

UUA General Assembly '98  
Unitarian Universalism in Societal Perspective  
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Robert N. Bellah

Let me start by telling you who I am in a little more detail than as coauthor of *Habits of the Heart* and *The Good Society*. I am a trinitarian Episcopalian with a strong ecclesiology. But I also have some enduring associations with your tradition. James Luther Adams was my mentor when I first started teaching--I was one-third time in the Harvard Divinity School. It was Jim who introduced me to much of the "lore," as he called it, of the social history of Christianity. Conrad Wright, whose recent book on UU polity I have enjoyed reading, was also my colleague at HDS in those days. Through my involvement with the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, I have had a long-term relation to the Starr King School for the Ministry, where one of my ablest former students, Clare Fischer, teaches. Most recently I have been associated with Denny Davidoff on the board of the Interfaith Alliance Foundation.

To put it more abstractly, while I am rather far from you theologically (I actually hope to use my trinitarian Christianity as well as my sociology to gain an outsider perspective on your movement), I am in solid agreement with your social witness: your opposition to racism, your inclusiveness, not only with respect to race but also with respect to gender and sexual orientation, and your strong stance on issues of economic and social justice. The resolution entitled "Working for a Just Economic Community," which you passed at your General Assembly a year ago, even though it was printed in very small print in the *World*, seems admirable to me in every clause.

I want to begin with a provocative paradox that contains in germ everything I want to say tonight: in your social witness you are strong dissenters, especially in terms of economic trends in today's America; but religiously and therefore culturally, you are mainstream, right at the American center. How can that be? you will say. Didn't Jim Adams put us squarely in the tradition of religious dissent and hasn't our whole tradition been one of religious dissent from beginning to end? Yes he did and it has been. The problem is that the *majority* of American religions have been in the dissenting tradition. Seymour Martin Lipset points out that ours is the only North Atlantic society where dissenting denominations have been in the majority through most of its history. All other North Atlantic societies have had a tradition of an established church.

What does it mean to be a dissenter in a society with a religious majority of dissenters? It certainly doesn't mean that the dissenters agree. They are much too busy dissenting from each other. You may say, haven't the Southern Baptists, even though they come from the largest group of American dissenters, shown of late an alarming tendency toward authoritarianism? And indeed they have. But we should remember that even the bizarre statement from their general convention in Salt Lake City earlier this month on the position of women in the family (how can you caricature people who caricature themselves better than any outsider could do?) had no authority over any congregation or any member of any congregation. Their polity is as strictly

congregational and their religion as strongly individualistic as yours. In the face of the dissenting majority in America, perhaps dissent at a deeper level is represented by the battered remnants of the establishment tradition: Catholics, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Presbyterians, though even they, in their minority status, are tempted to become sectarian. As Chesterton said, in America even the Catholics are Protestant.

Just to rub in my point that religiously UUs are part of the majority let me point out that one of your deepest beliefs, that in matters of religion the individual conscience must be unfettered, is shared by a majority of Americans. As we noted in *Habits of the Heart*, according to a Gallup poll 80 percent of Americans agreed that "an individual should arrive at his or her own religious beliefs independent of any churches or synagogues," a rather amazing idea when you think about it.

I have studied carefully the very rewarding report of your Commission on Appraisal published last year as *Interdependence: Renewing Congregational Polity*, and I know that the central purpose of the Fulfilling the Promise initiative is to strengthen a sense of connectedness, interdependence, and community, partly to counterbalance a perceived excessive emphasis on individualism. I simply want to point out that, starting from where you start, it may not be so easy to get there from here. In order to describe your religious individualism more carefully I will draw on the statement of Principles and Purposes that you adopted in 1985, the survey conducted by the Fulfilling the Promise Committee, and from the whole history of your movement.

The very first of the principles affirmed in your 1985 statement is "The inherent worth and dignity of every person." In an essay to be published this fall in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* entitled "Is There a Common American Culture?" I answer that yes, there is a common culture, and that its most fundamental tenet is the sacredness of the individual conscience, the individual person. Your opening affirmation therefore places you at the very center of American culture. That affirmation is reinforced by several more affirmations: for example, "a free and responsible search for truth and meaning," and "the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large." These individualistic affirmations are moderated by the two final principles the document affirms: "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." These affirmations are certainly important in complementing the individualistic affirmations, but, I will argue that the mere affirmation of community or even the interdependent web of all existence is not in itself enough to offset a fundamentally individualistic initial position.

That the emphasis on individual autonomy is clearly supported by the membership is indicated by the answers to a number of the survey questions. I will start by discussing some of those questions that Clark Olsen singled out as drawing strong majority answers from every demographic sector of the association, questions that suggest stronger common beliefs within the association than some had expected. For example, the very first question, "What things should your congregation be most intent on helping children learn?" was answered by a 70 percent majority by "a sense of their inherent worth, self-respect," a clear choice for the most individualistic of the possible answers. The second most popular response, and the one most

chosen as "next most important" was "openness to difference and respect for others." That seems to suggest a somewhat more social orientation, but I would argue that it is the thin social extension of our radical individualism. Indeed I formulated our common creed in my essay as, in the age of multiculturalism: "we are all different, we are all unique, respect that," which comes pretty close to "openness to difference and respect for others." The point is that emphasizing difference and respect for difference leaves us pretty well adrift when it comes to what could possibly hold us together.

Another question with an answer that draws a nearly 70 percent majority is "What needs for a child's religious development could ideally be best served within the community of UU faith?" to which the majority answer is "A sense of belonging, along with respect for difference." This question is as interesting for the way it is formulated as for the strong majority agreement. One of the problems with surveys as opposed to open-ended interviews is that they generate the response by the way they are formulated. The outside observer might have liked two questions here: one about belonging, one about respect for difference. It is as though the writers of the question were anxious as to how much appeal "a sense of belonging" would have without the individualistic caveat "along with respect for difference." In any case, putting the two phrases together was a winning combination.

Another question that drew a clear but less overwhelming majority for one answer was "What role has your congregation played most importantly in your life?" Some 56 percent chose "It supports my views and upholds my values," which I would take to be an individualistic affirmation of what the congregation is doing for me. The second most popular answer to this question gives a clear alternative to the first choice: "It is a beloved community of forgiveness, love and spiritual growth," and that answer, one that placed the community first rather than the self, drew 44 percent. These answers suggest that it is not only in the work of the commission that wrote the *Interdependence* document but in the congregations themselves that there is, in spite of the clear priority of religious individualism, an undercurrent of desire for an understanding that is fundamentally more social.

The last question I want to discuss at this point is both encouraging and discouraging from the point of view I am trying to develop in this talk. It is "What is the 'glue' that binds individual UUs and congregations together?" The 65 percent majority answer was: "Shared values and principles." That is certainly encouraging for the people who feared that UUs held such different positions that they shared very little. The most chosen answer to this question only makes explicit what is implicit in the degree of agreement in the answers to many questions: UUs *do* share values and principles. What is discouraging to me in my wish that UUs and other Americans had a more fundamentally social understanding of human beings is that though values and principles are shared all right, what is shared is still fundamentally individualistic. And the least chosen answer to this question, indeed the one that over 61 percent said was "least important" was "common worship elements and language." There may be hidden problems in this answer that I'm not seeing, but if it means that "common worship" is least important in what holds UUs together, then my anxiety level does indeed rise. For it is my understanding as a sociologist of religion that it is common worship that *creates* the beloved community for which many UUs yearn. Furthermore, shared values and principles don't necessarily motivate people to do anything; whereas a vital experience of common worship can send a congregation out into the

world with a determination to see that those values and principles are put into practice. Of course I know that in many congregations today, perhaps even a few UU congregations, worship can be a form of sanctuary, therapy, even cocooning, which draws people away from the world rather than motivating them to change the world: it surely all depends on what kind of worship.

Just to indicate how deep the issues I am discussing go in UU history, let me turn to Conrad Wright's book *Congregational Polity*. He singles out three attitudes that can be discerned in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century: institutionalism, parochialism, and individualism, and he goes on to say that "To this day, [these attitudes] remain imperfectly reconciled, often within the minds and hearts of individual Unitarian Universalists." (p. 68) By individualism he means the emphasis on the individual seeker, so that the person barely needs the congregation, much less the denomination. By parochialism he means the attitude, common enough in all denominations, to consider one's own local congregation sufficient, so that "the church" comes to mean my church down by the corner. The document *Interdependence* quite rightly suggests that parochialism is only the repeat of radical individualism at the congregational level. And by institutionalism Wright means a concern for larger structures and agencies, particularly at the denominational level, which will facilitate the religious life of congregations and enhance their joint impact on the world. Neither among UUs nor among other Americans has institutionalism ever had an easy time, or even a good name, as my coauthors and I showed in *The Good Society*. And yet, as we claimed in that book, without good institutions there will not be good communities and without good communities there will not be good individuals.

Wright singles out individuals important in the history of Unitarian universalism as representative of each of these attitudes, and I want to mention two of them. For institutionalism he holds up a man after my own heart, Henry W. Bellows. According to Wright,

basically [Bellows] argued, Unitarianism revealed the ultimate tendency of Protestantism to an individualism which was "the self-sufficiency of man" and "an absolute independence of Bible or church." That tendency had gone as far as it could, he thought, and a reassertion of the importance of the corporate nature of human life, in family, state, and church, was indicated. "Nor is there any complete and satisfactory, perhaps no real way, to come into this corporate capacity, except through a publicly recognized and legitimate organization, whether domestic, political, or religious." (p, 43)

Needless to say, Wright credits Bellows with such an effective institution building that the Unitarian denomination was able to survive the difficult times that lay ahead in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

As an example of the individualist attitude, Wright offers up a pastor with the charming name of Octavius Brooks Frothingham. "What Frothingham offered in his own church," says Wright, "was a place where absolute freedom of conscience was assured both in pulpit and pew."

Frothingham found that it was the sermon rather than the preliminaries that drew the crowds; many of his hearers arrived just in time for it. . . [N]owhere in the life of the society was there either cultivation of the devotional spirit through sacrament or ritual, or organization to promote cooperation for human betterment. Frothingham's preaching was what mattered. He was an effective public speaker with a personal following, enlarged by

many curious casual listeners. In 1879, when ill health made it necessary for him to give up his preaching, the church disbanded because nothing remained. (pp. 69-70)

Such is the fate of a religious individualism totally unleavened by institutionalism.

Now you may well say, what's wrong with religious individualism as long as there is enough institutionalism to keep the movement alive but not so much that individuals or congregations feel pushed around? And here is where I need to sharpen my argument. Let me begin in a slightly roundabout way. In the May 14 issue of *The New York Review of Books* Mark Lilla describes two kinds of current American reaction. We have two kinds of reactionaries, says Lilla, because we had in our recent history two revolutions. The first was the revolution of the sixties which was both a cultural and a political revolution, one that led to greater freedom of personal expression and greater acceptance of groups that were previously marginalized such as racial minorities, women and gays. Those in reaction against this revolution emphasize traditional values and consider the family as the key institution whose strengthening can solve all our problems. This group explicitly wants to return women and gays to their traditional place, and by opposing affirmative action, to return racial minorities to their traditional place, and they would even like to repress disturbing forms of free expression such as flag burning. The second revolution was the Reagan revolution of the eighties, an economic but also a political revolution. Those in reaction against this revolution are unhappy about the dominance of the free market ideology, the commodification of just about everything including law, medicine and education, and would like to restore or even strengthen dismantled features of the welfare state, such as programs to rebuild our inner cities rather than abandoning them. So far I think we can all see that Lilla is describing something real. I feel, and I suspect many of you feel, quite opposed to the first kind of reaction but very much part of the second kind of reaction. But here comes the bad news: Lilla says there weren't really two revolutions--there was only one. The two are deeply and intimately related and the majority of Americans have embraced them both. Now I don't want to believe that and I suspect many of you don't want to believe that but I think it is important that we try to discern what possible truth Lilla may be pointing to.

The revolution of the sixties did not come from nowhere. I would argue that it was another stage in the unfolding of what I have already described as our deepest common value, respect for the individual conscience, the individual person, a respect that is rooted in our dominant religious tradition of dissenting Protestantism.

But if we look back to the source of that tradition we will find something that makes Lilla's argument a little less preposterous. In the article on our common American culture that I have referred to earlier in this talk, I called to mind the dissenting tradition. What was so important about the Baptists, and other sectarians such as the Quakers, was the absolute centrality of religious freedom, of the sacredness of individual conscience in matters of religious belief. We generally think of religious freedom as one of many kinds of freedom, many kinds of human rights, first voiced in the European Enlightenment, and echoing around the world ever since. But Georg Jellinek, Max Weber's friend, and, on these matters, his teacher, published a book in 1895 called *Die Erklärung der Menschen- und Bürgerrechte*, translated into English in 1901 as *The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of Citizens*, which argued that the ultimate source of all modern notions of human rights is to be found in the radical sects of the Protestant Reformation,

particularly the Quakers and Baptists. Of this development Weber writes, "Thus the consistent sect gives rise to an inalienable personal right of the governed as against any power, whether political, hierocratic or patriarchal. Such freedom of conscience may be the oldest Right of Man--as Jellinek has argued convincingly, at any rate it is the most basic Right of Man because it comprises all ethically conditioned action and guarantees freedom from compulsion, especially from the power of the state. In this sense the concept was as unknown to antiquity and the Middle Ages as it was to Rousseau. . . ." Weber then goes on to say that the other Rights of Man were later joined to this basic right, "especially the right to pursue one's own economic interests, which includes the inviolability of individual property, the freedom of contract, and vocational choice." (1978:1209) So, almost from the beginning the sacredness of conscience, of the individual person was linked to "the right to pursue one's own economic interests." Remember that Weber locates the famous "Protestant ethic" in the intersection of Calvinism and sectarianism out of which our own dissenting tradition comes. Freedom of conscience and freedom of enterprise are more closely, even genealogically, linked than many of us would like to believe. As I hope to show, they are both expressions of an underlying ontological individualism.

So, it is no accident, as they say, that the United States, with its high evaluation of the individual person, is nonetheless alone among North Atlantic societies in the percentage of our population who live in poverty and that we are dismantling what was already the weakest welfare state of any North Atlantic nation. Just when we are moving to an ever greater validation of the sacredness of the individual person, our capacity to imagine a social fabric that would hold individuals together is vanishing. And this is in no small part due to the fact that our religious individualism is linked to an economic individualism which, though it makes no distinctions between persons except monetary ones, ultimately knows nothing of the sacredness of the individual. If the only standard is money, then all other distinctions are undermined.

What economic individualism destroys and what our kind of religious individualism cannot restore, is solidarity, a sense of being members of the same body. In most other North Atlantic societies a tradition of an established church, however secularized, provides some notion that we are in this thing together, that we need each other, that our precious and unique selves aren't going to make it all alone. That is a tradition singularly weak in our country, though Catholics and some high church Protestants have tried to provide it. Nor do we have a tradition of democratic socialism such as is common in Europe--again, I would argue, linked to an established church culture--a tradition that believes the state has some responsibility for the well-being of its citizens.

So, alas, perhaps Mark Lilla is right: the cultural revolution and the Reagan revolution are two sides of the same coin. Radical religio-cultural individualism opens the door to radical economic individualism. The former provides inadequate resources to moderate the latter. Here I return to the paradox from which I started, the contradiction between your social witness and your religious tradition: in your social witness you are dissenters; in your religious beliefs you are mainstream in a culture whose majority is dissenters. How can you possibly gain the religious and cultural leverage to overcome this contradiction?

Here let me assert that what religious liberalism and American culture generally lack is a social understanding of human beings. We start from an ontological individualism, the idea that individuals are real, society is secondary. This is clear in the dissenting tradition. Individuals are "called out" of the established churches; they establish new religious associations. Why do the Baptists, the largest of the dissenting communions, insist on adult baptism? Because infants cannot make a decision, cannot choose Jesus Christ as their personal lord and savior. Only adults who have made that decision can be baptized and admitted to full communion in the church. The Congregationalists, from whom the Unitarians derive, did not go quite that far. They did allow infant baptism, but at least at first, they did not allow full church membership to any who had not had a conversion experience. In short, Baptists, Congregationalists and other dissenters, believed individuals were saved first and *then* were admitted to membership in the church. In this understanding it is not the church that gives rise to believers but believers that give rise to the church.

The same ontological individualism can be found in the Anglo-American tradition of secular social philosophy, clearly for example, in John Locke, the most influential figure, I would argue, in American cultural history, indeed the spiritual father of us all, whether we like it or not. For Locke, individuals define themselves initially in relation to nature, making their livings out of the fruit of the land. Only when they fear for the safety of their property are they moved through mutual covenant, to form a society for the common protection of property. Society is derivative; individuals are fundamental: the common sense of our culture.

I want to assert, however, that ontological individualism is false both theologically and sociologically. I am tempted to start my rebuttal with theology, but I think it wiser in this setting to start with science and reason. Anglo-American individualism infects everything it touches, even our science. The notion that we are fundamentally self-interest maximizers, the secular side of our ontological individualism, has given rise to the movement known as sociobiology. I can think of no better place to start my counterattack than the recent book of the Dutch primatologist, Frans de Waal, *Good Natured: The Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Animals* (Harvard, 1996). De Waal shows that, leaving aside the theory of the selfish gene (other biologists such as Stephen Gould are showing why that can't be the whole story about evolution), one cannot go from genetics to individual motivation. He argues that the presence of generosity to the point of self-sacrifice, is documented for higher mammals, including not only our nearest primate relatives, but whales and dolphins as well. According to de Waal, not only sympathy and nurturing, but even a sense of justice, are things we share with higher mammals, are part of our nature. As he puts it:

If group life is based on a social contract, it is drawn up and signed not by individual parties, but by Mother Nature. . . Even in our species, which prides itself on free will, we may find an occasional hermit who has opted for reclusion; yet we never encounter someone who has consciously decided to become social. One cannot decide to become what one already is. (p. 170)

In the Anglo-Saxon world this comes as news, to some of us very good news. De Waal seems to be saying to us, "You are not the isolated selfish persons that you think you are"; "know thyself," or perhaps even better, "Become what you are," "Recover your fundamentally social nature." Of course to a sociologist, this is not exactly news. It was Emile Durkheim who insisted that society

is a reality *sui generis* and that we only become individuals in and through society. It was our own American social psychologist George Herbert Mead who worked this out concretely in the experience of the growing child. We become a self through, as Mead puts it, internalizing the role of the other. That moment when an infant takes the spoon out of its mother's hand, dips it in the food and raises it to the mother's mouth is the moment when the child *through becoming the mother* becomes a person, able to love as well as be loved. Today we might better say "parent" than "mother," but the point is the same. And if the child is not nurtured, is abandoned or abused, its sense of self will be irreparably damaged. We are not born at the age of 21 as autonomous rational beings. We are born helpless and dependent and only through the love of others will we ever become autonomous selves. Theologically that could be put "We love because he first loved us," (1Jn:4,19) but I will discuss theology later. If we are fundamentally relational creatures, as I think both biology and sociology affirm, then ontological individualism, religious or secular, is simply a mistake, but one with enormous cultural consequences with which Americans in particular will have to deal.

What the document *Interdependence* is on the verge of asking, I am forthrightly asking: give up ontological individualism and affirm that human nature is fundamentally social. That would mean making "the interdependent web of all existence" the first of your principles and not the last.

But am I asking too much; am I asking you to do something that you don't have the resources to do? I can't answer that question; only you can. But I am saying that if you believe in "a free and responsible search for truth," the truth is that our nature is social.

Even though I can't answer the question, I can discuss what resources I discern that might help give a positive answer. Let me turn first to the survey, where I find more than a few indications that a social understanding of UUism is by no means entirely absent. In answer to the question "How does being a Unitarian Universalist sustain you in times of crisis, tragedy or pain?" more than 61 percent say "it provides a community of love, support and renewal." However, for me, for reasons I will come back to, a somewhat worrisome answer to this question is the low number of people who said "provides a sense of transcendence, God or a healing power"--only 16 percent put that answer first and 58 percent put it last. Also, since the question refers to times of crisis, one might wonder if the 61 percent choosing community mean that it is *only* in times of crisis that they need community. My anxiety is allayed, however by the answer to another question, "What are your dreams for the UU movement?" where the answer of over 73 percent was "Become a visible and influential force for good in the world." I take that as a non-individualistic answer because, first, it comes in the context of the UU movement, not individual action, and second, being a force for good in the world is far too difficult to do alone. Any effective work in the world requires the support of our fellow believers. Slightly more ambiguous, though suggestive, are the nearly tied answers to the question "What is missing for you in your UU experience?" 52 percent said "greater intensity of celebration, joy and spirituality." Celebration would seem to suggest worship, about which the survey seems to reveal mixed feelings, but which I take to be a fundamentally social experience. The word "spirituality" in the answer, however, suggests otherwise, because we know that for Americans the word spiritual often denotes private or personal experience whereas the word religious denotes "institutional" religion. The second answer, which garnered 49 percent of the most important



category is "more racial and cultural diversity and diversity of perspectives." The ambiguity here lies in the fact that increasing diversity in any American institution requires concerted *social* action--it's not something one can do all alone. On the other hand valuing diversity for its own sake is highly compatible with American individualism.

Looking for resources from the history of the UU movement would require a degree of specialized knowledge which I do not possess. But one place to start would be to examine the writings of people like Henry W. Bellows, and other institution builders that Conrad Wright has discussed. I'm sure that would yield many interesting suggestions. I am even surer that the writings of James Luther Adams are an invaluable treasure when it comes to a social understanding of the Unitarian Universalist tradition.

However, as an indication of where you currently are with respect to a social as opposed to a radically individualist understanding of UUism, I would like to look at the document *Interdependence*, particularly since in it coherent arguments are presented, whereas survey results are like Rorschach tests that require a great deal of problematic interpretation to understand. *Interdependence* sounds its characteristic note from the first paragraph of its introduction where it speaks of the "beloved community" as being at the center of Unitarian Universalist belief. And then in the second paragraph it refers not only to the UUA principle of "the interdependent web of existence," but to Jim Adams's idea of "the covenant of being." (p. 1) Since I know Jim was sympathetic to the theology of Paul Tillich (he dedicated *The Prophethood of All Believers* to Tillich), as any religious liberal ought to be, I will return to that idea of Being later on. Before the introduction ends, however, the commission lays its cards on the table when it says "we are calling for a paradigm shift from individualism to interdependence, from the autonomy of congregations to a community of autonomous congregations." (p. 3) But then in the next chapter the commission takes another giant step. In a section headed "Toward a new doctrine of the church," there is the subheading "Embracing the church universal," which is spelled out as follows:

Unitarian Universalism or the UU movement are not the ultimate locus of our religious loyalty and commitment, because there are other religious bodies in North America and around the world with whom we also enjoy some sense of community. *And beyond these organized religious bodies, there are myriad individuals, known and unknown, whom we would include in any full accounting of "the church universal."* (p. 11)

And to make clear the link between local congregation and universal church the document goes on to say:

Through the congregation, the individual enables the universal religious community to become more than a nice idea; the individual enables it to become a historical reality. Conversely, through the congregation, the universal religious community calls the individual out of solitariness into solidarity with social, natural, and spiritual realities that transcend the self. (p. 12)

But here, much as I applaud the general sentiment, I still find the solitary individual understood as somehow prior to community, the fatal error of all dissenting religion. That limitation is almost but not quite transcended in a statement later on in the document:

With our tradition of autonomy comes a responsibility to the whole body. We have tended to focus on our independence, but it is the relational aspects of our common life

that have the potential to transform us, bringing wholeness, unity, and an experience of the holy that we seek. (p. 96)

In the dissenting tradition the individual is primary and community, however valued, is secondary. This gets into American culture in the widespread sentimental value attributed to community by virtually all sectors of the American public except academics, an exception it would take me too far afield to explain now. But this voluntaristic notion of community, however treasured, is unable to bear the weight it is expected to carry. This understanding of community is perilous because individuals devote themselves to it only so long as it "meets their needs," and when it doesn't, there is no claim of perseverance or loyalty that community so understood, can exert. I am convinced that only a social understanding of human nature is ontologically true and that only a social ontology could divert American culture from the destructive course upon which it seems to be set.

I am now ready to move beyond the realm of sociological analysis into the realm of theology. Here I want to issue a warning. Jim Adams in the old days when I was at Harvard, used to call me at 11 o'clock at night and say "Bob, put up your guard." He was about to ask me to do one more thing, and he told me to put up my guard so he wouldn't coerce me into accepting another obligation, and while I was putting up my guard he was slowly twisting my arm until I agreed to do the one more thing. I have no capacity to do any arm-twisting tonight, but still I say, put up your guard. Here comes a trinitarian sacramentalist making suggestions for UU theology. Forewarned is forearmed.

Let me start by saying that the most depressing thing in the survey questionnaire to me was question no. 18, "What do you expect to happen for you when you attend a UU worship service?" The problem is that none of the five possible answers have anything to do with worship as I understand it: not "get something to help get me through the week," not "intellectual stimulation," not "social interaction," not "remember with gratitude and celebrate what is most important in my life (note in *my* life)," and not "music and community singing," though I agree with Clark Olsen that the weak showing of the latter, which I think has at least something to do with worship, is upsetting.

Worship as I understand it is worship *of something*, and that defining aspect of worship doesn't seem to be implied in any of the five answers. What I am suggesting is that the absence of a social ontology is mirrored in the absence in worship of symbolism of something that transcends the individual. Indeed there is a wistful moment in the document *Interdependence* where that truth seems to be recognized:

While discarding the doctrine of Lordship, have we also lost a principle of union? Are we in a community of congregations merely to simplify the delivery of services? Does Unitarian Universalism have any meaning larger than what it means to any particular congregation? (p. 18)

I want to suggest in a minute the way in which Christian symbolism has what Jim Adams called "community-forming power." (*Interdependence*, p. 12) But first, to show you how ecumenical I am, I want to refer to Buddhism, Zen Buddhism in particular. Some of you may know that I started out as a Japan specialist, and that I have been not only professionally but personally interested in Zen Buddhism, having some experience of Zen practice, and having served for a

year on the board of the San Francisco Zen Center. Talk about individualistic religion! American seekers have been drawn to Zen often because of what they perceive as its total religious individualism. Just to illustrate, let me give a quote from someone Steven Tipton interviewed for his book *Getting Saved from the Sixties*:

I started Zen to get something for myself, to stop suffering, to get enlightened. Whatever it was, I was doing it for myself. I had hold of myself and I was reaching for something. Then to do it, I found out I had to give up that hold on myself. Now it has hold of me. . . (Berkeley: UC Press, 1982, p. 115.)

One of the things that surprised, and even annoyed, some seekers is that Zen practice is not just sitting, it is also worship. As part of every zazen session there is a worship service. The heart sutra is chanted and the Buddha and all the teachers who link the students to the Buddha are not only remembered but worshipped. Quite physically worshipped. One gets down on one's knees repeatedly during the service and touches one's forehead to the mat as one remembers those who made one's practice possible. Indeed one of the purposes of the worship service is to remind one that one is able to practice zazen only because of a community of practice that stretches back for millennia, but also that, as Suzuki Roshi put it, "our practice is for others." Buddhism, at least Mahayana Buddhism, is not, whatever Westerners may think, individualistic. Its social ontology is absolute. The Buddha nature is in every grain of dust, every tile, every animal, and certainly in every human. We are all part of the dharma body, we all float in the sea of dharma. Our little private selves are illusionary; in the light of the Buddha nature they don't even exist.

Before I get more specifically into Christian social symbolism, let me say that I don't think that the theism that alarms humanists is even necessary for Christianity. Paul Tillich, who defined god as "Being itself," was not, it is now generally agreed, a theist, but a panentheist, and nonetheless one of the most influential Christian theologians of the century. But for me, theology is as much what we do as what we say, and it is what we say in connection with what we do that is more important than what we say abstractly. So I want to start with the sacraments, baptism and communion or Eucharist.

The dissenting churches are characteristically suspicious of the sacraments--too closely related to hierarchy and dogma--but in their suspicion they also give evidence of their ontological individualism. For the sacraments give a tangible, physical expression to the one body of which we are all members. Paul is getting at this when he says in First Corinthians, "By one Spirit we are baptized into one body--Jews or Greeks, slaves or free." In Galatians he adds, "male or female," and we might add, without violating the spirit of Paul's letters, "black or white, Eastern or Western." In a sacramental Christianity, our diversity and pluralism are penultimate goods and we are right to celebrate them. But in the Spirit we become one body; that is our ultimate good.

And in the Eucharist the social ontology becomes if anything even more evident: the Holy Spirit sanctifies the bread and the wine so that they become the body and blood of Christ, and we, partaking of it, become members of the body of Christ. In the Eucharist, the word becomes flesh; God becomes incarnate so that we participate in the incarnate God; the priority of the body, the communion of the saints which was here before us, will be here after us, and upholds us every moment of our lives, is clearly asserted relative to our individual selves. With our innate American anti-institutionalism we tend to distance ourselves from the "institutional" church; we refer to "it" or "them." But the Holy Spirit fills *us*; *we* are the church. That's what Vatican II was

saying about the people of God. The church is not something over against us, any more than God is over against us. God in Christ is with us; the Holy Spirit fills us; we are the church. At least that is one possible Christian understanding. I suspect that most American Christians, and not in the dissenting traditions alone, have a much more individualistic understanding of their own faith. It is interesting to me that your own Jim Adams expressed, toward the end of *The Prophethood of All Believers* a deeply social understanding of the church:

The church as a community of faith and hope is entrusted in a special way with the ministry of wholeness for the individual and the society, for each member individually and all together. The church is, then the messenger of hope for the kingdom which through God's grace is always "at hand," available. (Beacon, 1986, p. 310)

My point, after all, is not to sell you any bill of goods, Buddhist or Christian. My point is in the end sociological: that without powerful rituals and sacraments--practices that make our beliefs tangible, physical--and without the powerful symbols and narratives that resonate with those rituals and sacraments, the fundamental truth of social ontology can be covered over. We may begin to really believe that we have created ourselves out of nothing, that our selves are, as Robert Coles put it, "the only or main form of reality." (*Habits*, p. 143)

Beneath the surface glitter of American culture there is a deep inner core, which, I have argued, is ultimately religious: the sacredness of the conscience of every single individual. Nothing I have said tonight takes away from the enormous power for good of that idea. It is responsible for the best in our culture. But, by the very weakness of any idea of human solidarity associated with it in a culture dominated by the dissenting Protestant tradition, it opens the door to the worst in our culture. It easily leads to the idea that humans are nothing but self-interest maximizers, and devil take the hindmost. It is that version that we see all around us. I don't think we can challenge that version until we come to see that the sacredness of the individual depends ultimately on our solidarity with all being, not on the vicissitudes of our private selves. You face in your very denomination the most basic conundrum of American life. If you can solve it you may help lead the larger society out of the wilderness into which it has wandered.