Universalists as necessarily taking into consideration all three of these factors.

The phenomenon we call conversion has always been of interest to me. From a young age, I was fascinated by stories I heard in my synagogue of adults who had become Jewish (I guess I was always destined to become a double major in Anthropology and Religion), by the factors that prompted particular individuals to convert and others not to. I was intrigued by the liminal space that interfaith couples seemed to occupy in my congregation and by their children, my peers, who considered themselves “half-Jewish.” Sure, perhaps my interest originally stemmed from a deep jealousy of anyone who was allowed to have a Christmas tree, but it eventually took on a more mature tone. When I was a senior in high school, I attended a Yom Kippur service during which congregants who had converted to Judaism were invited to come to the *bima* (the pulpit from which services are led and Torah is read) and share their stories. I have been to, and even led, a countless number of services over the last twenty-two years but this one was, without a doubt, the one in which I felt most engaged, most captivated. Those who spoke did so from their hearts, sharing their most private feelings and experiences with a congregation that wholly accepted them.

As I think back, I suspect that my interest stemmed from the fact that the way conversion was typically represented never made total sense to me. Yes, I understood it *logistically*: people could learn the intricacies of a new tradition, could undergo the

specific rituals required for conversion within a particular religion, and could become members of a new church or synagogue. On a deeper level, though, I was desperately confused. How could someone possibly abandon the entirety of a previously held identity? How did they isolate a particular moment in time at which they became something else? I do not mean here to criticize those converts, Jewish or not, who are able to apply their own experiences onto the predominant theorizations of conversion or to question those who believe they have been able to “lay the inner storm to rest forever” (James 1994[1902]: 191). I simply wish to suggest that an expansion of the meaning of conversion, both within academic and more casual circles, appears to me as something that is desperately needed. Understanding conversion as a protracted process, as a constant becoming, strikes me as more appropriate, as more fully taking into account the nuanced details of lived experiences.

It took me several months to determine what exactly I wanted to focus my attention on when writing this thesis. Even once I knew I wanted to write about the Unitarian Universalist community in Meriden, deciding what deserved my full consideration seemed impossible. For a few weeks, I convinced myself I was going to write about holidays and Unitarian Universalist ritual formation. A few weeks later, I had decided I wanted to write about the intertwining of Unitarian Universalism with other religious traditions. At one point I thought I could write a defense of Unitarian Universalism as a “religion.” As I spent the summer before my senior year interning in Warsaw, Poland, my coworkers tried to convince me I should change my topic completely and write about the Jewish diaspora and its relationship to Eastern Europe. Over time, though, I eventually realized that the theoretical framework of

conversion allowed me to touch upon all of these different issues under one umbrella (thanks to Matthew and his narration of his family history, as well as the development of Unitarian Universalism following the Protestant Reformation, even Eastern Europe was mentioned briefly!).

This entire project has been built upon the fragmented narration of multiple Unitarian Universalist conversion narratives. None of the stories I told was complete. Some life histories began in childhood or adolescence, others picked up when the individual in question was in adulthood, with a developed career and teenage children. I described the building on Paddock Avenue beginning at the process of renovation, ignoring its past usage as a home. I ended my history of the building on Norwood Street when the Unitarian Universalist church moved out. In all of the stories I told, of the lives I unraveled, I focused specifically on conversion, on the process of becoming a Unitarian Universalist. When I started my research, I may have taken for granted that something – a person or a place – could ultimately be labeled Unitarian Universalist. I originally worked under the assumption that if an individual identifies as a member of a Unitarian Universalist church or if a place serves as the home of a Unitarian Universalist community, either can be considered to have converted to Unitarian Universalism, to have *become* Unitarian Universalist. I no longer hold this to be true. Perhaps the very mapping of the term “conversion” onto this process of protracted transformation is inappropriate, as it implies that its final product is a static entity. As Belonging asserts, there is no end on this transformative journey. The “new place” to which individuals journey is not a finish line. The process of becoming Unitarian Universalist is both life-long and never-



ending. Just as nothing is inherently Unitarian Universalist, perhaps neither can anything ever be considered fully or totally Unitarian Universalist.

Throughout this thesis, I explored the consequences of conversion for particular individuals. One implication of joining a Unitarian Universalist church that I glossed over at the time is that individuals are often encouraged to develop a particular theological or spiritual label for themselves. The Unitarian Universalist Association describes the religion as “theologically diverse,” in that it has “historic roots in the Jewish and Christian traditions, but today individual Unitarian Universalists may identify with Atheism, Agnosticism, Buddhism, Humanism, Paganism, or with other philosophical or religious traditions” (Unitarian Universalist Association 2011b). This diversity is reflected in “Some U.U.s Are More U Than U: Theological Self Descriptors Chosen by Unitarian Universalists,” in which James Casebolt and Tiffany Niekro analyzed the results of a survey used to discover how Unitarian Universalists describe their own religious beliefs. They found that out of 206 members of Unitarian Universalist congregations, the number of theological labels selected by respondents ranged from one to sixteen, with a modal frequency of two and an average of 3.66 (Casebolt and Niekro 2005: 237). 74.8% of participants selected “Unitarian Universalist,” 54.4% selected “humanist,” 33% selected “agnostic,” 30.6% selected “Earth-centered,” 18% selected “atheist,” 16.5% selected “Buddhist,” and “Christian” and “pagan” were tied at 13.1% (Casebolt and Niekro 2005: 239). It is common, therefore, for individual Unitarian Universalists to associate with a wide variety of identification labels – how telling that only 75% of respondents selected the label Unitarian Universalist! As Jack Mendelsohn writes in

Being Liberal in an Illiberal Age, “I am willing to call myself a Christian and a Jew, but only if in the next breath I am permitted to say that in varying degrees I am also a Hindu, a Moslem, a Buddhist, a Humanist, a Stoic, and an admirer of Akhenaton, Zoroaster, Confucius, Lao-tze, Simone de Beauvoir, and Black Elk” (1995: 78).

When I thought about it, I realized that I have encountered a range in identification styles with the members of The Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden. Matthew calls himself a Unitarian Universalist “for lack of a better term.” It doesn’t adequately “describe my self, but it’s a code that others will understand.” Although Matthew would not call himself Jewish, he does identify with his Jewish ancestors, nor would he call himself a Christian, although he considers Unitarian Universalism still to be Protestant. Sheryl considers herself a “humanistic Christian.” Stuart calls himself a “Universalist, but not a Unitarian Universalist because I’m not into Christianity.” Helen thinks of herself as Unitarian Universalist, while her husband identifies as Buddhist. Reflecting on this diversity of identification labels after writing the bulk of this thesis has helped confirm my suspicion regarding the extent to which the final product of Unitarian Universalist conversion is not a final product at all. One can consider oneself Unitarian Universalist and still be on a journey of transformation.

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