UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM AND THE WORKING CLASS:
WIDENING THE WELCOME

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ABSTRACT

UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM AND THE WORKING CLASS: WIDENING THE WELCOME

by Rev. Andy Burnette

Americans have long grouped themselves according to social class in their faith communities. The groupings have remained remarkably consistent over the last 100 years. Unitarian Universalism remains at or near the top of every measure of social class.

For as long as these divisions have been discussed, theorists and practitioners of American religion have decried them. H. Richard Niebuhr saw Protestant denominationalism as evidence that the Christian church had violated Jesus’ teaching. Current Unitarian Universalists are in active discussions of ways to break through the faith’s challenges to welcome working class members.

This dissertation acknowledges that shifting social class position is extremely difficult. Interviews with ten working-class Unitarian Universalists demonstrate how hard it will be to widen our working-class welcome. However, there is reason to hope that this liberal faith tradition can learn from prophets ancient and future and improve its hospitality to both its own working class members and to working class neighbors in the communities in which Unitarian Universalism is practiced.

Randi Walker, PhD, Coordinator
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Chapter One

Social Class and Religion from Marx to Niebuhr

In this dissertation, I will argue that it is both possible and desirable for the Unitarian Universalist Association to widen its welcome to working class persons. I will use the work of theologians and sociologists, the writings of Unitarian Universalists on social class and the faith, and personal interviews with self-identified working-class Unitarian Universalists to suggest that there are indeed ways forward through the complicated theological and sociological tangle that is the relationship between true, working-class-inclusive Universalism and Unitarian Universalism’s persistent upper-middle-class identity. I will posit that those ways forward will require concentrated effort and critical self-examination by Unitarian Universalist individuals and congregations.

It is important, at the beginning, to grapple with the writings of several key figures. Karl Marx, Max Weber, Ernest Troeltsch, and H. Richard Niebuhr are among those whose writings about social class and religion persist in influence. Their thinking will form a foundation on which I will frequently build, and from which it will sometimes be necessary to depart.

1. Marx: A Revolution Is Needed

Karl Marx, troubled by the divide between the egalitarian principles Germany said it espoused and the capitalist society it in fact was, proposed revolution as the only solution. He set out neat divisions between working and owning classes or, in his words, the bourgeois and the majority proletariat. Basically, the proletariat were those people
who worked for others. They were the producing masses who fueled the profit-churning machine created by the Industrial Revolution, which was just coming to an end in the mid-nineteenth century. The bourgeois were those who owned the factories in which the proletariat worked, and to whom the proletariat had to sell their labor to survive.

Marx wrote his *Communist Manifesto* in 1847. In it he dreamed of a classless society rising from a radical proletariat-driven revolution. The *Manifesto* was published a year before the 1848 Spring of Nations, a series of democratic revolutions which sparked short-lived hopes across Europe that the kind of society Marx described might finally thrive. When the Spring failed as the revolutions were turned back one by one, Marx was demoralized. “(The failure of the Spring) meant abandoning the notion of ‘permanent revolution’, which precisely expressed the idea of an imminent transition from class to classless society and also the corresponding political program of the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ (as opposed to the ‘dictatorship of the bourgeoisie’).”

What he saw as the indifference of the proletariat as the Spring slowly failed was particularly troubling to Marx. Preoccupation with philosophy and religion were, if not the entire problem, certainly a major stumbling block on the road to Marx’s classless society. Religion, Marx famously believed, was the ‘opiate of the people’ which served to preserve the status quo. It was a tool the bourgeois could use to keep the proletariat in check; a source of daydreams which, for members of the working class of a capitalist society, would never be realized without revolution. Though the comfort people received from religion may have been real, Marx argued that religion’s insidious effect was to

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keep the proletariat from the work of liberation.

Marx wrote in the essay *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, immediately after the paragraph containing his famous condemnation of religion as the opiate of the people, “The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness. The demand to give up the illusions about its condition is the demand to give up a condition which needs illusions.”

Philosophy and religion were only methods for talking about the way the world was. The needed transformation of the world order could only be accomplished via a proletariat revolution. The goal was to transform the world, not simply to discuss it, which, again, philosophy and religion were content to do:

By becoming conscious of this mistake, human beings will become capable of ‘reappropriating’ their essence which has been alienated in God and, hence, of really living out fraternity on earth… it is the practical conflicts which set men against each other, to which the heaven of religion - or of politics - offers a miraculous solution. They cannot really leave these divisions behind without a practical transformation which abolishes the dependence of certain human beings on others.

Thus, Marx’s most clarion call was the call away from philosophizing to action. He was, in other words, a materialist, not an idealist. Marx urged the proletariat to shun German idealism in favor of a materialism which required, perhaps was, action in the world. His attitude is summed up in a story told by Donald Treadgold in an introduction to Sergei Bulgakov’s essay *Karl Marx as A Religious Type*. Treadgold wrote that Marx

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3 Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, 17. In this quote, Balibar refers to Feuerbach’s thinking, using Feuerbach’s term ‘reappropriating.’
“entered in a guest book belonging to relatives: for ‘your idea of happiness,’ …, ‘to fight’ … For ‘your idea of misery,’ Marx responded, ‘to submit.’”

No partial revolution of German society would satisfy, no peaceful and gradual revolution would suffice, because a partial or gradual revolution would be dominated by those with money and power. Marx wrote: “It is not the radical revolution, not the general human emancipation which is a utopian dream for Germany, but rather the partial, the merely political revolution, the revolution which leaves the pillars of the house standing.” Even the pillars must be torn down, for this was no remodel. A new, classless house needed to be built, one in which religion does not stand in the way of progress.

Russian essayist Sergei Bulgakov’s critique of Marx, that he is actually a fervently religious person, rings true and seems to apply to modern fundamentalist atheists like Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris as well as to some Unitarian Universalists. How did Bulgakov determine what was Marx’s religion? “To determine the real religious center in a person, to discover his genuine spiritual core, is to find out the most intimate and important things about him, and then everything external and derivative will be comprehensible.” He notes that Marx seemed unable to summon kindness for people who thought differently than he. He had a “self-confident and imperious nature, intolerant of any objections.” Marx seemed to subsume individual personhood under the banner of

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5 Marx, op. cit., 54.
6 Bulgakov, op. cit., 41.
7 Ibid., 48.
proletariat freedom, choosing freedom for humanity over the rights of individual humans. He was dead set against religion. “Marx fights the God of religion with both his own science and his own socialism which, in his hands, turn into a means for atheism - a weapon for the emancipation of mankind from religion.” This evangelical atheism, argues Bulgakov, was Marx’s true religion. So, though Marx’s thinking on social class even today deeply affects those who write about social class and religion, it seems faith movements might do well to be cautious in their application of his thinking if Bulgakov is to be believed.

And yet, the great twentieth century Unitarian Universalist theologian James Luther Adams sees Marx’s as a utilitarian atheism, not at the very core of his thinking. “Atheism,” he writes, “may be viewed simply as a Kampfbegriff contrived by Marx in order to promote revolution in face of entrenched ecclesiastical powers. The intrinsic merit of this sort of atheism may be discerned from its utility to a revolutionary movement at a given moment in history.” And what is more, Protestant theology in the form of Tillich, for example, is fully in dialogue with a materialism which cannot accept an intervening being called God in place of human agency in history. In Christianity, Adams further argues, the incarnation is proof of materialism. Perhaps religion and Marxism can get along at some level after all.

I perceive in contemporary Unitarian Universalism the full acceptance of Marx’s materialism. We are those who “are willing to forego the security of absolutes and are

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8 Ibid., 49.

willing to question the allegedly self-evident.”  Adams posits, for being in dialogue with Marxism.

Adams states, further, that Marxism and Protestant religion need one another if either is to make the societal progress they each desire:

Socialistic humanism has pressed the case for justice, especially as justice involves material equality, more dramatically than have the great philosophies of Catholicism and Calvinism. But it has often sacrificed freedom. Similarly, many religious philosophies have carried the torch for freedom but without an adequate sense of justice. For both Marxism and Christianity, the fundamental social problem is the combining of a radical concern for a just society and the freedom to organize differentiation. If justice and freedom are to be achieved, we shall require a new birth of dialogue and joint action.  

Nowhere is this need for dialogue between justice and freedom more evident than in the contrast between Marx, the justice champion, and William Ellery Channing, great preacher of freedom.

2. Channing: Evolution of the Working Class, Not Revolution

The Unitarian minister Channing wrote across the sea in America just before Marx penned his most well-known work. In 1840, less than a decade before Marx’s landmark Manifesto, William Ellery Channing called for a very different kind of working class revolution. Standing before a group of mechanics’ apprentices in Boston, he delivered what came to be called Lectures on the Elevation of the Laboring Portion of the Community. Channing, a member of Boston’s heady, high-status Boston Brahmin class, laid out his hopes for the laboring class in two lectures. They were delivered in meetings

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10 Ibid., 164.
11 Ibid., 171-172.
Channing, much less a materialist than Marx, reversed Marx’s preference for action, choosing individual mental and spiritual reformation over a material proletariat revolution. Channing prescribed thought as the preferred method of laboring class elevation. “Every man, in whatsoever condition, is to be a student,” he said. “No matter what other vocation he may have, his chief vocation is to think.” Specifically, Channing encouraged “force of thought, exerted for the acquisition of truth.”

It is important to note the sort of thinking and truth of which Channing was speaking. He was encouraging study which would help the laboring class see the world as interconnected, to view nature on its own terms. He told that room full of working people, “All thinking which aims honestly and earnestly to see things as they are, to see them in their connections, and to bring the loose, conflicting ideas of the mind into consistency and harmony, all such thinking, no matter in what sphere, is an approach to the dignity of which I speak. You are all capable of the thinking which I recommend.”

He was not advocating abandoning physical labor to while away life in the library. Working class people should learn to master their thoughts and be reflective, he said, not necessarily aim to spend hours and hours poring over books or visiting museums. Farmers should learn about farming, machinists about the inner workings of their

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13 Ibid., 18.

14 Ibid., 22.
machines. All people should develop a taste for beauty and art. Why beauty and art? “Let me add,” Channing opined, “that the farmer and the mechanic should cultivate the perception of beauty. What a charm and new value might the farmer add to his grounds and cottage, were he a man of taste?”¹⁵ Like Marx, Channing was advocating for laborers freeing themselves from mindless servitude to the machines of the industrial revolution.

Unlike Marx, Channing’s would be, not a revolution, but an elevation of the mind and spirit. Though labor was essential, so too was learning. The two should be better balanced in the lives of the laboring classes. He wrote: “I do not expect a series of improvements, by which he is to be released from his daily work. Still more, I have no desire to dismiss him from his workshop and farm, to take the spade and axe from his hand, and to make his life a long holiday.”¹⁶

And here is the essential contrast between Marx and Channing. Again, where Marx calls for a material revolution and seeks to stir the passions of the proletariat, Channing prescribed an elevation of the spirit of the working person while preserving existing class divisions and avoiding such passions. “To rise,” Channing said, “the people must substitute reflection for passion. There is no other way.”¹⁷

In fact, the very gathering of workers to hear a lecture was proof to Channing that the revolution was already afoot:

> That members of the laboring class, at the close of a day’s work, should assemble in such a hall as this, to hear lectures on science, history, ethics, and the most stirring topics of the day, from men whose education

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¹⁵ Ibid., 25.
¹⁶ Ibid., 5.
¹⁷ Ibid., 14.
is thought to fit them for the highest offices, is a proof of a social revolution, to which no bounds can be set, and from which too much cannot be hoped.\textsuperscript{18}

Channing was clear that his was no political elevation. Workers should not necessarily seek to become politicians, though the work of thought might well lead to a change in station for some. Never should the working class unite in an attempt to overtake the ruling classes. This was about improving the everyday lives of the laboring classes, not changing their station. Intellect could, Channing argued, “throw a grace over our common actions, to make us sources of innocent cheerfulness and centuries of holy influence, and… give us courage, strength, stability, amidst the sudden changes and sore temptations and trials of life.”\textsuperscript{19} But without labor, life was close to meaningless.

But was that true for Channing himself? Was labor key in his own life, or was his life an extended holiday from the perspective of the working person? Since thought was of primary importance and work with one’s hands was essential, would Channing gladly trade places with his laboring audience? His hypocrisy was evident when he wrote:

\begin{quote}
The city is thronged with adventurers from the country, and the liberal professions are overstocked, in the hope of escaping the primeval sentence of living by the sweat of the brow; and to this crowding of men into trade we owe not only the neglect of agriculture, but what is far worse, the demoralization of the community. It generates excessive competition, which of necessity generates fraud. This elevation is not to be gained by efforts to force themselves into what are called the upper ranks of society… I wish them to rise, but I have no desire to transform them into gentlemen or ladies, according to the common acceptation of these terms… Very many of them need nothing but a higher taste for beauty, order, and neatness, to give an air of refinement and grace as well as
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Ibid.}, 2.
\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Ibid.}, 38.
comfort to their establishments. 20

One can almost hear Marx shouting that Channing’s prescription is an opiate of the proletariat and a salve to the conscience of the bourgeoisie. One thing is certain: Channing was not hoping to throw open the doors to higher social status.

As Mark Harris notes in his book *Elite: Uncovering Classism in Unitarian Universalist History*, Channing’s lectures came in a time of class struggle in America. The very first labor unions had come into being just a decade before Channing’s visit to the mechanics’ trade union library. Harris wrote:

Many (labor unions) advocated free public education, the end of monopolies, and the abolition of imprisonment for debt. They began to exert their rights and liberties as American citizens, and while Unitarians advocated these values in their religious system, they became anxious when democracy and equality were applied to local political and economic issues.21

Channing once told a colleague that the working class were better off than lawyers and merchants, since their goals were less lofty and they were less likely to be disappointed when they went unfulfilled. Certainly working people could be elevated to the moral level of the Unitarians, but if social classes were set up against one another, some believed chaos in the social order was likely to follow.22

The legacy of the *Elevation* lectures is mixed. Certainly there is beauty in Channing’s democratization of intellectualism. As will be seen below, more than one contemporary working class Unitarian Universalist interviewed for this project spoke of


the desire to be respected on their own terms as a thinking person, whether or not they hold degrees. Further, Channing’s honoring of physical labor was likely affirming to those workers who heard or read his lectures. Similarly, working class interviewees for this project spoke of the dignity of their work, their enjoyment of it, and the wish that other Unitarian Universalists could understand that dignity.

Still, Channing’s standing before a room full of people who worked with their hands telling them that their work was valuable and that they only needed to read and think more to be ‘elevated’ is a parable for the social class problems Unitarian Universalism faces still today. We speak to issues of economic inequality and other class-based social injustices, and we advocate for alleviation of poverty and more equitable sharing of wealth, yet our congregations are not home to large percentages of working class persons. We do not seem to see working class folks as ‘our people.’ Unitarian Universalists find it easier to work on behalf of working class persons than to work with them. Certainly easier than to worship with them. Later in the nineteenth century, another German thinker would create a new way to think about religious groups. When social class was applied to his theory, it revolutionized thinking on social class and religion.

3. Max Weber: Calvin and the Protestant Ethic

Max Weber (1864-1920) is often credited with co-founding sociology as an area of study. As James Luther Adams contended, “Weber must be classified with such seminal figures as Marx and Nietzsche, Adam Smith and Hegel.”23 Certainly he can also

be cited as the pioneer of “sociological attempts to classify religious movements.”

Philosophically, Weber was part materialist, part idealist. To quote Adams once more, “Weber held that ideas are not merely epiphenomena of social conditions and struggles, but decisively affect human behavior and history. At the same time, of course, he recognized that a reciprocal relation obtains between ideas and conditioning factors.”

The interplay of ideas and social phenomena was evident in his work on Capitalism and Calvinism.

Weber’s 1905 work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* is a seminal writing in the areas of sociology of religion and economics. In it, Weber argued that modern capitalism, with its ethical considerations which are innovations over the more unchecked capitalism of previous periods, was inherent in the Puritan spirit. The evidence seemed clear enough to Weber. He wrote:

A glance at the occupational statistics of any country of mixed religious composition brings to light with remarkable frequency a situation which has several times provoked discussion in the Catholic press and literature, and in Catholic congresses in Germany, namely, the fact that business leaders and owners of capital, as well as the higher grades of skilled labor, and even more the higher technically and commercially trained personnel of modern enterprises, are overwhelmingy Protestant.

This, Weber claimed, was the fruit of an old tree. The Reformation shook the foundations of religion, he concluded, upending any assurance that one would, in the end, be saved by God. If indulgences could not in truth be secured as insurance for heaven,

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25 Adams, *op. cit.*, 175.

how could a person know they were destined for eternal blessing rather than damnation? This question, Weber wrote, was especially salient in light of the Calvinist doctrine of double predestination, the belief in God’s decision that some would be saved and some would be damned regardless of their deeds.

What Weber described as the Calvinistic desire to verify personal election was mainly satisfied in the proof of worldly success. This required a strong work ethic in which any time spent not earning money or working was wasted time. The writings of Benjamin Franklin served for Weber as prime examples of this ethic. James Luther Adams writes, in agreement with Weber: “Without the ethic of ascetic Protestantism the spirit of modern capitalism could not have become so readily widespread. On the other hand, ‘the spirit of capitalism,’ in turn, affected the development, indeed the transformation, of the Protestant ethic.”

Religion as a motive for the Protestant ethic became less and less important until the ethic became mostly secular. The desire for wealth took the front seat from the desire for eternal salvation. Adams argues, “These changes might be called Weber’s account of the devil’s toboggan slide of ascetic Protestantism.”

Though Adams seemed to accept Weber’s assessment of the rise of modern capitalism, others told the story of its ascent differently. Prominent among the critics of Weber’s hypothesis was Richard Tawney, who in Religion and the Rise of Capitalism broadened the birth narrative. He told it as a European story, inclusive of both Catholics

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27 Adams, op. cit., 176.

28 Adams, op. cit., 177.
and Protestants. As the medieval, church-controlled united system gave way to a separation of church and economics in the sixteenth century, the tension between the desire for profit and the teachings of the church regarding proper management of capital came to the fore for all of European Christendom, not for Protestants alone. R. H. Tawney wrote:

There was plenty of the ‘capitalist spirit’ in fifteenth-century Venice and Florence, or in south Germany and Flanders, for the simple reason that these areas were the greatest commercial and financial centers of the age, though all were, at least nominally, Catholic… It seems a little artificial to talk as though capitalist enterprise could not appear till religious changes had produced a capitalist spirit. It would be equally true, and equally one-sided to say that the religious changes were purely the result of economic movements.  

The economic successes in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries marked the close of the Middle Ages. In this new era, said Alister McGrath, “Capitalism and Protestantism appear to have been regarded as possessing economic and religious affinities with the rising artisan and mercantile urban classes, allowing them a degree of self-expression and fulfillment hitherto unattainable within the matrix of the restricted economic and religious beliefs and practices of the late medieval period.”  

Some Christians sought to sanctify gaudy displays of wealth, others to shun the world and its wealth entirely. But, Tawney questions in the voice of Calvinism, “Was it not conceivable that the gulf which yawned between a luxurious world and the life of the spirit could be bridged, not by eschewing material interests as the kingdom of darkness, but by

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dedicating them to the service of God?"  

Here it becomes clear that Weber oversimplified Calvin’s teaching when it came to worldly success. For Calvin, all life was intended to glorify an omnipotent, omniscient God. This God had ordered the world as it was. Certainly financial success was part of God's plan for some people, and God’s gifts should be enjoyed and used for their intended purposes. The sanctification of economics was a religious innovation. But, for Calvin, to strive for such gifts was to display a lack of faith in God and God’s plan. 

Calvin wrote:

Away then with that inhuman philosophy which, while conceding only a necessary use of creatures, not only malignantly deprives us of the lawful fruit of God’s beneficence but cannot be practiced unless it robs a man of all his senses and degrades him to a block. But no less diligently, on the other hand, we must resist the lust of the flesh, which, unless it is kept in order, overflows without measure.  

Calvin emphasized work and stressed (as did the Catholic church) that laziness was a sin, in direct opposition to the sometime view of the very wealthy that work was base and to be avoided. In Calvin’s Geneva, even those from royal families were required to work for a living. For the first time, all work was holy, from cleaning out animals’ stalls to operating a bank, and everything between. God must be honored in even the mundane, but God was present in even the mundane. Hard work was a sign of election for salvation, and as such could alleviate the often significant anxiety over whether a person was one of God’s elect. Hard work (not wealth, but work) was an indicator of  

31 Tawney, op. cit., 110.  


33 McGrath, op. cit., 232.
election. McGrath clarified, “Work, it may be added, is not understood as ‘paid
employment’, but as diligent and productive use of whatever resources and talents one
has been given.”34 This sometimes took the form of political activism, as was the case for
English and later American Puritans.

Certainly Calvin’s teaching helped justify financial success and the capitalism of
the day in a time when many Christians were condemning it:

It is not wholly fanciful to say that… Calvin did for the bourgeoisie of the
sixteenth century what Marx did for the proletariat of the nineteenth, or
that the doctrine of predestination satisfied the same hunger for an
assurance that the forces of the universe are on the side of the elect as was
to be assuaged in a different age by the theory of historical materialism.
He set their virtues at their best in sharp antithesis with the vices of the
established order at its worst, taught them to feel that they were a chosen
people, made them conscious of their great destiny in the Providential plan
and resolute to realize it.35

But though Calvin’s thought did reconcile profit and faith, it also limited usury
and severely restricted the mark-ups merchants could make on their products. Making an
unreasonable profit off of a fellow Christian’s need was prohibited. Instead of
condemning practices like interest out of hand, Calvin wanted to affix Christian ethics to
their application. Moderation, not abstinence, was the rule. Calvin preached discipline
and the imprint of Godliness on social institutions, not their demise.

Over time, there came to be a difference between Calvin’s teaching and the
theological school called Calvinism. “The Calvinists of history were not… necessarily
loyal and rigid adherents to strict systems of doctrine,” McGrath posited, “but were,

34 McGrath, Ibid, 245.
35 Tawney, op. cit., 112.
rather, individuals who conformed to a general social type. Their character… was ultimately detachable from its theological roots.”

Weber makes much of the doctrine of double predestination as helping bring about modern capitalism. But Alister McGrath emphasizes that the doctrine of predestination was not an innovation of Calvin’s. It hearkened back at least as far as Augustine. Further, though not central to Calvin’s theology, predestination came to be emphasized by Calvinists who came after Calvin in large part as a way of distinguishing themselves from the Lutherans, who in most other ways were remarkably similar to Calvinists.

As well, though Calvin himself was suspicious of human reason, the notion of theology as a science became increasingly important after his death, leading his followers to develop, or attempt to develop, a systematic Calvinist theology. The theologian Theodore de Beze, Calvin’s contemporary who took over much of Calvin’s responsibility in Geneva after Calvin’s death, even designed a flowchart which detailed the progress of the chosen toward salvation, and the progress of the damned toward eternal punishment. God’s predestination of human beings was central to Calvinism as espoused by de Beze and other of Calvin’s followers. At the 1618 Synod of Dort, the Reformed church adopted a theology similar to the TULIP Calvinism that came to be espoused in early America. Here again, predestination was at the center of the theological system.

Even still, some Calvinists emphasized double predestination and some did not. McGrath pointed out Weber’s shortcomings in recognizing this:

36 McGrath, op. cit., 203.
Weber fails to distinguish the different levels of Calvinist commitment to the doctrine… The Arminians virtually abandoned the idea, while orthodox Calvinism retained it… Yet it was Arminian Amsterdam which created the remarkable wealth of the United Provinces, while Calvinist Gelderland remained economically backward. Weber’s theory suggests the reverse should have occurred.  

As McGrath asserted, “Capitalism and Calvinism were virtually coextensive by the middle of the seventeenth century.” But by then, the doctrinal foundations of the Protestant work ethic had largely been left behind.  

It is as if Calvinism’s distinctive commitment to mundane activity and investment had been detached from its theological basis and become absorbed within western European society independent of its original religious roots. What may have been distinctive of Calvinism in the sixteenth or early seventeenth centuries seems to have become the common coinage of the northern European bourgeoisie by about 1650… It may be argued with some cogency that the general later seventeenth-century attitude towards work and secular activism - upon which Calvinism by then had lost its monopoly - is the residue of the Ange of an earlier period over the issue of divine election.  

Although there is deep connection between Calvinist Protestantism and the rise of modern Capitalism, Weber’s linear cause-and-effect thinking is far too simple to describe the complex interaction between Calvinism and economics in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. However, Tawney notes:

What is true and valuable in his essay is his insistence that the commercial classes in seventeenth-century England were the standard-bearers of a particular conception of social expediency, which was markedly different from that of the more conservative elements in society - the peasants, the craftsmen, and many landed gentry - and that that conception found expression in religion, in politics, and, not least, in social and economic

37 McGrath, Ibid., 239.  
38 McGrath, Ibid., 237.  
39 McGrath, Ibid., 243.
4. Weber’s Church-Sect Delineation

Some argue that Weber mainly disagrees with Marx, especially when it comes to religion’s relationship to economics. Certainly Weber contradicts Marx’s harsh materialism, attempting to prove that the ideas and ideals found in religion can in fact shape reality.

Weber does not ignore religion’s role as a legitimating element in social inequality… Weber’s sociology of religion, nonetheless, is notable for its claims that religion can be a source of social change, as opposed to either (a) merely a reflection of material causes of change or (b) a source of (oppressive) stability.  

Yet Weber did not leave materialism completely. He argued that society and religion are always acting on one another. The material world influences ideals, and vice-versa. In this effort, which begat a school of religious sociology that flourished in the mid twentieth century, one of Weber’s most enduring contributions was his demarcation between church and sect. The church-sect divide would eventually cascade down through Weber’s peer, Troeltsch, to H. Richard Niebuhr, and then to the vast American religious audience to influence thinking on social class and religion even today.

A fundamental difference between church and sect for Weber was the path to membership. Church membership was a birthright. One born into a church must purposely reject such membership to lose it. Even being a ‘sinner’ cannot separate one from membership in a church.

40 Tawney, op. cit., 317.

The church was defined further, Weber argued, by four characteristics:

1) the rise of a professional priesthood… with salaries, promotions, professional duties, and a distinctive way of life; 2) claims to universal domination, that means, hierocracy must at least have overcome household, lineage and tribal ties… 3) dogma and rites (Kultus) must have been rationalized, recorded in holy scriptures, provided with commentaries, and turned into objects of systematic education… (and) 4) all of these features must occur in some kind of compulsory organization.42

The main tools the institutional church possessed were its sacraments, and it sought to spread its gospel, and wield its power, by making sure as many people can access them as possible. It also exercised considerable control by denying people access to its sacraments. The church was a hierarchical institution, with offices like priest and bishop. For the most part, however, the church was inclusive, since, as was noted above, all in its realm were born into membership.

By the measurement of membership, sects were more exclusive than churches. A person must choose to join a sect as an adult. This, of course, made sacraments like infant baptism illegitimate in such groups. Weber added:

Sects have strict criteria of entrance, and impose stringent performance norms. They have a strong sense of their own identity and of the distinctiveness of their mission. They are protest movements. In many sects, protest… (extends) to wholesale rejection of the values and lifestyles of the modern world… People who fail to live up to the sect’s demanding moral codes run a high risk of being thrown out - ‘disfellowshipped’ or ‘disowned’ - and ignored, ‘shunned.’ 43

Whereas in a church charismatic power is contained in offices like priest, in a sect


43 Aldridge, Religion, 34.
power is much more diffuse and accessible, at least to those with force of personality. “In one word, the church is the bearer and trustee of an office charisma, not a community of personally charismatic individuals, like the sect… In contrast to all consistent churches, all rigorous sects adhere to the principle of lay preaching and of every member’s priesthood, even if they establish regular offices for economic and pedagogic reasons.”

It follows, then, that sects are characterized by direct democracy in governance.

One feature of sects which is also a feature of Unitarian Universalism (which I will argue is a church-sect hybrid) is its anti-political character.

The pure sect must advocate ‘tolerance’ and ‘separation of church and state’ for several reasons: Because it is in fact not a universalist redemptory institution for the repression of sin and can suffer political as little as hierocratic reglementation [meaning regulation or control]; because no official power can dispense grace to unqualified persons and, hence, all use of political force in religious matters must appear senseless or outright diabolical; because the sect is simply not concerned with outsiders; because, taking all this together, the sect just cannot be anything but an absolutely voluntary association if it wants to retain its true religious identity and effectiveness. Therefore, consistent sects have always taken this position and have been the most genuine advocates of ‘freedom of conscience.’

But sects, which often center on a rejection of the world as it is, usually do not remain sects. After the death of its charismatic founder, and as its membership grows, Weber observed that most sects evolve into churches. The charisma which before was centered in one person is transferred to an office. Aldridge writes, “In the Catholic Church, for example, Christ’s charisma derived from his unique personhood, is transmitted to the church as the office charisma of Peter, the popes, and the priesthood.

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Even if an individual is not worthy of the office he or she holds, the office is not thereby undermined.”

There are certainly sects which have remained sects. Branches of the Pentecostal church such as the independent Holiness Pentecostals and those who are often called Oneness Pentecostals are examples. They condemn educated clergy, for example, preferring lay preachers called from among them who are ordained by other lay preachers. The question becomes, do these cases, which are somewhat rare in American religion, prove or disprove the rule? Weber may have anticipated, or observed, this himself. In *Economy and Society*, he makes a brief note about transitional forms between church and state, but declares that he has no time to expound and moves on. Whatever the answer, the church-sect delineation is ubiquitous in writings on social class and religion. In the background of this delineation is Weber’s belief that “the middle class, by virtue of its distinctive pattern of economic life, inclines in the direction of a rational ethical religion, wherever conditions are present for the emergence of a rational ethical religion.”

In the 1930s, as is demonstrated below, H. Richard Niebuhr took Weber’s church-sect distinction and add to it another feature: social class. Specifically, Niebuhr argued that in religion, people group themselves primarily along lines of social class. The disinherited are often the founders of sects which, in the second generation, trade passion for cultural respectability, the sect membership system thus yielding to that of a church.

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46 Aldridge, *op. cit.*, 35.

Niebuhr did not reserve judgment here as Weber seems to do. Still Weber’s shadow is obviously cast across Niebuhr’s writing.

But there is another important figure who should not be passed over in the rush to get to Niebuhr, who brought Weber’s church-sect classification to American audiences and whose work will be essential in considering Unitarian Universalism’s working class welcome. Much of Weber’s thinking which was passed down to Niebuhr came to him through Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923), on whose philosophies Niebuhr based his doctoral dissertation at Yale Divinity School.

5. Ernst Troeltsch: Building on Weber

The theologically and politically liberal Troeltsch was and is something of a divisive figure, when he is not dismissed entirely. One author wrote of him, “The view is widely held, and not only amongst those who would discredit him, that Troeltsch may have begun as a Christian theologian but that, in the end, he turned rather to a more general philosophy of culture.”48 This is only true, however, if one completely separates sociology from theology. When the two are seen to play on one another, Troeltsch can be read as a true, if practical, theologian. Troeltsch had an “interest in a link between historical analysis and interpretation of the present, in which the question of the relationship between culture generally and religion has a central place.”49 In his work the church is clearly his utmost concern.


Like Weber, Troeltsch implied the interaction of the material world and ideas/ideals, arguing that the two have an effect on one another, that there is not a one-way relationship. In his 1912 book *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches*, Troeltsch moved epoch by epoch to discuss the interplay between society and the Christian religion. Christians in all historical periods, he argued, developed a form of the faith which speaks to and is suited for their time, and the type of Christianity which they create has sometimes changed the society in which it arose. The medieval Catholic church was in a unique position, having in large part created the society in which it found itself. He saw this as a golden era in Christianity.

The most pertinent theme for this dissertation is Troeltsch’s adaptation of Weber’s church-sect type. Troeltsch added a third type to Weber’s initial two, writing in *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches* of church, sect, and mystical types. Troeltsch’s types of sect and church are similar to Weber’s. The institutional church is universal in nature, Troeltsch argued, “able to receive the masses, and to adjust itself to the world.”50 The sect is a body of believers living “apart from the world… limited to small groups, (emphasizing) the law instead of grace, and in varying degrees within their own circle set up the Christian order, based on love.”51 For these sects, the imminent coming Kingdom of God typically offers a binding pressure. About his third type, the mystical, Troeltsch wrote:

Mysticism means that the world of ideas which had hardened into formal

51 Ibid., 993.
worship and doctrine is transformed into a purely personal and inward experience; this leads to the formation of groups on a purely personal basis, with no permanent form, which also tend to weaken the significance of forms of worship, doctrine, and the historical element.52

New Age practice is an example of this type, but so, Troeltsch wrote, were the beginnings of Quakerism and Methodism. Troeltsch argued that all three types were valid and had their basis in the Christian Bible. Any of the forms could be filled with the truth of the faith, he posited. The form simply depended on sociological realities of the time period in which they arose. However, Troeltsch sometimes betrayed his preference for the organized church.

His most prominent American disciple, H. Richard Niebuhr, was quite open about a different preference, one for the sects which he sometimes called the religions of the disinherited, when, through his writing, he brought Weber and Troeltsch to America. Niebuhr was concerned about class divisions in Protestantism. He found in the church-sect division a way to talk about both the problem and the possible solution.

6. H. Richard Niebuhr: Class Stratification in Church and Sect

In 1929, fifty years after Marx’s death, H. Richard Niebuhr wrote the essay “Christianity and the Industrial Classes.” In it, he expressed his concern that the church was a classist organization:

So akin by nature, so closely connected in history, Christianity and the labor movement might have been allies and seed-plots for each other’s truth. That this has not been the case is the tragedy of both labor and the church… The church has lost not only the social enthusiasm and the energy of the labor class movement, but has failed also to appropriate for itself the spiritual qualities which labor could give to it; on the other hand

52 Ibid., 993.
it received from its connection with the leisure class qualities which stand
often enough in direct contrast with spiritual realities: worldliness and
satisfaction with the things that are; customs, habits of thought,
conventions of every kind, that obscure the real things in life; a practical
belief in the class-division of mankind into upper and lower groups and a
spirit of narrow nationalism and racial prejudice.  

Also in 1929, and here clearly influenced by Marx’s, Weber’s, and Troeltsch’s
thinking, H. Richard Niebuhr wrote The Social Sources of Denominationalism. This book
has come to be seen as one of the most important works on religion and social class in the
twentieth century. In Social Sources, Niebuhr built on Marx’s brief reflections on religion
and social class, even borrowing the terms ‘proletariat’ and ‘bourgeois.’ But where Marx
was ready to condemn religion altogether as a preoccupation which kept people from the
real work of liberation in the material world, Niebuhr wanted a saving revolution within
the church. As R. Laurence Moore wrote, “He wanted to demonstrate that religion had
acted in the past and could act in the future as a vigorous form of social protest.”
Niebuhr Biographer Jon Diefenthaler posited that, for Niebuhr, “the eyesore… was the
tendency for whole denominations to accommodate themselves to humanity’s divisions
into classes, races, and nations. This prevented the development of a Christianity capable
of integrating America’s culture.”

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53 H. Richard Niebuhr, “Christianity and the Industrial Classes,” Theological Magazine of the
Evangelical Synod of North America 57 (January 1929): 12-18, quoted in Keiser, R. Melvin,
Roots of Relational Ethics: Responsibility in Origin and Maturity in H. Richard Niebuhr (Atlanta,
Ga.: Scholars Press, 1996), 160. (After a careful search, I was unsuccessful in finding the primary
source.)

54 David G. Hackett, Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, R. Laurence Moore, and Leslie Woodcock Tentler,

55 Jon. H. Diefenthaler, Richard Niebuhr : A Lifetime of Reflections on the Church and the World,
Niebuhr, a proponent of the social gospel, likely was influenced by his generation’s call to world unity. The nationalism that was seen to have fueled World War I was largely condemned in liberal religious circles. The Paris Peace Conference gave birth to the League of Nations. Unity was being preached across disciplines and around the world. Niebuhr seems to have seen Christianity as a possible tool for a true political and religious universalism of humankind. As such, he believed religion could be useful to the working classes.

But this was all potential. It would require great reform of the Christian church. When Niebuhr looked around at American Christianity, he saw it promoting all the divisions that were present in other institutions. People most often did not join churches because of what they believed, he declared. They were grouped much more predictably along lines of social class.

Niebuhr was certainly also influenced deeply by the struggle to bring his denomination, the Evangelical Synod of North America, into greater influence on and assimilation into American culture. A member of the clergy in the denomination, as were his brother and father, Niebuhr was put off by the denomination’s insistence on maintaining certain traditions including, until World War I, speaking German in worship and in classes at Eden Theological Seminary where he later taught. The Niebuhrs believed such denominational insistence on particularity detracted from the true purpose of the Christian faith, which was in large part to bring people together to reform society. Such insistence on tradition certainly led to the proliferation of denominations in America, as splinter groups formed to worship in the language of their founders and
maintain other cultural traditions when reformers brought English to the worship service.

The concerns of the Evangelical Synod, and of all religious groups, must become more universal and outward-focused, Niebuhr argued.

Diefenthaler suggested that Niebuhr’s early work in the Evangelical Synod colored everything he did after:

To that denomination he willingly committed himself as pastor, educator, and leader. Yet in the process of the synod’s Americanization following World War I, he chafed under its resistance to assimilation and tasted some of the bittersweet realities that resulted from his efforts to heighten its concern for society and to reclaim the ecumenical aspects of its heritage. This he came to see as a struggle to keep “church” and “world” in their fundamental tension. By the time he wrote Social Sources, therefore, he was ready to assert that this same battle was the one all of Christianity in America must fight.56

To reform itself to proper influence in society, Christianity, Niebuhr argued, needed to overcome its divisions by returning to the teachings of its spiritual head. In a critique of the religion of his day and its corruption by a divisive world culture, Niebuhr wrote:

Christendom has often achieved apparent success by ignoring the precepts of its founder. The church, as an organization interested in self-preservation and in the gain of power, has sometimes found the counsel of the Cross quite as inexpedient as have national and economic groups. In dealing with such major social evils as war, slavery, and social inequality, it has discovered convenient ambiguities in the letter of the Gospels which enabled it to violate their spirit and to ally itself with the prestige and power those evils had gained in their corporate organization. In adapting itself to the conditions of a civilization which its founder had bid it to permeate with the spirit of divine love, it found that it was easier to give to Caesar the things belonging to Caesar if the examination of what might

56 Ibid., 25.
belong to God were not too closely pressed.\textsuperscript{57}

The great sin of the church which grieved Niebuhr most was denominationalism, which he deemed an ethical failure of American Christianity. Niebuhr saw the denominational divisions in the church as “accommodation of Christianity to the caste-system of human society…. The division of churches closely follows the division of men into the castes of national, racial, and economic groups.”\textsuperscript{58} He seems to have been unable to see the benefits denominations might offer, or that denominations could join together in groups, or even that denominational hierarchy might serve to strengthen Christianity by serving congregations. But these blind spots do not diminish the importance of Niebuhr’s thinking regarding the prominence of social class divisions in religion.

Niebuhr, leaning on the thinking of Marx, Weber, and Troeltsch, distinguished between the churches of the disinherited (proletariat) and the churches of the middle class (bourgeoisie). Believing that “castes make outcasts and outcasts form castes,”\textsuperscript{59} Niebuhr described a regrettable cycle of American religion in which the more pure religions of the disinherited were too quickly contaminated by economic success.

He made note of several distinguishing characteristics of disinherited people and their worship practices. He saw these sects, here again language borrowed from Weber via Troeltsch, mainly populated by the working class including Pentecostals among others, as influenced deeply by the members’ lack of formal education. “Where the power


\textsuperscript{58} \textit{Ibid.}, 8.

\textsuperscript{59} \textit{Ibid.}, 39.
of abstract thought has not been highly developed and where inhibitions on emotional expression have not been set up by a system of polite conventions,” Niebuhr wrote, “religion must and will express itself in emotional terms.”

Tongues-speaking, shouting and dancing in worship, spirited (and often anti-intellectual) preaching, these were marks of the religions of the disinherited. Across Western European and American religious history, Niebuhr wrote, the disinherited relied on inner experience rather than book learning for their experience of God. But the disinherited did not see this as a deficit. Nor did Niebuhr. He wrote, “Simple and direct in its apprehension of the faith, the religion of the poor shuns the relativizations (sic) of ethical and intellectual sophistication and by its fruits in conduct often demonstrates its moral and religious superiority.”

This led to a religion which held in great concern the needs of the poor. There is usually in this sort of faith a clear portrait, painted in word and song, of the coming future of equality and empowerment, the overthrow of the current world order, typically in the form of millenarianism.

But, according to Niebuhr (and here he sounds much like Weber), this pure sect-religion rarely lasts more than one generation. A first-generation religion of the disinherited, Niebuhr argued, inevitably backslides into denominationalism in its second generation. The path to perdition, for Niebuhr, seemed clear. A first generation which, though poor, emphasized restraint and contentment naturally built wealth. Success became downfall, and predictably so, as, he argued, “most important among the causes of

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60 Ibid., 30.
61 Ibid., 31.
decline of revolutionary churches into denominations is the influence of economic success. The churches of the poor all become middle-class churches sooner or later and, with their need, lose much of the idealism which grew out of their necessities.”\textsuperscript{62} So, for Niebuhr, Weber’s move from sect to church was judged to be negative. Its cause was what the Protestant work ethic had portrayed as ‘upward’ class mobility.

The churches of the middle class were markedly different than the religions of the disinherited, Niebuhr said, but not because their practitioners decided it should be so. “Upon the whole the acquisition of a bourgeois type of religious faith is not an heroic achievement, accomplished by dramatic revolt from prevailing conceptions, but rather the produce of a slow process of accommodation to the developing interests and experiences of a rising economic group.”\textsuperscript{63} Here, the disinherited first generation had traded passion for social respectability, and the convictions held by the fore-parents of the faith grew cold in their children and grandchildren. A romantic reliance on Providence in the first generation gsbr way to the frantic religion of activism.

According to Niebuhr, the religion of the middle class was an individualistic faith. It was not able to produce effective social justice change agents. He wrote:

Such an ethics is capable of producing a real heroism of self-discipline and, in its insistence on personal responsibility, the courage of resistance to the authority of state and church when these conflict with the imperatives of individual conscience. But this morality is incapable of developing a hopeful passion for social justice. Its martyrs die for liberty not for fraternity and equality.\textsuperscript{64}

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 54.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 89.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 87.
Puritanism, Niebuhr posits, grew where one could find the “rising commercial classes.” Puritanism eventually made its way to America, where its progenitors looked to make a great profit, as Weber said was inherent in their religious system. They worked the land with success, and the teachings of the sovereignty of God faded from Calvinist teaching, especially in the breakaway Unitarians. Niebuhr wrote:

A single line of development leads from Jonathan Edwards and his great system of God-centered faith through the Arminianism of the Evangelical revival, the Unitarianism of Channing and Parker, and the humanism of transcendental philosophy, to the man-centered, this-worldly, lift-yourself-by-your-own-bootstraps doctrine of New Thought and Christian Science. The common strand that runs through these various movements is the adaptation of the early faith to the changing attitudes of the bourgeoisie… This is not the religion of that middle class which struggled with kings and popes in the defense of its economic and religious liberties but the religion of a bourgeoisie whose conflicts are over and which has passed into the quiet waters of assured income and established social standing. Yet it remains the religion of a middle class which excludes from its worship, by the character of its appeal, the religious poor as well as those who live within the lower ranges of economic and cultural respectability.

It appears Niebuhr condemned Unitarian Universalism to a future devoid of working class appeal. Unitarian history does little to counter his claims. Unitarian Universalist historian and minister Mark Harris has detailed the participation of Unitarians in the field of eugenics, for example, in his book *Elite: Uncovering Classism in Unitarian Universalist History*. Channing’s patriarchal attitude toward the working class stands as one among many examples of such thinking in his generation of Unitarian preachers.

Yet there is hope, and it can be found even within Unitarian Universalist

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tradition. Niebuhr prescribed as a cure for the fractured Protestant church a universalism in which:

the organic, active peace of brotherhood leads through the hearts of peacemakers who will knit together, with patience and self-sacrifice, the shorn and tangled fibers of human aspirations, faiths, and hopes… will transcend the fears and dangers of an adventure of trust… It demands a resolute turning away from all those loyalties to the lesser values of the self, the denomination, and the nation, which deny the inclusiveness of divine love.67

His conclusions seem to live in the shade of the question asked by Unitarian minister Theodore Parker in the nineteenth century: What is permanent and what is transient in Christianity? Contemporary Unitarian Universalists might widen Parker’s query to ask what is transient and permanent in liberal religion in general, and in Unitarian Universalism in particular. Niebuhr is quick to allow that no religion will completely break from social and class characteristics. It will be difficult to find the balance between adaptation to social class norms, national identities, racial considerations, and a universally appealing faith but, Niebuhr pleaded, that is no excuse to give up the fight.

7. Unitarian Universalism: Church-Sect Hybrid?

Of course, this ideal is nearly impossible to put into practice. But Unitarian Universalists are positioned well to make a serious run at Niebuhr’s universalist vision. Today’s Unitarian Universalists stand near the intersection Niebuhr’s religions of the disinherited and of the upper middle classes. I argue that tolerance of heresy and the resulting fight for the rights of the heretics persecuted by the orthodox is and has always

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67 Ibid., 284.
been the primary connective tissue for Unitarians, Universalists, and Unitarian Universalists. Sometimes this struggle is couched in God language and sometimes it is not, sometimes it is about doctrine and sometimes it is about tolerance of and love for those who are perceived as somehow different from the majority, but the heresy/orthodoxy tension remains a central Unitarian Universalist message. We are concerned for the disinherited, and are ourselves often disinherited as LGBTQ people, people of color, and their allies, and atheists or agnostics who value religious community, among other categories. In Unitarian Universalism, those considered heretics in other faith traditions can find belonging. We are not quite Niebuhr’s faith of the “bourgeoisie whose conflicts are over and which has passed into the quiet waters of assured income and established social standing.” We have some characteristics of sects/religions of the disinherited. And yet, Niebuhr included Unitarianism in his list of bourgeoisie religions, and rightly so.

As further evidence that Unitarian Universalism straddles Weber’s church-sect divide, and Niebuhr’s separation of religion of the disinherited and middle class religion, take our system of ordaining clergy. We have a professional ministry, for example (church-type), but one which was developed out of pragmatic concerns, not ideology. Still today, ministers are symbolically called from among the congregation at our General Assemblies, reminding those who are paying attention of James Luther Adams’ call to the prophethood and priesthood of all believers (sect-type).

As well, the early Universalists, especially in America, were typically not formally educated. They really did often come to religion through the heart rather than
the human reason that Unitarians tended to emphasize. As Harris writes:

One of the defining features of Universalists is their class status. People who emerged from many different classes, lower as well as upper, but more firmly rooted in a hard-working middle class, largely created Universalism. Unitarianism tended to range from the middle class to the upper and educated classes.⁶⁸

This mixed identity will, in a later chapter, be revisited as a source of hope for welcoming working class persons.

8. Conclusions

Unitarian Universalists may feel acutely Marx’s call to move away from philosophizing and toward action, especially when it comes to more fully welcoming working class persons. We have been talking about it for an awfully long time. But instead of a coming revolution, working class Unitarian Universalist interviewees (see chapter three) point to the ghost of Channing haunting the coffee hours and worship services of our congregations in the form of assumptions about work, income, and education. Why might this be? And will a Unitarian Universalist revolution be required to change it? The answer becomes clear when Unitarian Universalism is situated among other faiths along measures of social class.

As will be shown in the next chapter, most Unitarian Universalist congregations are much more bourgeois than proletariat in makeup. This has led us to a deep and long-standing struggle welcoming working class persons. If Niebuhr is right about religions being grouped largely along lines of social class, one would expect some proof of such from sociologists measuring religion. In the next chapter, it will become clear that though

⁶⁸ Harris, op. cit., 64.
Niebuhr cannot be received without criticism, in general the class divisions in Protestant denomination in his thesis are proven by the numbers.

Five measures of socio-economic status are important in examining Unitarian Universalism’s class identity: income, degrees held, years of education, job prestige, and what sociologist and philosopher Pierre Bourdieu called social habitus. The latter, a ubiquitous but somewhat nebulous aspect of social class, is one about which Unitarian Universalists must think carefully to more fully welcome working class people. It will also be the most challenging to change. In chapter two, I will situate Unitarian Universalism in each of the five categories and discuss more contemporary thinking on social class and religion.
Chapter Two

A Persistent Division in Religious Movements

As stated above, Niebuhr’s application of social class to the church-sect distinction was groundbreaking. It offered a new way of understanding the many divisions in American religion. His classifications were often much too neat, perhaps especially for the increasingly pluralistic 21st century, but the substance of his observations has largely been supported by research. Americans still seem largely to group themselves according to class when it comes to faith. And the socioeconomic rankings of religious groups largely has not changed.

Yet although much has been written about social class and religion in America, there is no unanimously agreed-upon definition of social class. Marx was clear that for him, there were mainly two classes which were differentiated by their relationship to the means of production. Owners of the means were the bourgeois, and the proletariat were those who rented their bodies to produce on behalf of the bourgeois. In the 21st century United States, social class has more to do with access to power via education, money, and appearance.

Certainly there are aspects of class about which most modern sociologists agree. Class measurement always includes economics, often both income and wealth. It has something to do with a person’s level of and access to higher education as well as the type of work a person performs. But as Sean McCloud writes in *Divine Hierarchies*:

Class is much more than this… It is also about how we move our bodies, how we use them, and what we put on and into them. Class concerns
boundaries, those distinctions we make between ourselves and others. Because of this, class entails relationships, identities, meaning, and power… Class factors into how we vote, what kinds of breads we eat, and even how we worship and live our religion.69

Four measures are nearly ubiquitous and somewhat easy to discern: Income, degrees held, years of education, and even job prestige, a decades-old sociological measure of societal power and esteem. But when McCloud wrote about the food we eat, how we vote and what we wear, he was hinting at social habitus, a concept developed by French sociologist and philosopher Pierre Bourdieu. Social habitus will be explored in detail below. First, though, the data yielded from measuring the four more standard markers of social class sheds light on Unitarian Universalism’s social standing, which has changed very little over the years.

1. Class Rankings in American Religion

Sociologists rank religious movements in each of the four major areas: Income, degrees held, years of education, and job prestige. Most groups, once established, don’t move far if at all. R. E. Pyle reported in 2006, for example, that although black and conservative Protestants showed improved socioeconomic status between 1970 and 1990, the position of liberal Protestants and members of the Jewish faith remained unchanged near the top of most measures. “Liberal Protestants and Jews continue to rank highest in income, education, and occupational prestige. Catholics and Moderate Protestants score near the national mean on these measures, and Black Protestants and Conservative

Protestants rank lowest on socioeconomic indicators.” Niebuhr described most of these same groupings in 1929, and Weber’s work foreshadowed them.

Certainly some sociologists of religion argue that denominationalism is on the decline, and in some ways that is true. The move away from identification with a particular religious group is well documented and researched. The increase of the ‘Nones,’ those who do not claim a religious affiliation, is an example.

Adherents to sociology’s Fair Play Theory posit that as media and migration bring people together more frequently than ever before, there is resulting a dramatic shift toward universalism writ large. As well, groups which previously had little access to higher education are more easily able to earn degrees. In that kind of world, boundaries, including denominational divisions, become much less important than unity, and traditionally oppressed groups have new access to previously inaccessible religious groups, at least in theory. But the research does not seem to support these shifts.

In fact, research shows that those Americans who do practice religion may be as divided when it comes to social class as they have ever been. This is no surprise. Niebuhr, and Weber before him, as well as the evidence gathered by sociologists since, follow more closely with Fair Shares Theory. In this school of thought, writes R. E. Pyle, “Status boundaries between religious groups are… reflective of social divisions within the larger society. The boundaries persist to the degree that the various faith traditions embrace distinctive beliefs, practices, and styles of worship that have differential appeal to

individuals of high or low social standing.” 71 This was Niebuhr’s approach in *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*. Niebuhr hoped the church could change this reality, but the situation he described has persisted.

Pyle argued for what he called a modified Fair Shares approach. He allowed that cultural changes truly had caused shifts in power dynamics between denominations. Pentecostal denominations, for example, are no longer necessarily faiths only for the disinherited. Catholicism is being transformed by increased Latino immigration since the 1960s. Still, in Pyle’s thinking, which is borne out by his and others’ research, socioeconomic boundaries in American religious life will persist, in part because some of the changes in American culture which might seem at first glance to decrease class differences do not in fact have that effect:

> Though education levels have increased for all members of society, the influence of education in promoting social mobility has declined since the 1970s. Occupational changes in recent decades, such as growth in the number of service sector positions, increasing trends in outsourcing and sub-employment practices, along with a decline in domestic manufacturing have consequences in terms of reinforcing class differences and promoting polarization between workers in primary and secondary labor markets. 72

Therefore, Pyle argues, since socioeconomic inequality has not been undone in the wider American culture, Niebuhr’s maligned religious divides will persist and will continue to reflect the divisions in the society. Since humans are social animals, it makes sense that the ideologies held in our social groupings would manifest clearly in one of our most ideologically tribal pursuits: religion. Though American religionists seem to be


more able to choose their faith than ever before, one’s social habitus, developed since childhood, may be just as important as religious belief in choosing a faith. A person may be more able to put up with theological misalignment than class misalignment. When Thomas Jefferson predicted that all young men in his generation would become Unitarians, he did not take into account the narrow social class from which the faith drew.

Along these lines, most Americans remain in the religion of their upbringing, having inherited “religiously based cultural capital (e.g., religious knowledge and familiarity with belief systems and styles of worship).”

73 There will, then, be a generational perpetuation of these divides. Hence, “the relative ranking of the major religious categories will remain the same. Jews and Liberal Protestants will continue to occupy the upper ranks; Catholics, Moderate Protestants, and Nonaffiliates should be placed in the middle; and Black and Conservative Protestants will be positioned at the bottom.”

74 Pyle offers proof of his hypothesis using research gleaned from the General Social Surveys of 1972 to 2000. Frustratingly, there is little newer data to analyze. This speaks to the neglect of the study of social class in religion at large. Nevertheless, where Pyle compressed Unitarian Universalists into a category with other liberal Protestants, Christian Smith and Robert Faris in 2005 used the same survey data but broke out ‘Unitarians’ as a separate grouping. Smith’s and Faris’ analysis of the data makes a clear case for Pyle’s hypothesis.

73 Ibid., 67.
74 Ibid., 67.
2. The Divisions Persist: The Newest Numbers

When comparing the percentage of members of each group/denomination holding a college degree in the 80s to the same data point in the 90s up to 2000, the overall ranking of religious groups is remarkably consistent. Unitarians are first in college degrees held in both time periods, followed by Jews and then liberal Protestant groups. Near the bottom in both decades are more traditional sect-type faiths, including Pentecostals, Seventh Day Adventists, and Jehovah’s Witnesses. Black Baptist groups are near the middle.

More than 61 percent of Unitarians reported holding college degrees. On the lower end, Assemblies of God (Pentecostal) came in at 10.3 percent, and Black Baptists were at 19.9 percent. Jehovah’s Witnesses were at the bottom with seven percent.

Unitarians were also first in average years of education with 16.39 years per member in the 2000 survey. The lowest ranked, Other Pentecostals, reported an average of just 11.81 years of formal education per adherent. Where Unitarians reported an average of more than a college degree, Pentecostals averaged less than a high school diploma.

Unitarians come in second to Jews in mean household income in both the nineteen-eighties and the nineteen-nineties. The mean household income of Unitarians is reported to have been $46,158 just before 2000, more than twice that of the Pentecostals and conservative Methodists at the bottom of the scale. This ranking may be seen as a result of the educational position of Unitarian Universalism. Access to higher education has yielded higher incomes.
Certainly economics is not the only social class marker, but it is important for a group for whose theology and practice social justice is so essential. As R. Laurence Moore wrote, “every form of social hurt we have invented in America works hardest upon those people who lack the financial resources to fight back or even to imagine a different social reality than the one in which they are locked.”

As was stated above, Unitarians often work for causes that would be believed to improve the lives of working class people, but those people are not part of our congregations in large numbers. Unitarian Universalists are often working on behalf of working class persons, but not often beside them.

In addition to education (in degrees and years) and economics, a fourth ranking is also important: Occupational prestige. This ranking has long been used by sociologists to measure power relationships within cultures. Basically, the theory behind occupational prestige as a measurement is that there is a division of labor in every society, and a number of jobs which have to be done. The job a person performs affords her access to certain resources in the society. The jobs which allow most access to resources and esteem are measured as high on the prestige scale, and vice versa.

In the ranking of mean occupational prestige, as in mean household income, Jews are first and Unitarians second. Smith and Faris point out that “differences between the groups roughly track differences noted in education and income.” Unitarians fell very

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It is clear that Unitarian Universalist socioeconomic standing is largely static. In fact, not only did Unitarian Universalists not move much in any of the categories, few groups did. From these findings, Smith and Faris concluded that “the system of socioeconomic inequality that characterized American religion at the end of the twentieth century reflects a high degree of stability in reproducing itself over the years between the early 1980s and the late 1990s.” They perceive from this stability “that significant mobility within this system in the mid-twentieth-century may be declining, thus producing a more stable system of stratification.” It will not be easy for any group to change its positioning.

The categories they ascribe to religious groupings are troubling, if not surprising. Their conclusion echoes Niebuhr. They write:

The socioeconomic inequality evident in the American religious system appears to be patterned by theology, race and ethnicity, and liturgical style. As a generalization, the higher ranked religious groups tend to be more theologically liberal denominations and traditions, while the lowest ranked tend to be more conservative and sectarian. The highest ranked tend toward more hierarchical and federated church policies, whereas the lower ranked groups tend toward more openly expressive, informal, emotional, and “Spirit-filled” styles of worship… More highly ranked groups tend to have high percentages of whites as members, while lower ranked groups tend to include more racial minorities…

Again not surprisingly, the small amount of movement in socioeconomic ranking that did take place was mostly among the group which Weber and Troeltsch would

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77 Ibid., 100.
78 Ibid., 95.
79 Ibid., 102.
classify as sects, Niebuhr’s religions of the disinherited. The Pentecostal Assemblies of
God were the biggest gainers, moving up four spots. Mormons moved up one place, and
conservative Methodists moved up two. This seems to imply a realization of upward
mobility for those who began at the bottom, though perhaps it also represents the trading
of passion for social respectability. At the top there was little shuffling. Neither Unitarians
nor Jews moved at all, both maintaining their top rankings.

Why is this grouping so persistent? Sean McCloud, writing in 2007, further
developed Niebuhr’s hypothesis in an attempt to answer that question. McCloud believes
that social class does, as Niebuhr suggested, affect a person’s choice of religious faith, but
mainly by limiting the available options. Social class, McCloud argues, determines the
scope of choices available to a person, which limits their selection of faith. Writes Moore,
“A person with access to the privileged treatment at Sloan-Kettering may never see the
point of faith healing even if that person dies after a long, painful, and uselessly
prolonged illness.”80 People in various social classes simply experience the world
differently and therefore have access to different options.

3. Bourdieu and McCloud: Social Habitus and Socially Habituated Subjectivities

This hints at the fifth factor in measuring social class, one which may attract or
repel those looking for a faith home. This factor is the product of the social positioning
described above. Every group, certainly including religious groups, creates and occupies
what French Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu called a social habitus. This is something like a
natural habitat in which the members of each social class most naturally move.

80 Moore et al., American Religion and Class, 23. Sloan-Kettering is an elite hospital and cancer
research center.
Bourdieu described social class as the occupation of certain social spaces related to power and access to capital:

These fundamental powers are economic capital…, cultural capital, social capital, and symbolic capital, which is the form that the various species of capital assume when they are perceived and recognized as legitimate. Thus agents are distributed in the overall space, in the first dimension, according to the overall volume of capital they possess and, in the second dimension, according to the structure of their capital, that is, the relative weight of the different species of capital, economic and cultural, in the total volume of their assets.  

Each occupied space creates in its members “similar dispositions and interests, … thus … producing practices that are themselves similar.” Persons become comfortable in the space they occupy, with its practices and dispositions, and are not likely to move once habituated. This space and its accompanying dispositions and interests comprise a person’s social habitus. It encompasses relationships and the ways they are lived out, entertainment preferences including favorite sports, music, movies, and more. It certainly also includes worship services. Any denomination interested in enlarging its working class welcome, then, would have to undertake a serious examination of the habitus it has created in its worship services. It would need to ask whether its music is recognizable, its sermon references relatable, to people of various social class situations.

Even then, as is proven above, transcending social class divisions in religion is difficult. Habitus is certainly a factor here. Bourdieu writes, “If you want to launch a political movement or even an association, you will have a better chance of bringing together people who are in the same sector of social space… than if you want to bring

82 Ibid., 17.
together people situated (in different social spaces).”

McCloud builds on Bourdieu’s social habitus idea in constructing his notion of “socially habituated subjectivities,” which he defines as “the repertoire of beliefs, practices, attitudes, assumptions, and gestures that have been inculcated by our social locations.” Among the factors which lead to one’s socially habituated subjectivities he includes the four measures of social class, but also “race, gender, age, place, and region.” Here McCloud adds volume to Bourdieu’s idea.

Unlike Bourdieu, who portrays social habitus as a mostly static reality, McCloud offers hope for change.

The term I proffer differs from habitus in at least three ways. First, I acknowledge the possibility of conscious habituation. In other words, individuals may deliberately and actively engage in various disciplinary routines in order to cultivate particular habits or extinguish existing ones. Second, I view socially habituated subjectivities as multiple and at times conflicted within a single individual. Third… socially habituated subjectivities are not necessarily static throughout one’s lifetime. People may move in and out of various material and social circumstances throughout their lives.

McCloud’s addition of limited freewill in socially habituated subjectivities implies that social class boundaries can be overcome. It does not in any way imply that this will happen naturally. It is important to note that he talks about ‘cultivating particular habits’ and ‘extinguishing existing ones’ when he suggests peoples’ situations can change.

It seems Unitarian Universalists and those working class persons who join us each have

83 Ibid., 17.
84 McCloud, op. cit., 168.
85 McCloud, op. cit., 168.
86 McCloud, op. cit., 168.
difficult work ahead.

In summary, there are at least five indications of social class: Income, years of education, degrees held, job prestige, and social habitus or socially habituated subjectivities. In each of the first four, Unitarian Universalists measure at or near the top of denominational/religious group rankings. This produces a Unitarian Universalist social habitus which one would expect to be somewhat exclusive of working class persons. McCloud would argue that an individual can change their habitus, but can an entire religious group? Those who wish to more fully welcome working class persons into Unitarian Universalism must hope so since, as will be demonstrated in the next chapter, assumptions about the Unitarian Universalist habitus often do great damage to our efforts to cast a wider welcome.

4. Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Unitarians:

A Unitarian Universalist Class Story

Having laid out the evidence for Unitarian Universalism’s primary upper-middle to upper class identity, one would expect to find anecdotal evidence of such standing and its effects. As it turns out, the evidence is everywhere. Testimony from current-day working class Unitarian Universalists will come in the next chapter, but a few stories from our history help demonstrate the depth and complexity of the issue.

In 1970, Richard E. Sykes published an article entitled “The Changing Class Structure of Unitarian Parishes in Massachusetts, 1780-1880.” In it he considered the change in social status of the members of six congregations resulting from the separation of church and state. The congregations are: Second parish, Worcester; Unity Church in
the same town; the Unitarian Society of Fall River; Second Congregation Society of Springfield; and First Parishes in Fitchburg and Waltham. He measured four indicators of social class status: economic, occupational (job prestige), social, and political. He defined political class as “a measure of the amount of power which a person can exercise in comparison with others. Social class specifically connotes the subjective belief of an individual that he belongs to a particular class, beliefs of others about his class position.”87

Sykes found that Unitarians in the early nineteenth century held massive amounts of wealth in comparison to the rest of the community. An 1802 Worcester tax list showed that: “The reduced per capita wealth of the average member of Second Parish was $200.68, while that of the average non-member was $55.62.”88 In other words, Unitarians held on average nearly four times the amount of wealth as non-Unitarians. Sykes stated that across Massachusetts in the early 1800s, “Arminianism or Unitarianism was associated with those individuals in the highest quartile.”89 As the years went on, the gap widened. In 1870, Sykes determined that on average Worcester Unitarians held nearly 10 times the wealth of the average non-Unitarian citizen.

Between 1787 and 1866, the percentage of farmers in the Worcester congregations declined drastically, as the percentage of bankers, shipping traders, and other merchants increased far out of proportion to the surrounding population. By 1866, the Unitarians at

88 Ibid., 27.
89 Ibid., 28.
Second Parish in Worcester, wrote Sykes, “did not reflect the general occupational class structure of the state, but (were) dominated by professionals, merchants, bankers, and manufacturers, the upper end of the occupational class structure.” This trend was found in all six of the congregations measured. Sykes continued, “Since the industrial proletariat was virtually absent, by 1870, Unitarianism by economic and occupational criteria was almost entirely upper-middle and upper class.”

Mark Harris offered further detail:

By the 1830s Unitarians made the decisions that shaped the city’s economy. Compared to other denominations, Unitarians had twenty-two times more lawyers, twenty times the number of bankers, twice as many merchants, and twenty-eight times the number of manufacturers. But they had almost no farmers, craftsmen, or industrial proletarians. In 1850 two-thirds of the wealthiest Bostonians were Unitarians. By 1870, the average Unitarian was thirteen times richer than the average member of any other denomination. By 1870 Boston Unitarians were almost entirely upper-middle and upper class.

Not surprisingly, this economic and job prestige was combined with a high degree of political influence. Unitarians were supplying national and state political leaders at a rate far out of proportion to their ratio of the general populations. According to Sykes, Unitarians then became increasingly aware and proud of their social standing. Surely they felt a sense of superiority when Thomas Jefferson famously predicted, as was mentioned above, that all young men in his day would be Unitarians by the end of the generation. Being a Unitarian became a source and symbol of upward socioeconomic mobility, but

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90 Ibid., 29.
91 Ibid., 32.
Unitarianism’s appeal to an increasingly limited social class helped prevent Jefferson’s prediction coming true.

In one of the great tangles of Unitarian Universalist history, Sykes argues that the separation of church and state, much loved and fought for by Unitarians, widened the gap between Unitarians and non-Unitarians:

Before the separation of church and state, Unitarianism appealed to a broader cross-section of the population. After separation, the parish adjusted slowly to its status as a voluntary association and in terms of class indices appealed only to a very elite group… When confronted with masses of unchurched Protestants in the growing towns and cities of the Commonwealth, the Unitarian response took the form of building segregated ‘chapels’ for the ‘poor’… The factor of class, then, is important in understanding why the movement did not grow in proportion to the general population growth, yet at the same time was associated with the locus of population growth, the city, for precisely there was found the limited strata from which the members came, the manufacturers, the merchants, the government officials, and professionals.93

With so much at stake in a change in the status quo, Unitarians sometimes found it difficult to take public stands for social justice, and certainly for equality among social classes. Mark Harris notes the long-standing conflict within transcendentalism, and Unitarianism more narrowly, over whether there should be a reform of society, or whether the elevation of the individual (ala Channing, see above) was a sufficient revolution. Still, throughout Unitarian history, Harris is quick to add, there have been those who have worked to spread the faith beyond the wealthy, educated classes. Harris’ list of such Unitarians includes Arthur Buckminster Fuller, who was a parish minister and chaplain to Union soldiers. Herman Melville, who sometimes attended a Unitarian congregation, is

93 Sykes, op. cit., 26-34.
also included:

His books describe confrontations between employer and employee or captain and sailor. This was an important counterpoint to the highly personal Unitarian faith, where one achieves fulfillment through self-improvement... He also emphasizes the lost or forgotten. No one talks of class difference in the culture, he believed, because it is ignored. He tried to rectify this by writing of common sailors, immigrants, blacks, and city clerks.  

Yet Harris wrote that Melville’s common folk were typically not welcomed with open arms into Unitarian congregations. To illustrate, he told a story of which Sykes also wrote. In 1846, a visitor was attempting to get into a Boston Unitarian church to hear a prominent minister speak. Finding himself shut out and not knowing what to do, he asked a member of the congregation whether some accommodation was made for visitors. “The person he asked said, ‘We are rather exclusive here,’ and then went into the church without offering assistance.” Harris continued, “Even if visitors walked through the doors, they probably found no place to sit as most of the pews were already restricted to people who owned them.”  

The story of the repelled visitor made its way into the Unitarian denominational periodical, the Christian Register.

5. The Social Class Gulf between Unitarians and Universalists

But it was not just Sunday morning visitors who were often made to feel unwelcome by the Unitarians. The gap between Unitarians and common folk certainly included a divide between them and their Universalist kin. Eighteenth and nineteenth century Universalist ministers, generally holding more rural or working class statuses and

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94 Harris, Elite, 48.

95 Ibid., 48.
a much more evangelical approach than Unitarians of the same age, often complained that though they shared a belief in freedom of religious thought, they were excluded by Unitarian colleagues.

It is no wonder. Where the Unitarians stressed the ability of people to elevate themselves, “Early Universalism emphasized that there was a moral community of all people in the Godhead. Central to the Universalist gospel is an egalitarian, classless idea of salvation. It is not our individual acts that will save us but our connection with that larger moral force which unites the universe.” 96 Like many modern-day Pentecostal groups, the early Universalists even condemned formally educated clergy, believing that over-emphasis on human reason could block the move of the Holy Spirit through the preacher.

Peter Hughes told the story of the calling of Universalist minister Adin Ballou, who became an important figure in the American Universalist movement:

Ballou provides a portrait in himself of the Universalist type. He was the son of a well-to-do, but not rich, farmer. Designated for the agricultural life, Adin wanted more than anything to go to Brown University in order to become a lawyer. His father would not provide the funds to educate him for “idleness.” When he stood up at their Christian Connexion meeting one day and announced that the next Sunday he would preach, he had it in the back of his mind a plan to set out on his own as a minister. His father… only modified his fate slightly. Adin could run the family farm during the week and preach at the Elder Ballou Meetinghouse on Sundays. It was not until he converted to Universalism, and was disinherited by his father, that Adin was able to get off the farm. Although he never got much formal education, his writing reflects an extensive reading, in the Bible, and also in Shakespeare and Sir Thomas More. The nature of Ballou’s call to the ministry gives us something of an idea of the distinctiveness of the folk who became Universalists. The spirit of his

96 Ibid., 56.
deceased brother Cyrus drifted through Adin’s closed window one night and told him, “Adin, God commands you to preach the Gospel of Christ to your fellow-men; obey his voice or the blood of their souls will be required at your hands.” Ballou was part of a culture that accepted such ecstatic experiences. Later in life, like many other mid-nineteenth century Universalists, he became a Spiritualist.97

The Universalists’ sometime shunning, even condemnation, of higher education should not be understood as praise of ignorance. In fact, as argues Nathan O. Hatch, it can be seen as an effort to democratize the faith. “Insurgent religious leaders were not so much anti-intellectual as intent on destroying the monopoly of classically educated and university-trained clergymen,” Hatch wrote. “The insurgents considered people’s common sense more reliable, even in theology, than the judgment of an educated few.”98 Hatch included Universalists among the sects of Early America when he added:

Despite their wide diversity, Methodists, Baptists, Universalists, Disciples, Mormons, and Millerites were all communication entrepreneurs, and their movements were crusades for broadcasting the truth… By systematically employing lay preachers, by exploiting a golden age of local publishing, and by spreading new forms of religious folk music, they ensured the forceful delivery of their message… This attempt to deluge popular culture with the spoken and the printed word was motivated by acute anger at the orthodox churches for withholding knowledge from ordinary folk.99

Early American Universalists certainly were not all, or even mostly, uneducated people who were content to be ignorant preachers of an unpolished theology. They read, they studied scripture, and they engaged with the social issues of their day, including the


99 Ibid., 127-132.
democratization of religious knowledge and truth. They founded schools and seminaries. But their emotional worship style and their lack of formal education invited scorn from the Unitarians.

In important ways, the difference between Unitarians and Universalists often preceded their births. As Hughes notes, where Unitarians often inherited status and standing congregations, Universalists tended to earn both their education and their congregations by the sweat of their brows. They often held tent revivals which, after some weeks of converting Baptists and Methodists to Universalism, turned into congregations with meetinghouses built by the passionate new members. Max Weber would almost certainly have classified nineteenth-century Universalism as a sect, Unitarianism as a religion.

The story of the great Universalist minister Hosea Ballou’s relation to Unitarianism is another story which serves to demonstrate the difference between Unitarians and Universalists in social standing. Ballou, the author of the landmark *A Treatise on Atonement*, had great difficulty relating to his Unitarian colleagues. In a letter exchange with nearby Unitarian minister Joel Foster in the 1790s in which the two discussed future punishment, “Foster at one point attacked Ballou as an uneducated preacher of a strange doctrine… The Standing Order minister criticized the uneducated, lower-class Ballou as a buffoon who was not worthy of Foster’s regard. On the title page… Ballou is referred to as an itinerant preacher.”¹⁰⁰ Ballou was at the time the settled minister in Dana, Massachusetts.

¹⁰⁰ Harris, *op. cit.*, 70.
As well, Harris notes, Unitarians were often all too happy to exchange pulpits with their Calvinist colleagues while shunning exchanges with Universalists. No doubt this was due to wariness when it came to Universalists’ social class. “The Unitarians were educated, and the Universalists were not. In fact, there is no evidence that the uneducated (Hosea) Ballou ever even met Channing, even though their respective churches were just blocks apart, and they were in Boston together for twenty-five years.”  

But by the end of the 1800s, and increasingly so as the nineteenth century rolled into the twentieth, Universalists and Unitarians grew more and more alike. Their liberal theology united them even as the Universalists remained more identifiably Christian than were the Unitarians. Universalists were to some degree a victim of the success of their theological message, as Calvinism faded and Arminianism, and to some degree Universalism, took hold across the country in liberal Protestantism. These realities initiated a great numerical Universalist decline. As a result, in the twentieth century, the Universalists, who had become in large part a group of social class climbers, sought respectability in the religious community. David Bumbaugh, a minister ordained in the year of the Unitarian-Universalist merger wrote:

The Universalists defined themselves as part of the great army of ‘Christian soldiers, marching as to war’ in a campaign to bring into being the Kingdom of God on earth. The focus was no longer upon a unique Universalist gospel; it was upon discovering ways in which Universalism might engage the great social mission of the day as a full partner in the liberal Protestant enterprise.  

101 Ibid., 71-72.

When Universalism writ large was replaced by neo-orthodoxy in post-World-War-I Protestantism, Universalism lost its status as a peer Protestant Christian group, if ever it had such status. Bumbaugh described the unsuccessful attempt of Universalists to trade the passion of first-generation founders for cultural respectability. He wrote, “Twice in the 1940’s (the Universalist Church of America’s) application for membership in the Federal Council of Churches was rejected because they were not Christian enough. Universalists found that according to general consensus they were something else, though by this time they were not sure what that something else was.” Numerically, the Universalist church was in a tailspin. As to its identity, though it was still Christian, its theological statements were mentioning the Bible less than before in favor of emphasizing a Universalism that went across faiths, not just Christian creeds. Dying Universalist congregations were merging with Unitarian congregations well before 1961.

In the 1961 merger of the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America, Unitarian practice and thinking overshadowed Universalism. This is likely due, at least in part, to the Unitarians’ higher degree of skill with institutional organization. This swallowing up of the Universalist message is regrettable, because, as Harris notes, Universalism had an important lesson to share when it came to social class. “Universalists actually lived out the values expressed in their faith of freedom and equality. A diversity of classes participated (in Universalism)... Universalist congregations welcomed both rich and poor, businessman and seamstress alike. The elite Unitarians found the actual embodiment of the tenets of their democratic faith much more
difficult, and this remains a challenge to Unitarian Universalism today.” It certainly remains a challenge when it comes to welcoming working class persons.

6. Called to (And Interested In) A Wider Welcome

But it need not be too late. Perhaps we can still apply this lesson. I will explore this possibility in the final chapter. There is hope in our DNA for, as Hughes writes:

Universalism was, in the beginning, a movement. Its membership grew fast, embracing people with a variety of religious ideas and styles. When it became too organized, when it was passed from people who had come up in the world to others who, thanks to their parents’ efforts, no longer felt the urgent need to rise, it lost its momentum and its reason for being. Universalism had to be reinvented several times to keep it going. Lately, its passion has seemed nearly extinct. But the tradition remains with Unitarian Universalism, a seed that may at any time sprout.

Maybe it is our Universalist heritage that will not let the question of working class inclusion die in Unitarian Universalist circles. In fact, there has been a great deal of recent thinking around social class in the faith. In 2013 the UU Funding Program gave a grant to a group called UU Class Conversations. The group now offers workshops on social class and Unitarian Universalism around the country. UU Class Conversations has conducted well-attended sessions at General Assemblies as well.

At the 2014 General Assembly, delegates approved a congregational study/action issue (CSAI) entitled “Escalating Inequality.” CSAIs are basically delegate-approved calls to congregations and to the entire association to spend four years studying an issue in depth. A curriculum for congregations has been developed by Unitarian Universalist

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103 Harris, *op. cit.*, 76.

Association staff, and tens of thousands of Unitarian Universalists are thinking about and acting on the causes of the widening wealth gap in America. Though this is not directly a study of social class, it has social class implications.

In June of 2015, the Unitarian Universalist Association’s Commission on Appraisal, a group elected directly by general assembly delegates to conduct in-depth studies of timely issues, published “A Preliminary Report on Class in the Unitarian Universalist Association.” Though a full report has not yet been issued, the preliminary report condemns capitalism as a fundamentally unjust system and calls the UUA to work on inclusion across social class divides. The call is grounded in liberation theology, including Jesus’ preferential option for the poor.

The report traces in nearly all the world’s major faiths a condemnation of greed and praise for help of the needy. Further, the authors joined the long line of materialists studying social class when they note, “Liberation theology holds that any claims about God, the spirit, doctrine, or sacred texts must prove themselves by resulting in justice and mercy at this point in history. Theological truth must incarnate a more just world, or it isn’t true.” 105 Unitarian Universalism, the report concludes, is missing the mark in its congregations and in the world around them. This is in large part because Unitarian Universalist social status tends to be perpetuated by congregational practice. “Democratic processes in congregations can revolve around finance, parliamentary procedure, and majority rule rather than mission and consensus. Congregational polity, while offering

self-governance, can also become a tyranny of the majority class.”

The authors offer some important suggestions for improvement, including a revision of the ends of the Unitarian Universalist Association, which are largely silent when it comes to social class. The report calls for the collection of better Unitarian-Universalist-specific demographics (seemingly in suspicion of whether Unitarian Universalists really are as upper middle class as sometimes is suspected). It recommends that congregations study the issue of social class, that the Unitarian Universalist Association board of trustees “create structures and processes that intentionally create opportunities for class inclusion and class equality at the Associational level,” and much more.

This report is important, and its recommendations should be taken seriously. They are thoughtful and wide-ranging. But, with acknowledgment that it is a preliminary report and that a fuller report may answer the following concerns, most of the suggestions are technical, structural fixes. As well, the report does not engage with thinking on religion and social class outside the Unitarian Universalist Association, and the cost of that omission is a lack of larger context.

Most importantly as pertains to critique of the report, it misses what I believe is the heart of the issue. Unitarian Universalism, and before it Universalism and Unitarianism as separate religions, faced and still face a theological conundrum. Our proclaimed theology, liberal and accepting and love-affirming, does not match the

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106 Ibid., 39.
107 Ibid., 57.
enactment of Unitarian Universalism when it comes to welcoming working class persons. Unitarian Universalists need to engage the question of welcome across the strata of social class as a theological, or at the very least religious, question rather than as a structural issue. If we created the right policies and enacted the right processes, they may well fail because of a deeper spiritual disconnect lurking in the background.

Unitarian Universalists need to question the practicality of our faith, and, frankly, our interest in enacting its implications. We have betrayed, by the very locations in which we have built our sanctuaries, that we do not believe the working class are our ‘target audience.’ As Harris noted, “Unitarian Universalists often assume that UU congregations belong in wealthy suburbs where the grass is greener and the children go to high-achieving schools. This assumption exists alongside the half-defensive, half-optimistic ideology of genuine diversity.” Are the working class ‘us?’ We often seem to have answered ‘no.’

Unitarian Universalism will probably never be a predominately working class association. Unitarian Universalists are a small group of mostly upper middle class people who generally have higher than average access to education, hence to prestigious jobs, hence to power in society at large. Can it be any wonder that this movement has not historically attracted large numbers of working class persons? It has also been proven that the rank of religious groups along measures of social class do not easily change, if indeed they change at all. But we can take a careful assessment of whether our beliefs match our actions and work to close that gap.

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To do so, we must be clear about what we are up against when we say we want to more fully welcome working class persons. In 2007, Doug Muder stated the problem clearly in story form. In his UU World Article “Not My Father’s Religion,” he tells of his upbringing by a factory-working, conservative Lutheran father. Muder earned advanced degrees and became a Unitarian Universalist but, though he loves his faith tradition, he has not tried to evangelize his parents away from their conservative faith. “That theology, as I said, works for my parents, which is one reason I’ve never tried to convert them. But there’s another reason: If they did start going to a UU church, I’m not sure whom they’d talk to.” He added:

Unitarian Universalism has a class problem. We rarely discuss it, and when we do, we often focus on the very poor: the homeless, panhandlers, people on welfare. But we also have a problem with the working class, particularly the ones suffering from what Marx called alienation. If you’re a skilled craftsman and like to work with your hands, you might be a UU. But if you make a living by renting your muscles and selling your time—permanently, not just until your novel gets published—you probably aren’t.

The intersection of social class and religion is a tricky one. These two contribute to other oppressions as well. Certainly race cannot be ignored. Black Americans, for example, have been oppressed in the wider American culture in many ways, including socioeconomically. Religious grouping of historically black denominations near the bottom of the socioeconomic scale surely has as much, if not more, to do with systemic socioeconomic oppression as with religious belief and worship practices.

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110 Ibid.
Religion, social class, and gender form another intersection worthy of thorough exploration. The question whether simply being a woman has historically, or does now, affect social class standing is important. It seems social class intersects with nearly every other oppression in one way or another.

It is tempting to take each of these intersecting roads. Many have done so, and I will touch on race briefly below. But it is essential not to neglect social class qua social class. In twenty-first century culture in general and in the study of religion specifically, there is frankly too little discussion of social class divisions on their own. And, writes Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, “our current inattentiveness to class looks suspiciously like avoidance.” She goes on to issue a challenge to groups like Unitarian Universalists:

Could our reticence also be related to our own location within the knowledge class? As Weber argued over a half century ago, educational credentialism forms a status group of its own, one that is ambivalent, if not hostile, toward claims made on the basis of tradition or class. The educational status group derives its position from the liberal ideology of equal opportunity cum merit and has much at stake in upholding individual merit as a universalistic principle. Questioning class within the field of religious history takes us precariously close to analyzing our own most cherished values.

And yet, there are already working class persons among us. What is more, working class people visit our congregations every Sunday. Some stick around, becoming active in various facets of the life of our congregations, and some quietly drift away.

Regardless whether our pews are ever full of working class people, Unitarian Universalism calls us to a radical welcome of any person who can join in our

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112 Ibid., 16.
congregations’ covenants. As Harris urges, “Perhaps we need to broaden our
understanding of who belongs among us. Maybe we are a thinking person’s faith, but
people in all classes think deeply and broadly.”\footnote{Harris, *Elite*, 126.} If we are serious about this effort, we
must hear from working class Unitarian Universalists. Interviews with 10 working class
Unitarian Universalists are detailed in the next chapter.
Chapter 3
Interviews with Working Class Unitarian Universalists

A review of the literature makes it clear that changing the socioeconomic positioning of an entire religious movement is difficult if not impossible. This is especially true for those movements which, like Unitarian Universalism, are at the top of the socioeconomic ladder. Yet, as has been noted already, there are many working class Unitarian Universalists already active in congregations and in the wider association. These people often endure significant prejudice and buck decades- and centuries-long religious trends to practice their faith. Their stories reveal their reasons for sticking around, and what Unitarian Universalists can do to be more welcoming to other working class people.

In the interviews detailed in this chapter, I sought out people who self-identify as working class Unitarian Universalists. I did not attempt to define working class for the interviewees, as I wanted to understand how these Unitarian Universalists define working class for themselves. Those interviewed are religious professionals and lay people. Some have degrees and some do not. Some are working, or are retired from, blue-collar jobs, and some do less physically demanding work. All identify as working class Unitarian Universalists.

In their report mentioned above, the Unitarian Universalist Association’s Commission on Appraisal offered a detailed definition of working class:

“Working class” refers to those who experience some or all of the following class indicators: little or no college education, and in particular
no degree from a four-year college; low or negative net worth (assets minus debts); rental housing, or one non-luxury home long saved for and lived in for decades; occupations involving physical work; and little control in the workplace.  

Under this definition, while some have more of the indicators than others, all of the interviewees are working class.

I. Interviewee One: Working Class UU Evangelist

Interviewee One is a retired farmer and truck driver living in a 55-and-over trailer park in Arizona. He is an active member of a Unitarian Universalist congregation near Phoenix. Interviewee One believes Unitarian Universalism can be a powerful faith for working class people, and that the working class have important lessons to teach Unitarian Universalists.

He was born to a Midwestern farming family. His father ran the farm and his mother, for some of Interviewee One’s childhood, was a registered nurse in nearby Cook County, Chicago. As a child, he relished helping his father with farm chores:

I was the oldest boy and Dad’s right-hand man, so to speak, so he expected me - when I was big enough to see what was going on - he expected me to know where to shine the flashlight next. He expected me to know which wrench he would need. “If you’re paying attention you know what I’m doing.” Which gave me a little different perspective, I think, than a lot of people about knowing what makes things work.

Though he understood the inner workings of machines, Interviewee One says he was never a star pupil in school. This damaged his confidence early on. The truth was, he

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115 The names of most of the interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement. Though some consented to give their names, I chose to make all interviewees anonymous for sake of consistency.

116 Interviewee One, interview by author, online, June 1, 2016.
simply liked farming better than school. “I spent a lot of time in the field,” he said. “I was late for the prom because I had to finish discing this field before I could go. But I enjoyed (discing).”

Interviewee One’s father encouraged him to attend college, which he did. He spent a year at Western Illinois University, then another at a small junior college called Black Hawk College. He enjoyed astronomy and music appreciation classes, but did not find overall academic success. He left college without a degree and set out to earn a living.

As he began his working life, Interviewee One was drawn to the factories of the Quad Cities, which would offer him the chance to fulfill his most important dreams:

It was the farm implement capital of the country… I could work there and be a United Auto Worker, make enough money to have a vacation, make enough money to pay for all my healthcare, make enough money that I could send my kids to college, not worry about retirement and that basically was… to me the American dream… In 1984, working for U.S. Harvester building farm tractors, I was making $18 an hour with four weeks paid vacation, plus a week at the end - at the holidays, full insurance… retirement… And that’s the American dream. Not a thing to worry about. Live your life and let’s go to Yosemite.

When the factory shut down, he returned to farming. He and a partner grew a pig farm to the point that they were selling 3,000 pigs a year. In 1998, Interviewee One earned a patent on a computerized feed system which saved farmers a great deal of time and effort in mixing feed. In the end, however, his business partner saw most of the profits from the patent. Eventually Interviewee One drove a semi-truck, then retired to

117 Ibid.
118 Ibid.
Arizona to be near family.

In 2002, Interviewee One attended a Unitarian Universalist worship service in Davenport, Iowa, where he was visiting family. The service turned out to be one of the most important events in his path to becoming a UU:

A retired JOHN DEERE engineer gave a sermon entitled “Power Hop.” It was about his quest to figure out why when a tractor is about to lose traction it begins to hop up and down. He showed a video of a big tractor on concrete not moving forward, just hopping. On a Saturday morning over a cup of coffee he thought about how the math was coming together and he knew it had to be the air pressure in the tires. By reducing tire pressure the tractor would just hunker down and pull. For me the sermon was about the spiritual experience of learning something no one else in the world knew that was good, useful and could be applied to make a better world.119

This was not Interviewee One’s only attraction toward Unitarian Universalism. He also tells the story of being invited to worship by his sister and hearing another sermon he loved, this one on Star Trek’s Prime Directive. What seems clear is that it was important to Interviewee One that his interests and lifestyle, his habitus, be validated in a Unitarian Universalist worship service.

Clearly Interviewee One is working class by all four of the measures used in this project. His level of education, his income, and his job prestige all fall within working class parameters. He is also a passionate, evangelical Unitarian Universalist. He sings in the choir, and has been active in promoting environmentalism within his congregation. What keeps him in the faith?

For much of his adult life, Interviewee One was a Jehovah’s Witness. He

119 Ibid.
compares Jehovah’s Witness eschatology with a Unitarian Universalist message that is very important to him:

Why aren’t we talking about climate change? We all know what the enemies are. I don’t know a stronger force in the world that could beat the Unitarians to fight that fight. And I don’t know a more critical time in the history of the planet, you know. Jehovah’s Witnesses… the good news we always preached was, uh, we are at the end of an age. Which we are… It’s an exciting time to live in. We need to do something.120

Interviewee One moves with ease in various theological and philosophical spheres. It is clear that he has done some serious thinking in these areas which has helped him reconcile the religious worlds of which he has been a part. He doesn’t much care for hymns that mention God, in which opinion he has considerable company among Unitarian Universalist Humanists, and he is a whole-hearted believer in the Unitarian Universalists’ seven principles. Still, the faith is not entirely comfortable for Interviewee One.

At first, as he was being interviewed, Interviewee One placed the blame for his sometime discomfort among Unitarian Universalists squarely on himself. “I have viewed myself as not equal to the Unitarians because I don’t have the money or education they have,” he said. “This is something I impose on myself… I have not been judged by anyone as less than.”121 He is not the only interviewee who was quick to defend middle and upper-middle class Unitarian Universalists.

Soon after, though, Interviewee One described a feeling of exclusion. “I feel like they like me and they respect me but they don’t feel I’m on the same level with them,” he

120 Ibid.
121 Ibid.
said. “And that to me - that to me, in a way, is a little bit of a violation of our first principle.”

In some social circles, Interviewee One described feeling condescended to, included in conversation only as an afterthought. With this in mind, he reflected on what might happen if working class people flooded Unitarian Universalist sanctuaries on Sunday morning:

I think people would become addicted (to the worship services) but because of feeling ‘less than,’ because they’re not recognized, or… appreciated or approved of or acknowledged as being worthy or valued they might not return. We working class, maybe we don’t have the same clothes as you’ve got on but we’re equal to you because we’re alive here.

Interviewee One noted that his working class and Unitarian Universalist identities most often clash around education and finance. The middle and upper-middle class access to education and money create a social habitus not available to working class people. “I can’t live like they live,” Interviewee One said. “I can’t do the things they do. I’ve never been out of this country other than Canada and Mexico. And so I don’t fit.”

But the very things which lead to Interviewee One’s not ‘fitting’ sometimes make him a valued member of the community, which he notes and appreciates in a story that took place one evening after choir practice:

We were working one night changing the risers so they’d all fit… I used to have tools but when I got rid of the truck I relinquished those tools… And one of (the people working on the risers) said “We’ve got tools but we don’t know how to use them.” So they started doing this thing with the risers and I said, “Don’t do it that way. Get a knife and cut the carpet.” You know, I suggested they do it a different way and they proceeded to do

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122 Ibid.
123 Ibid.
124 Ibid.
that. So, I have been accepted and honored…125

Here, Interviewee One was validated and felt a part of community when his unique gifts were recognized and appreciated. Community and validation were themes that ran throughout the interview. He told another story in which working class values offer a corrective to Unitarian Universalist congregations, especially to the tendency toward individualism. As was noted above, Interviewee One lives in a trailer park in a Phoenix suburb. He described a sense of community found in his trailer park which he feels is lacking in many middle and upper-middle class settings:

People in the park don’t have anything for the most part. But somebody needs groceries, I’ll make a run. Somebody needs this, somebody needs that, they do it… One guy here, he’s concerned about my health and every three or four days he’ll come knocking at the door… I tell my neighbor across the street that I’m going to be gone for the summer and so they’re looking out for me. People all down the road are looking out.126

Certainly neighborliness is not unique to working class communities. And yet, it is true that middle and upper-middle class people can often pay for services, including house-sitting, lawn-mowing, and others, for which working class people have to rely on one another.

Unitarian Universalists need, Interviewee One said, to empathize with working class people, to deeply understand their lives. Middle and upper-middle class Unitarian Universalists have important similarities to and differences from their working class co-congregants. He voices the religion social class conundrum in a nutshell when he says, “(Middle class and working class people) share the same principles but they don’t share

125 Ibid.
126 Ibid.
Perhaps sometimes middle and upper-middle class people expect working class people to need answers when they actually have lessons to teach.

2. Interviewee Two: Working Class Minister’s Spouse

Interviewee Two is the 62-year-old son of a Polish father and an English mother. They emigrated to the United States when Interviewee Two was very young so that his father could study engineering at the University of Colorado. His father eventually became a civil engineer. His mother mostly stayed at home to raise the couple’s three children.

Though Interviewee Two attended Colorado State University, he left without a degree. He has spent his entire life in working class jobs, most with hourly pay. For nearly 20 years he worked as an hourly employee at Adolph Coors Company. “I did various jobs, drove forklifts, drove all kinds of different equipment,” he said.

Interviewee Two took pride in his job at Coors. “Coors actually paid very well,” he said. “And you know, I was proud to be able to do that for my family. And there were a lot of people who wanted to work at Coors. I don’t know why I got hired… But I was very proud of that job. It was a respectable place to work… and they took good care of us.”

When Interviewee Two’s wife, whom he met in his teenage years, entered seminary to become an ordained Unitarian Universalist minister, they left the Denver area and Interviewee Two quit his job at Coors. “I got a nice severance from them,” he said,


128 Interviewee Two, interview by author, online, August 1, 2016.

“so I took that and went and I’ve been kind of just finding jobs where I could.”¹³⁰ He has delivered mattresses in San Francisco, installed satellite dishes in Ohio, driven a coach bus around the country, and delivered recreational vehicles made in Indiana to various parts of the United States. He currently drives a shuttle bus at the University of Arizona.

Like Interviewee Seven, a ministry student whose interview is detailed below, Interviewee Two notes the diversity present in one of the working class settings he experienced. When he delivered mattresses for Sleep Train, “there were about 100 drivers that delivered mattresses. It was probably forty percent black, forty percent Mexican, ten percent Samoan, and ten percent white. And that was the first time I had ever worked in that kind of diversity… But I made a lot of friends and I made a lot of connections. And I’m always proud of that.”¹³¹

In Unitarian Universalist settings, Interviewee Two has faced a slew of assumptions about his work, some of which he attributes to being a minister’s spouse. When his wife was the candidate for a new ministry in Arizona, Interviewee Two was forced to navigate treacherous social waters:

I’d be introduced to somebody and I’d tell them I work at the University of Arizona and they would be like, “So, are you a professor or…” You know, it was the assumption that you’re a researcher. “Uh, no, I drive a shuttle.” I mean, you know, sometimes that’s hard to say and sometimes that’s hard to admit. I mean, I’m fine with it but it’s kind of… embarrassing at times… I think there are sometimes assumptions, especially since I’m married to a minister, that I must be degreed.¹³²

Interviewee Two was a charter member of a small Unitarian Universalist

¹³⁰ Ibid.
¹³¹ Ibid.
¹³² Ibid.
congregation, and he did not experience the same unwelcoming assumptions there. He attributed this to people knowing him more deeply in the smaller setting. But he also felt less judgment in Presbyterian and Christian Science settings before he became a Unitarian Universalist. Whatever the reason, the assumptions he faces don’t stop with his type of work or level of formal education:

I’m the one that they come to when the heating isn’t working or the air conditioning isn’t working. Like, well, you’re, you know, you’re working class, you should know how to fix this. Look, I’m just a member like you are. Why am I supposed to be able to fix this? I think that’s a reflection on my working class status. There’s a lot of other people around here. Why aren’t you asking them? Well, he’s a professor and he’s an engineer and he works there… I’ve never asked that question. Maybe I should.\textsuperscript{133}

It is important to note a difference between Interviewee One’s and Interviewee Two’s experiences with hands-on labor in Unitarian Universalist congregations. Where Interviewee One offers his expertise and is proud to have it accepted, those around Interviewee Two assume class-based knowledge. These are very different experiences. One leads to a feeling of inclusion in community. The other fosters a feeling of being outside community norms, useful mainly for an assumed skill.

It is difficult for Interviewee Two to relate to many of his middle and upper-middle class Unitarian Universalist peers.

There aren’t many people at church that I can talk to about working class kind of issues… Like, I get up at 4:30 in the morning and, you know, I have to go to bed early at night and just about hourly wages and… issues around money, that incomes haven’t gone up, things of that sort. Just the kind of general stuff that you even do when you’re at work with people… I never could really get into those kinds of conversations at church. They don’t seem to either want to talk about it or have no idea what it’s like to be an

\textsuperscript{133} \textit{Ibid.}
hourly employee. And, you know, every state I go to, every new place, I have to find a new job. I don’t have something waiting there for me, something, you know, a university or engineering degree that would take me somewhere… I never felt comfortable trying to start that kind of conversation… The couple of times I have the person was either retired and they’re long past that or they’ve never had that experience.\footnote{134}

Interviewee Two sees in Unitarian Universalism’s theology a call to address our social class problem, a theme which will be explored further in the last chapter of this work. Humility will help. “I think people just have to get over themselves for the most part,” he said. “We are all equal and people just need to hear… that we are all equal. It doesn’t matter how much money we make or how educated we are.”\footnote{135} This is basic Universalism.

Interviewee Two offered one final proposal. Why not develop a working class welcoming curriculum similar to the LGBTQ Welcoming Congregation program already in place? “Put it on a poster,” he said. “We’re a huge part of the community. This church… could be doing so much better if they were more open to working class.”\footnote{136} The work of UU Class Conversations, mentioned above, seems to be a solid beginning.

3. Interviewee Three: Single Mom to Working Class Advocate

Interviewee Three, an accountant for a landscaping business, lives in Rochester, Minnesota. She worked her way up to her current position after being a secretary, an office manager, “and, so, kind of bouncing around in that direction.”\footnote{137} She is also a

\footnote{134}Ibid.  
\footnote{135}Ibid.  
\footnote{136}Ibid.  
\footnote{137}Interviewee Three, interview by author, online, April 13, 2016.
Interviewee Three grew up in what she describes as a “lower, or middle lower class” household. Her father painted billboards, and her mother stayed at home with the couple’s children. The five family members “lived in a two-bedroom house, so it was pretty tight… We lived out in the country and in a rural area and so around lots of family… To me, it just seems very normal.” Though her father never made enough money to amass a savings and her parents now live off of their social security income, there was always enough to get by.

Though she was raised Presbyterian, something about the faith didn’t resonate with her. She left the Presbyterians early in her adulthood.

For the longest time I just didn’t go to church or anything like that. I’ve been an atheist or humanist, however you want to put it, for the majority of my life… I just didn’t believe any of the (Bible) stories and things like that. And then it got real, real clear for me actually when my son was in high school and he’s a reader and at one point he decided he was going to read the Bible from cover to cover as a novel and he would come to me with all these crazy - you know, all the, all the horrible things especially that are in the Old Testament and ask me “This isn’t true is it?” And then I’d say, “No, it’s not.”

Just out of high school, Interviewee Three earned an associate’s degree in business administration, married, and had a child. After three years and two children, she and her husband divorced. She remained single while raising her children. She struggled financially, moving from house to house, evicted several times after not being able to

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138 Ibid.
139 Ibid.
140 Ibid.
make the rent. “I just didn’t make enough for three people,” she said. Now that her children are grown, Interviewee Three lives more comfortably, though she still has no savings. “I live paycheck to paycheck,” she said. “Basically that is how I classify working class.”

Interviewee Three is sometimes proud of her working class status, especially about one of its effects on her children. “They always tell me that they’re glad that they didn’t have things handed to them and that they had to work,” she said. “They started working when they were thirteen or fourteen years old… to be able to buy their own things. I appreciate knowing that they didn’t feel put down or, you know, short that way.”

It is clear that Interviewee Three is in line philosophically with Unitarian Universalism, especially with the Humanist leanings of the faith. She also deeply appreciates the social action of her congregation, which she says is one of the faith’s biggest draws for her. “I’ve never been at a church before that works so hard with social justice,” she said. But, like Interviewee One and other working class Unitarian Universalists, she is less comfortable when markers of social class come into play. As an illustration, she tells the story of a group of congregants with whom she recently shared a dinner:

We started what we call silver and gold dinners, where… there’s eight

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141 Ibid.
142 Ibid.
143 Ibid.
144 Ibid.
people that kind of get put together and we go to each other’s houses for dinner… When we were eating and we were talking, everyone there travels extensively. They talked a lot, you know, about going to Italy and being in Europe and that kind of thing. And you just kind of sit there, like, you really have absolutely nothing to add to the conversation. It’s times like that that I feel lesser than or like I don’t fit in. But, for the most part, the people at the church are wonderful and I definitely wouldn’t complain about the majority of them.145

Like Interviewee One, Interviewee Three is quick to note that most of the people in her congregation are “wonderful.”

Interviewee Three exemplifies Harris’ reminder that “people in all classes think deeply and broadly.”146 She did not hesitate when asked what working class people like her need most out of a congregation. “They don’t need to, you know, be a doctor or a lawyer or travel around the world… or be able to donate lots of money and that type of thing… I feel that the one thing that people need is to have, to feel a sense of belonging.”147

The congregation of which Interviewee Three is a member is, she estimates, “95 percent, 90 percent… doctors or lawyers or engineers.”148 Being near the Mayo Clinic, there is a considerable number of physicians. She is not suggesting a Marxian proletariat takeover of the congregation. In fact, she states, “With the people that are in the church there’s a lot of power as far as, you know, socio-economic power to be able to have people listen to them. And so that’s kind of one of the things that we want to really look

145 Ibid.
146 Harris, Elite, 126.
147 Ibid.
148 Ibid.
at is how can we get more active in local government.” Interviewee Three hopes the
doctors and other middle and upper-middle class people in her congregation might use
their social capital to address working class issues in their city, like affordable housing.

As for Interviewee Three, she has become an advocate for social class inclusion in
her congregation. She and another member are bringing a workshop on social class to the
church in the coming months. Her partner in the project is also working class. “I really
feel like we’re kind of like comrades in arms, you know, as far as economic status and
not being able to travel all over the world and that type of thing.” Finding another
working class Unitarian Universalist has helped Interviewee Three deepen a sense of
belonging.

4. Interviewee Four: This Faith is Made For the Working Class

Interviewee Four is a musician, a factory worker, and a self-described blue collar
Unitarian Universalist. He and his wife live in Tempe, Arizona and attend a Unitarian
Universalist congregation near their home. Interviewee Four was introduced to Unitarian
Universalism as an adult, and believes Unitarian Universalism has appeal to working
class people like him.

Interviewee Four grew up in California, moving to Arizona for his last year of
high school. His mother began to show symptoms of paranoid schizophrenia in his
teenage years. The family moved several times as his mother’s illness caused her to
believe they needed to relocate.

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149 Ibid.
150 Ibid.
After finishing high school in Mesa, Arizona, Interviewee Four attended a local community college for a year. He felt he needed to leave college to support his mother and his father, especially since his father was struggling to help his mother with her illness after being injured himself. “I basically quit school to get a full-time job to kind of help get my life going but also to be supportive of (my parents). But it was a pretty rough time.”  

Interviewee Four and his parents moved to Prescott, Arizona, where he learned to hang drywall. He worked in that field for 11 years, until a doctor told him he needed to find a new line of work because of an injury. After a stint as a car salesman, Interviewee Four landed a job working in a factory, where he works now. “We build aluminum chassises that hold electronics for aerospace,” he said. “It’s basically making different shape aluminum boxes that you put a circuit boards in.”

Interviewee Four recalled a moment in which he realized he was proud to be a working class person:

I was on the 405 Freeway in California coming home from a job in traffic and I was just kind of sitting there thinking, “You know, I’m a blue collar kind of guy,” It just kind of clicked… I don’t mind this lifestyle. I’m not going to get rich by any means even though my brothers and sisters all have white collar jobs and are pretty successful. I was actually kind of happy doing what I do… I like building things… And so I kind of stuck with it.

Interviewee Four was introduced to Unitarian Universalism by his wife. One incident especially drew him in. On his first visit to a Unitarian Universalist

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151 Interviewee Four, interview by author, online, August 17, 2016.
152 Ibid.
153 Ibid.
congregation he was welcomed by a member whom he asked, “What book do you guys read out of?” And she basically said ‘Any one you want,’ which I thought was actually confusing but kind of cool. Interviewee Four sees this religious freedom as appealing to working class people:

Actually a lot of working class people I know are kind of stuck between they want to believe in a religion because that’s what they’re told to believe, but they don’t want to go to a church because they don’t want to hear God’s basically going to ban you to hell if you don’t follow the rules… And they believe that there might be something out there but they just don’t know… And when I ask - actually I’ve mentioned it a few times ‘Why don’t you try a UU church?’ and I always get the question ‘What is that?’ It’s like ‘Well, come and find out.’ And they just don’t do it… I’m always kind of wondering why we don’t attract more working class people because it seems like a working class kind of religion.

Interviewee Four tells stories of class-based prejudice which are similar to other interviewees’ stories. He has felt excluded and looked down on because of his type of work. He has also been on the sharp end of assumptions about money, as in the case of a Unitarian Universalist who had a question about Interviewee Four’s choice of guitar. The man asked, “You don’t want an acoustic guitar?” And I said, ‘No, I just can’t afford one right now.’ And he’s like, ‘How can you not afford an acoustic guitar? They’re only $500.’” Interviewee Four just ended the conversation and walked away. “That was kind of annoying, but what are you going to do?” he asked.

It is Interviewee Four’s reaction to these assumptions and exclusions that make him unique among the interviewees. He seems willing to brush off the typical class

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154 Ibid.
155 Ibid.
156 Ibid.
I can see where it would be (a problem) for some people because the people that really kind of look down on me, they don’t talk to me and I know they don’t talk to me for whatever reason, and I look at it like, you know, I don’t really care if they like me or not actually. I’m happy with the friends I have… And so, you know, if they don’t like me then it’s their loss.\textsuperscript{157}

Interviewee Four has a strong friend network in his congregation. He plays guitar in a band composed of fellow congregants. He seems in the quote directly above to allude this network of Unitarian Universalist friends as one of the reasons he can get past the class prejudice he experiences.

Interviewee Four’s approach to life in a Unitarian Universalist community is one from which middle and upper-middle class UUs, and perhaps all people of faith, could benefit. “I know I’m not the smartest guy in the world so I’ll listen to someone else’s opinion and kind of work it out and think about it for a couple days and make my opinion that way,” he said. “I always feel like there might be something else that I might not know that these people might and so I guess it’s more open to someone else’s idea or opinion. I think this is a plus being a kind of blue collar, non-educated guy.”\textsuperscript{158}

This idea is complicated. It could be argued that Interviewee Four is buying into the stereotype that formally educated people are smarter and must be listened to. But Interviewee Four is not suffering here from lack of self-esteem. He eventually works out his own opinion on the issue at hand. But he approaches his faith with wonder, holding the assumption that there is something for him to learn from fellow congregants. Like

\textsuperscript{157} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{158} Ibid.
Interviewee One, he values humility. His blue collar lifestyle, he reports, is a reminder that it is important to listen to everyone, to avoid thinking you’re the smartest person in the room.

Middle and upper-middle class people also are usually not the smartest persons in the room. Though Unitarian Universalism’s Humanist and Transcendentalist heritages might make it difficult, what if such humility became a virtue preached and taught in Unitarian Universalist congregations? Can the faith better balance humility and pride? Would working class persons feel more welcome among more humble people, even if those people were middle or upper-middle class?

Perhaps the place to start is by listening more to working class peoples’ stories. “I think a lot of people are aware of (working class people) but maybe just kind of write it off like they’re Unitarians so they understand the working class person,” Interviewee Four said. “They really don’t.”¹⁵⁹

5. Interviewee Five: Covenant is the Cure

Interviewee Five, granddaughter of Czech and Austrian immigrants, grew up in Hopelawn, New Jersey, in the house in which her mother was born. Her parents inherited the home when they married. Even with this advantage, times were often tough for the family.

Her father was a chemist in a large company until, when Interviewee Five was fourteen, the corporation moved to Alaska. Her father then took lower-paying work as a security guard. Her mother, who began her career as a switchboard operator, worked her

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.
way up to bookkeeper over the years. Interviewee Five herself was “very, very schooly, because there weren’t a lot of children to play with,” though she did become involved with a local VFW all-girls marching group.

Interviewee Five, now 49 years old, is clear that hers was a working-class upbringing. The family drove used station wagons, she said, and the children could only rarely participate in extracurricular activities other than the free ones offered by the local public school.

After high school, Interviewee Five worked her way through college, earning an associate’s degree in English at Middlesex Community College in New Jersey. She then went to work as a licensed insurance agent to pay for a bachelor’s degree in communication at Kean University. Afterward, she worked as a journalist for four years. Currently, she works as a dispatcher, sending out technicians to fix heating and air conditioning.

What makes her working class? Several factors, Interviewee Five says. She rents her home, and “there have been a few addresses where I have lived that I don’t know if I would go around bragging about.” But for Interviewee Five, finance is an especially important working class marker. Her boyfriend’s family “travels regularly with money they budget for travel, for example,” she said. “I don’t have that kind of money.” Her family would like them to come to California for a visit. “They don't understand that we don’t have this set aside,” she said. “We would have to sacrifice something we need.”

160 Interviewee Five, interview by author, online, April 6, 2016.

161 Ibid.

162 Ibid.
Interviewee Five and her boyfriend have no retirement or savings, and only a small life insurance policy on her. “(For middle and upper-middle class people), there’s an assumption that what you need will be provided,” she said. “But I need to ask where it’s coming from. I feel like a chess player most of the time, moving one thing over here and another over there.”

Still, Interviewee Five is often proud of being a working class person, especially when it comes to community. “There is a camaraderie and fellowship that doesn’t exist (in other social classes,)” she said. “As a person who has to reach out for help… the ones who become members of my tribe are the ones who give the shirt off their back to help, even if it’s their only shirt.”

Interviewee Five is a member of a small Unitarian Universalist fellowship in Virginia. Though “many of them are what I would consider to be very well off.” She reports mostly positive experiences when it comes to social class inclusion. Though frequent fund-raisers and high-priced ticketed events have left her excluded, “It was made very clear to me that it was OK that I couldn’t put as many dollars in the plate,” she said. The occasional negative experience, including people asking when she will move from her rental to buy a house or whether she has begun a master’s degree, are outweighed in Interviewee Five’s mind by positive experiences including her being given in 2007 a scholarship to attend leadership training at The Mountain, a leadership school

163 Ibid.
164 Ibid.
165 Ibid.
166 Ibid.
in North Carolina. “I was very honored and humbled by that,” Interviewee Five said. “I
couldn’t have done it on my own.”

In fact, Interviewee Five argues that working class issues are addressed indirectly
in the foundational theology of Unitarian Universalism:

A couple of years back, UU World did some articles on working class and
Unitarian Universalism. I sat down with a friend of mine who also
identifies as working class and we talked about doing an RE class on it.
We talked to some people, but we decided to scrap the whole idea because
covenant really does cover it. We didn’t want to dwell on the fact that
we’re working class and we sometimes get treated differently, and we
were right about that. Covenant really was where we should have been
putting our energy.

If Interviewee Five is correct, this is good news. There would be no need to
undertake a major Unitarian Universalist theological overhaul to create a wider welcome
for working class persons. The answer may have been right under our noses all along.

6. Interviewee Six: Congregation Administrator

Interviewee Six is the administrator for a small congregation near the Wisconsin
city where she lives. She and her husband are members of one of the largest
congregations in the Unitarian Universalist Association. Each congregation has unique
class-related lessons to offer, as does her own working class upbringing.

Interviewee Six was born in Des Moines, Iowa, to a family that started out middle
class. “But my dad kept losing jobs - couldn’t keep a job. And so, by the time I was eight,
the house was foreclosed on… and all of a sudden we were on welfare living in low

167 Ibid.
168 Ibid.
income housing. And then we continued on welfare until I left home.”169

At a young age, Interviewee Six decided she needed to go to college, in part because of the gender salary gap. “When I was a teenager I even read this study that a woman with a college degree made the same amount as a man with a high school diploma,” she said. “I have to go to college was my mantra.”170 She moved to Ames to attend Iowa State University.

Though she earned a bachelor’s degree at Iowa State, a student survey made clear to Interviewee Six that she was in a minority of poor students. “We were on welfare and all these different things,” she said. “Like with every marker I was, you know, with one percent or two percent of the students. I felt like a complete fish out of water there.”171 Interviewee Six eventually earned a master’s degree in library science, but she found that even an advanced degree was no guarantee of financial security, as she was unable to find a good-paying job. Interviewee Six understands that some people believe having a master’s degree automatically disqualifies her from being working class, but economics and her upbringing lead her to continue to identify this way.

The fish-out-of-water feeling Interviewee Six experienced at Iowa State returned when she first attended a Unitarian Universalist congregation. “I was trying hard not to let people find out my background or anything,” she said. “When a different congregation opened on the east side in a more working class neighborhood I ran to that congregation and just went back (to the more middle class congregation)… when I was going to get

169 Interviewee Six, interview by author, online, August 15, 2016.

170 Ibid.

171 Ibid.
married to somebody who was a member.”

When she began attending the more middle class congregation, Interviewee Six reports:

At first there were all these assumptions. Like one time I wanted to check a book out from the… library and they didn’t have that book. And someone said, “Oh, you can just buy it.” And actually, you know, I couldn’t just buy it. It was fifteen dollars and the way I was raised, we didn’t buy books. We went to the library and checked them out. And so it’s just like, you know, I can’t actually buy a book… And then there used to be so many assumptions like that everybody was away for the summer. That everybody went to a cabin up north for the summer. And I remember saying, “If I’m not on my porch, I’m at work all summer.”

Interviewee Six notes that the assumptions have lessened over time. In part, this is because “As I’ve gotten to know some people really well I’ve known people of various backgrounds who have been members.” But Interviewee Six has had to do the work of finding other working class people on her own. She wonders, could Unitarian Universalists make this easier for working class members?

One thing that would make it easier would be if there… could be like a covenant group for that or something like a new member something where only (working class people) were invited and we could kind of get to know each other and figure out, you know, why stuff is the way it is… Almost like having a posse that you could go to if nobody else understands something.

Another reason Interviewee Six is experiencing fewer class-based assumptions these days is that she is being more assertive about who she is and what she needs. She was prompted to make this move by seeing the experience of another working class

172 Ibid.
173 Ibid.
174 Ibid.
175 Ibid.
Unitarian Universalist congregational employee. A janitor in her congregation was approached by a wealthy member. “The janitor was really muscly, and the rich guy, the wealthy guy said, ‘Oh, you must work out. You’ve got - you look really fit.’ And my friend just said, ‘No, I’m a janitor.’ And I thought, ‘That’s great. You can just say that.’ And so I started to say it too.”

Later, when she expressed a longtime desire to play piano and another Unitarian Universalist asked her why she didn’t take lessons, “I had to explain ‘Well, when you’re on welfare there’s no money. I mean, piano lessons cost money. It was like… that never occurred to him… But I’ve been more comfortable just letting people know.” Maybe, she suggests, middle and upper-middle class people need a list of questions not to ask:

Like, I grew up in Des Moines and one time another member said “Oh, I’m from Des Moines, too. Which neighborhood did you grow up in?” And that’s something you just shouldn’t be asking somebody is which neighborhood did you grow up in. You can say “I grew up in ‘x’ neighborhood” and then see what they say. But I was really embarrassed when I was asked that and I had to really think fast. “Golly, do I say the inner city? Do I say…” I mean, we moved all the time - whichever apartment was cheapest. So I ended up saying, “Well, some of the time we lived near Drake University” and thought that would be the end of the conversation. But unfortunately she said, “Oh, your parents were professors perhaps?” I didn’t think fast enough to realize, oh, no, you mention a university and somebody is going to assume that you’re a professor. But there was really cheap housing there.

Despite such experiences, Interviewee Six loves Unitarian Universalism for many reasons, not least of which is the opportunity to create music. She is in her congregation’s

176 Ibid.
177 Ibid.
178 Ibid.
choir, where she has learned to sing. She has also learned to do other things she didn’t expect to learn.

Learning how to run a meeting and the various trainings I’ve been able to go to, I think is really great because I’ve never had a job where I can be a leader like that but I have in Unitarian Universalist circles, you know, facilitated covenant groups and even coached a group of facilitators and all these different things where I have skill-building in ways that otherwise wouldn’t be possible.  

Interviewee Six has concrete suggestions for making Unitarian Universalist congregations more inclusive of working class persons. In addition to creating ways for working class persons to find each other, she suggests, it would benefit congregations to include working class persons on pledge drive and stewardship committees. Also, Interviewee Six proposed, ministers and people who run meetings should be careful to explain terms that are not in the common parlance. Certainly when Robert’s Rules are cited there should be an accompanying explanation. Emphasizing pledging as a percentage of total income rather than highlighting the amount of the pledge, a widely-conducted Unitarian Universalist practice, is also helpful, Interviewee Six said.

If Unitarian Universalists become more welcoming and wind up with more working class members, it will be a great benefit to the association in more than one way, Interviewee Six said. For one, the food might improve. “I cook or bake something from scratch when I take food to potlucks,” she said. “Cooking from scratch is fairly inexpensive and shows that I made an effort.” The level of gratitude, an important virtue in most religions, might also rise, Interviewee Six suggested:

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179 Ibid.
180 Ibid.
We working class peeps are less likely to be cynical and jaded and more likely to enjoy and relish life feeling optimism and gratitude. For example, when I was growing up, we never had an apartment or house with a shower. The shower was always broken and the various landlords refused to fix it. So, I didn't get to shower regularly until I was twenty-one! When I'm taking a shower, I'm grateful and pleased. I know lots of UUs who don't even notice taking a shower. I also notice great weather, comfortable furniture, flannel sheets, etc. and am happy to have them.¹⁸¹

Who knows what other hidden gifts Unitarian Universalists will receive by widening our working class welcome?

7. Interviewee Seven: Class Climber and Ministry Student

Interviewee Seven is among the many Unitarian Universalists who have changed their social standing over their lifetimes. She is a student at Drew Theological Seminary. Though she is preparing for Unitarian Universalist ministry, she “grew up in a pretty secular religious environment except for some kind of Irish Catholic stuff floating in the background.”¹⁸² Living on the south side of Lansing, Michigan, in her earliest years her homemaker/women’s rights activist mother was married to her father, who worked at the Post Office.

“When I was five,” Interviewee Seven said, “my parents got divorced… So, my brother, my mother, and I moved into Section 8 housing. And that probably was the primary experience of my childhood of understanding poverty and growing up in a self-consciously aware system of poverty.”¹⁸³ This understanding is key to her working class identity, and leads her to connection with those who are struggling. “Most of the world is

¹⁸¹ Ibid.
¹⁸² Interviewee Seven, interview by author, online, April 16, 2016.
¹⁸³ Ibid.
living in pretty difficult situations,” she said. “I think I see things that maybe other folks may not see.”

Interviewee Seven adds that the project-style housing complex in which she grew up was quite diverse, a theme to which other interviewees also alluded, and which the research cited in earlier chapters proves carries over into religion. Economic oppression in the wider culture makes race a factor in many areas, including housing and religious groupings. To the degree that a certain grouping of people is economically oppressed, they will likely find it difficult to become part of a primarily middle or upper-middle class faith.

Interviewee Seven had deeper questions about working class identity itself. She wondered whether ‘working class’ might be a way of masking talk about white poverty. Her description of the factory town of Lansing is supportive of this concern:

Where I grew up bars are open 24 hours because of all the shifts… Alcohol is a big part of the culture. Kind of the sense of living and grinding through the days is very real. You just kind of push through and it’s physically hard… So peoples’ bodies deteriorate really early, and there’s kind of a fast aging process in that environment. People aren’t healthy. There’s a lack of attention to, to what that means. I mean, health is a privilege, right?… And so with that there’s a certain simplicity about what’s enjoyable: family life, a lot of being outside.

Though she grew up poor, Interviewee Seven did have access to higher education. Her mother studied throughout Interviewee Seven’s childhood, eventually earning a Ph.D. “The influence of education in life was certainly present, but she was also an activist, so that brought a different kind of conversation into the household as well.”

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184 Ibid.
185 Ibid.
Interviewee Seven said. “We were surrounded by a good deal of intellectual activity… but it didn’t provide financial resources.”

Later, Interviewee Seven moved to Turkey, where she completed an undergraduate degree. She spent seven years there, eventually marrying a Turkish man. The experience of living in Turkey changed her views of the world, leading her to “a religious sensibility and understanding.” She discovered Unitarian Universalism upon her return, by then in her early thirties. After doing some work planning after-school programs in a Chicago suburb, she entered seminary.

Clearly Interviewee Seven does not hit every mark in working class classification. She is working on a master’s degree, which makes her middle class in terms of education. She doesn’t have a high income, but she also does not do the kind of blue-collar work that is often associated with being working class. What, then, leads her to identify as a working class person? In her answer to that question, Interviewee Seven hints at McCloud’s socially habituated subjectivities, especially as McCloud argues that socioeconomics limit a person’s access to certain types of faiths:

For me it really comes down to the question of cultural capital and the circulation of cultural capital… It’s the things that circulate around us, that give us access to resources. It’s also a familiarity with the sensibility of poverty. I relate very deeply to that. It’s really an informative piece of my ministry and my call to ministry, that experience of how poverty shapes what’s possible in our lives… A lot of my friends growing up forget getting out of poverty. A lot of folks don’t get out alive.\footnote{Ibid.}

Her upbringing has led Interviewee Seven to be comfortable with a certain social

\footnote{Ibid.}
\footnote{Ibid.}
\footnote{Ibid.}
habitus not typically associated with being upper middle class. “I’m not the person you want to take to the opera, right? I get it, but I’d rather go see Bob Seger,”189 she said.

She also spoke of class-related assumptions she has noticed in Unitarian Universalist congregations, including a story about an adult religious education course being offered in one congregation during the day. Leaders wondered why people weren’t attending. “I mean, really?” Interviewee Seven asked. “They’re at work… Maybe people don’t have jobs where you can just go to a meeting, where there’s flexibility, or, you know, the people are held accountable for their time in really different ways.”190

Interviewee Seven acknowledges that hers is not the typical working class life. Others have congratulated her on this, but she is not certain congratulations are in order. “People say, ‘Oh, you got out of it. You should be happy,’” she said. “It’s more complicated… We lose people along the way. That’s a lot of relationships. And a lot of parts of ourselves.”191

Interviewee Seven hopes to bring her social class awareness into her ministry. Perhaps not surprisingly, she sees theology as part of the problem, and part of the solution. She prescribes for Unitarian Universalists the Christian story of resurrection:

> I think there’s something about that narrative of recovery that really can speak to the experience of working class. We’re not honest about it. Maybe we code it in because we have these complicated ways of avoiding things sometimes. But what would happen if we really made clear… there is a place to be redeemed in ourselves and in the wider world? And that

189 Ibid.
190 Ibid.
191 Ibid.
communities can do this together?  

This suggestion hints at the diversity and community Interviewee Seven found in her growing up years. She is suggesting Unitarian Universalists move away from individualism toward community, which would involve acknowledging and ministering to the lived needs of the working class people in our midst. They are in fact needs we all experience, though middle and upper-middle class people may struggle to acknowledge them.

8. Interviewee Eight: A Religious Professional Who Has Had Enough

Interviewee Eight is the full-time Director of Religious Education for a congregation in the Boston area. She has deep concerns about social class exclusion in Unitarian Universalism. “At least if you’re a conservative Christian with a lot of rules, you own those rules,” she said. “You say, if you do this you’re not welcome here. We say we believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person, but we aren’t clear about who is not welcome.”

Interviewee Eight grew up in a poor neighborhood in Connecticut. She lived with her mother and stepfather in a triple-decker which housed five other families. Her stepfather had a sixth grade education. Her mother grew up on a farm in Scotland and emigrated to the United States as an adult. Like her husband, she did not have a secondary education. The family did not own a car.

After high school, Interviewee Eight earned an associate’s degree in retailing at a

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192 Ibid.

193 Interviewee Eight, interview by author, online, August 4, 2016.
junior college. “That degree is a silly thing to me,” she said. “I’m kind of embarrassed about it now.” She worked in retail for a while selling knives in a cutlery shop, one of three jobs she held simultaneously while also taking night classes in accounting. Finally she landed a job that paid enough money to support herself, and she dropped out of school without finishing her bachelor’s degree. She has been a Unitarian Universalist on and off since she was a teenager. She joined a congregation just over 20 years ago when her children were young.

In a theme that resonates through nearly every interview, Interviewee Eight is without a doubt a Unitarian Universalist in her belief but, she said, “I don’t find the community nurturing.” When she retires in a few years, she is not certain whether she will worship in a Unitarian Universalist congregation. Social class prejudice is a major reason.

Right now I think I’ve had enough (of Unitarian Universalism). I live in a very diverse town, and the contrast between my home life and my work life has really started to grate on me. It is grating when you have to comfort someone when they didn’t get into Harvard and they think their life is over when a block from here a boy was shot… The unfairness of that has started to pile up on me.195

Recently, her congregation’s struggles over whether to support the Black Lives Matter movement have caused Interviewee Eight to doubt her place in Unitarian Universalism. “The things I had to hear them say,” she said, “I am having trouble erasing them from my head.”196 She attributes much of the congregation’s skittishness over Black

194 Ibid.
195 Ibid.
196 Ibid.
Lives Matter to fear. Interviewee Eight notes that her upbringing may have taught her lessons different than the ones learned by other congregants. “I was taught, be a stand-up guy, have courage,” she said. “Nobody’s ever even beaten you up. What the hell are you afraid of?” 197

The answer may be that, as in Channing’s time, substantial investment in the status quo makes it difficult for middle and upper-middle class people to challenge societal norms in real time, no matter how liberal their thinking. In General, Interviewee Eight said, Unitarian Universalists are not as progressive as they sometimes imagine. “They may be religiously free thinkers, but as far as being unconventional in any way, not so much.” She added, “I felt some pride about Black Lives Matter, that I didn’t have that much to defend. People told me they hated conflict and I said, ‘I hate it too, but moral cowardice would be worse.’” 198

Interviewee Eight believes her whiteness leads congregants to assume things about her lifestyle, namely that she is middle or upper-middle class like most of them. “Because I am white and articulate, they have trouble keeping track of the fact that my life is different from theirs,” she said. “I’ve had to say more than once, ‘I’m not here because I’m one of you.’” One example she offered is that her salary does not allow her to afford a smart phone. “People in my congregation can’t seem to get that,” she said. “They keep saying ‘I’ll send you that on your phone’ and I have to keep saying ‘I don’t have a smart phone.’” 199

Often, Interviewee Eight has not had to remind the Unitarian

197 Ibid.
198 Ibid.
199 Ibid.
Universalists around her that she is not one of them. Their assumptions have served as reminder enough.

Not long ago Interviewee Eight was in casual conversation with two Unitarian Universalists in the congregation’s kitchen. The discussion turned to children and music, and whether the violin or the viola was to be preferred.

I couldn’t really follow, as my family did not know about music lessons, or lessons of any kind… There were several comments I couldn’t make sense of, but finally one said, “Everyone knows that violin players are a dime a dozen. If you want to be guaranteed a place in the orchestra you’re smarter to choose the viola.” Most of the discussion was just of no interest to me, but the “everybody knows” comment? It bothered me. Everybody doesn’t know. Not even everyone in this room knows, and there are only three of us.  

Interviewee Eight tells another story of a “wonderful, kind minister” whose actions frustrated her. “About every other time I said something he would laugh, and it was always something I was serious about,” she said. When she confronted him, asking why he laughed at her so often, he said “well you’re just so cute, so funny.” She responded, “It makes me feel very small. He was horrified,” she said, to know that he had offended her. Here as in other interviews Interviewee Eight attempts to defend the person whose assumptions made her feel less than.

It seems two decades of mistaken assumptions and class prejudice have taken their toll on Interviewee Eight. Her testimony is important. It serves as a reminder that unmasking and reforming Unitarian Universalist class prejudice is essential work lest our congregations imply to another generation of working class people, including the

200 Ibid.
201 Ibid.
professionals who work for those congregations, that the first Unitarian Universalist principle does not apply to them.

9. Interviewee Nine: UU Ministry Student and Social Class Educator

Interviewee Nine is a ministry student at Meadville Lombard Theological School. Since 2014, she has also volunteered with UU Class Conversations. At the time of her interview, she was the steering committee chairperson for that group. Her working class upbringing and present socioeconomic situation inform her ministry and her hopes for greater working class inclusion in Unitarian Universalism.

Interviewee Nine was born into a family of restaurant workers. Her grandmother waited tables most of her life, retiring at age 65. Her mother was also a waitress, and her father was a chef, “but not a chef who went to culinary school. He worked the line and they met at a steak house.”202 Interviewee Nine describes the sometimes harsh realities of working in the restaurant business in Chicago in the 1970s:

He was paid hourly. However, there were no benefits - health insurance, sick days. If you didn’t work, you weren’t paid. And while my mother often made more than him as a waitress, it was almost like straight commission sales. You went in and if the Bulls were playing - I grew up in the Chicagoland area - so if the Bulls were playing you had an empty restaurant. If it was snowing you had an empty restaurant… and they had to work really hard just to be able to afford an apartment and transportation.203

The family moved around quite a bit, especially when the rent was raised on the apartment or house they were living in. More than once, they were evicted. When her mother took four weeks off unpaid after the Cesarean section delivery of her younger

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202 Interviewee Nine, interview by author, online, April 21, 2016.

203 Ibid.
sister, the family ended up filing bankruptcy. Interviewee Nine’s parents divorced not long after.

The divorce complicated an already difficult economic situation. Her mother didn’t trust babysitters outside the family. “So we usually slept on the floor at family’s houses, you know, cousins, aunts,” Interviewee Nine said. “And she’d wake us up, like, at 1:00 in the morning and drive us back home so we could go to school the next day. And then finally, I was old enough to babysit my sister and so that helped a lot.”

Her mother eventually moved the family into “the cheapest place in a really good school district.” While this provided an excellent education, it also made evident to Interviewee Nine the social class gap between her and her peers. “The neighborhood that we moved into we rented a condo behind the Dunkin’ Donuts. And I had one friend whose father was the president of a bank and each person in the house had a Cadillac… I didn’t realize how big of a difference it was at first.”

Interviewee Nine was a gifted student, however, and was accepted at New York University School of the Arts, specifically into NYU’s Tisch School. She hoped to become an actress. She quickly found, however, that even with student loans she could not afford to attend.

I remember calling and talking to the financial aid office and saying, you know, “I don’t understand. Where am I supposed to come up with the rest of this money?” And he said, “Well, your parents may have to take out a second mortgage.” I said, “Well, you’re obviously not looking at my application because my parents don’t have a house that they can take any

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204 Ibid.
205 Ibid.
206 Ibid.
mortgage on.” So, luckily, Northwestern then and now still has a - like they meet 100 percent of what the FAFSA says that you need.\textsuperscript{207}

So she headed off to Northwestern University. But the rigor of the classes combined with the required work/study were too much. After a year, Interviewee Nine left Northwestern and “became a nanny for the wealthy - a live-in nanny so that I would have somewhere to live.”\textsuperscript{208} Though she planned to go back to Northwestern, she was never able to return.

Intent on avoiding waitressing, Interviewee Nine found work in sales for several businesses, including working for a company that placed programmers and network engineers into jobs. There, “for a brief, shining moment, I made phenomenal money for like three years.” Eventually Interviewee Nine returned to school to become a teacher, and became pregnant while she was in school. “Once I actually had Matthew, my expectations slowed down a little bit and so I only took a few classes a year once I had him. But I finally ended up finishing when I was forty-one.”\textsuperscript{209} Now forty-five years old, Interviewee Nine is nearly finished with seminary.

For this interviewee, identifying as working class is complicated. For a long time, she wanted nothing more than “to get out of the working class. And my mom and her mother as well kind of were always striving… So all I wanted was to be a yuppie… And to be a DINK - a Double Income, No Kids - I wanted that so badly… I guess (my husband and I) had three years of success financially. The rest of the time I was

\textsuperscript{207} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{208} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{209} Ibid.
supporting both of us and we were struggling.”  

Interviewee Nine realized several years ago that her desire to be a “yuppie” was coloring her view of her own life choices. Struggling with seminary debt to be a minister might be OK because it was respected in society, but struggling as a single Mom was not acceptable to her because she felt it was looked down on. She worked to change her perspectives, and came to see working class identity as a source of pride. But being a working class Unitarian Universalist, especially as an emerging religious professional, hasn’t been easy.

When I started at Meadville I really thought that if I told them that the UU faith is not very welcoming to people of different classes, I really expected them to say, “Oh, wow. I didn’t realize that. Let’s talk about what we can do differently.” And instead I felt like I had, you know, rotting garbage, rotting food thrown at me. It was that I have anger that isn’t justified and that I have anger that isn’t directed at the right people, and that, if I was talking about race, well then we would be talking about something. But, you’re white. You have a bachelor’s degree. What are you complaining about? Oh, so you have to take out a large amount of student loans to do this degree. Well no one’s forcing you to… So that is really where I realized, especially at Meadville, that academic elitism and that professional managerial class, middle class, that they talked about as the ministerial (class), I did not feel like I belonged there at all. And I felt like lived experience, knowledge and intelligence that comes from places other than Harvard and Yale or any institution was completely dismissed. And so I realized that even if they decided to completely change their financial aid program and I didn't have to worry about money - no loans, you know, everything’s taken care of - I still would not feel comfortable there.  

Here Interviewee Nine hints at a discomfort with the social habitus of Unitarian Universalism. But in her research with UU Class Conversations, she has discovered that she is far from alone. In workshops, she has heard stories from many


Unitarian Universalists who are struggling with finances and do not meet the perceived middle or upper middle class Unitarian Universalist norm. Many of those people, she reports, are hesitant to talk about their difficulties openly in their congregations. She has also discovered that it is sometimes difficult to keep people attentive to working class challenges, even when they themselves have been working class at some point in their lives.

We have a lot of UUs who grow up poor or working class but now have master’s degrees, Ph.D.s. They did get out of their group, and so they think, why can’t other people, not realizing that even with all of the social programs that were around for the baby boomers and the incredible economy that existed post-World War II, it still wasn’t everybody. And it certainly affected minorities differently.\(^{212}\)

Though at one point in her life Interviewee Nine had a 401k, she had to cash it out to buy her first home. She now has no retirement savings. “I think I’m going to be working until I am no longer able to work,” she said. “And that’s why I picked ministry. Because I love it.”\(^{213}\) She hopes that the work of UU Class Conversations, and other work on social class inclusion in her ministry career, will yield long-term results. “If we worked hard maybe in ten years we could see a difference,” she said. “And ten years sounds like a long time but it really isn’t.”\(^{214}\)

10. Interviewee Ten: Young Adult Faith Leader

Interviewee Ten, at twenty years old, has already been active in Unitarian Universalism for nearly a decade. He felt the call to ministry when he was twelve years

\(^{212}\) Ibid.

\(^{213}\) Ibid.

\(^{214}\) Ibid.
old, and that call persists. Currently, he is a member of the Unitarian Universalist
Association nominating committee, chair of the General Assembly right relationship
team, and manages communication for Diverse Revolutionary Unitarian Multicural
Ministries (DRUMM), a ministry comprised of Unitarian Universalists of color working
toward an anti-racist, anti-oppressive, multicultural Unitarian Universalist Association.

Interviewee Ten was born to first-generation Mexican American parents, “both of
whom had native ancestry.” He spent his first four years in and out of foster homes,
then was adopted “by two Moms, one of which is… a German immigrant to America,
and the other of which is first generation American as well, also with native ancestry.”
Each of his Moms held multiple jobs as he was growing up, working hard to provide for
their children. Things were often tight financially. “I think almost every Christmas, a
decent amount of my presents were from the tree in the mall sort of thing,” Interviewee
Ten said. “We’d shop at the dollar store for a decent amount of our groceries, for clothes
and stuff like that.” Careful money management, he said, has them in a more stable
situation these days.

Interviewee Ten has been living separate from his parents for nearly three years.
He identifies as working class for many of reasons. “I think one of the clear markers to
me is I’ve never been able to have just one job,” he said. “I’ve never had, up until this last
month, less than three or four jobs.” He has worked in customer service, done yard

216 Ibid.
217 Ibid.
218 Ibid.
work, replaced air conditioners, and repaired roads. As well, he uses “public transportation consistently, food stamps, that sort of thing.” When he applied for financial aid, he was offered the maximum amount based on his economic situation. He is working on a nursing degree at a community college.

Being a self-described “Native North American” makes him unique in more than one of his social circles:

Not just in UU circles but, I mean, I myself and my family and a lot of those I spend time with tend to surround ourselves with pretty liberal folks and sometimes pretty white liberal folks… So I’ve got a decent amount of family and friends that have a lot of money or are involved in politics and stuff like that. And so for me it’s a point of pride there even though it’s a challenge as well… It’s weird because sometimes you’re like the one person in the room who has brown skin and low income. But it also sometimes means that you can speak to stuff and kind of bring about awareness and have pride in… having an alternative perspective.

It is easy for Interviewee Ten to come up with advantages of being working class. One of them harkens back to Jesus’ advice that it is difficult for a wealthy person to enter the Kingdom of God:

Not making that much money, it’s easier for me to choose integrity over money. It’s easier for me than maybe some of my folks who have more money. And so I’ve quit jobs and/or like shifted my priorities in a way that affected my finances pretty strongly… because I haven’t had that much money at times and I realized that I would be happier with less money. And I think that might be easier to do for someone who has a lot of money and I think actually might take a little bit more sacrifice from someone who doesn’t.

Still, being a working class Unitarian Universalist of color is often difficult.

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219 Ibid.
220 Ibid.
221 Ibid.
Interviewee Ten recently completed an internship in a Unitarian Universalist congregation in the Pacific Northwest.

I had a conversation with one other rather important person in that congregation where they brought about this - Black Lives Matter idea - and followed it up with a comment about due to their influence in the congregation they were sure that they could make people listen to me. And there was like a real subtle implication of how our financial and, like, power differences were different because of money. Because he was going to use it to his advantage.  

There are, Interviewee Ten notes, intersections of white privilege and class privilege which make it especially difficult for working class Unitarian Universalists and UUs of color to be heard:

Folks who are upper class, without even realizing it, especially if they’re white but not even just then, um, just kind of assume… that they have more control over situations than they do or more power… It’s not even that they assume they have it, it’s that they assume it, they take it on, immediately. And that’s exhausting if you’re the person who, by default, does not. The biggest way that class has an impact is these folks, and through no fault of their own, were just brought up to think that… it’s their job to talk first and that they have more power in any given situation and they know more. Period.  

When middle and upper-middle class white people assume inherent authority they, often unconsciously, create a habitus which is deeply uncomfortable for working class people of color like Interviewee Ten. In his travels as a volunteer in the Unitarian Universalist Association, he has experienced embarrassment, even shame, in more than one situation, including dining with his colleagues. “Sometimes,” he said, “I’ll look at the menu and I’m like, okay, well, thank goodness the UUA is paying for this… And,

222 Ibid.
223 Ibid.
second, I really don’t know what some of this stuff is. So that’s embarrassing, right?…

Some of them laugh because it’s just an item on the menu, but unless you have a certain amount of money you aren’t going to go to a restaurant like that, ever.”

Sometimes, he added, he has sensed that as a speaker he has made a group uncomfortable:

I’ll talk about a situation that - “I had this conversation with a young person of color about money” - or whatever and I’ll realize while I’m talking through this that the upper class or upper middle class or whiter folks in the room are uncomfortable… the energy shifts into the room where it’s now almost like my job to walk them through their discomfort. But it’s not… And now I am uncomfortable and I feel kind of embarrassed because I brought something to the table that has put them on edge… And so it brings up feelings of shame as well, feelings of shame that I wouldn’t necessarily call valid, because what do I have to be ashamed for in that situation other than embarrassing them?

Lately, Interviewee Ten said, he has been empowered by his experience in People-of-Color (POC) ministries leadership to state clearly that it is not his job to guide white, middle or upper-middle class people through their discomfort. “And that can be difficult as well,” he said, “because then it turns me into some sort of ‘attacker.’”

As a young adult, a person of color, and a working class Unitarian Universalist, Interviewee Ten has faced a tangle of prejudice which has him sometimes feeling disillusioned. Worship with other Unitarian Universalists of color helps remind him that he can still find home in Unitarian Universalism. For his part, he has vowed to check his own assumptions even as he pushes others in the faith to do the same.

224 Ibid.
225 Ibid.
226 Ibid.
I’ve caught myself talking to what seems to me to be a very rich, white, wealthy, well-dressed, fancy minister and then they… tell me about how they grew up. And I’m like, oh, that’s really my bad… I can totally relate to them and they can totally relate to me. And so… just kind of assume you know nothing then move forward with positive behavior… Then I am less likely to be taking space that doesn’t belong to me. And I think other people are more inclined to be willing to open up and talk about their own experiences and then we can reconnect over that, if I don’t take up the space. At the end of the day that just models the same thing to everyone else. 227

11. Some Notes on the Interviews

I went into these interviews expecting to find disconnects between the musical interests of working class interviewees and the worship services they attend. This hardly ever came up. Though I asked questions about the music and entertainment the interviewees personally enjoyed and whether it was represented in their congregations’ worship services, none of the interviewees reported that this was a major concern for them. Several said they wish their musical taste was more represented in the choice of worship music in their congregations, but none expressed concern without being asked about music first.

It also became clear in the course of the interviews that Unitarian Universalism is attracting working class persons who are aligned philosophically and theologically with the movement. Several report either having converted because they no longer believed in the God of their childhood and/or feeling a deep connection with the social justice concerns of Unitarian Universalism. They value Unitarian Universalism’s religious freedom and diversity of thought. Some of the working class persons I interviewed spoke

227 Ibid.
of feeling excluded because of a lack of degrees, but never because the level of discourse was out of their range of understanding.

The most prominent thread which ran through every interview was class-based prejudice experienced in congregations. This usually came in the form of assumptions about what the working class person can or cannot afford, the kind of work they do, and what their aspirations might be. The message received from this prejudice seems to be that the working class person does not belong, but not because of their values or what they do or do not believe about the supernatural. Rather, it is intimated that they do not belong because of their socioeconomic status.

This indicates at least two things. First, social class divisions often counter our most deeply held aspirations, even in the very place that we come to affirm and celebrate those universalistic notions. Second, and closely related to the first, the interviews show that the greatest challenge to welcoming working class persons is not the oft-supposed academic nature of the faith which some assume is inaccessible to the working class. This counters Niebuhr’s notion that those without formal education would choose a ‘religion of the disinherit.’ Rather, the problem is the privileged assumptions of many of the faith’s adherents. Unitarian Universalists are sometimes sending coded class messages, likely almost always unintended, which counter Unitarian Universalist values by restricting access to working class Unitarian Universalists.

If we are to build the Beloved Community to which Unitarian Universalists often refer, surely it will include a wider working class welcome. How might we move further in that direction? In the final chapter, I will reflect theologically on the interviews, social
class theory, and the history of religion and social class and will conclude with some
suggestions for widening Unitarian Universalism’s welcome to working class persons.
Chapter Four

Proposals for a Different Approach

Just months after transferring from ministry in the Church of the Nazarene to the Unitarian Universalist Association, I attended my first Unitarian Universalist ministers’ retreat. Though I had been a Christian Universalist for years and certainly had no trouble with the theology of my new ministry setting, I felt lost in certain situations. In the Church of the Nazarene, I served mainly farmers and factory workers. My parents were factory workers. Suddenly I was serving a congregation that was largely full of degreed professionals. I was working with colleagues who had at least a master’s degree, more than a few from Harvard Divinity School. I drove a pickup and a cruiser-style motorcycle, I fished, I hunted a little, and I loved football. I felt I might never find a Unitarian Universalist minister to whom I could relate on more than a superficial level. I wondered if it was possible to feel at home, or at least comfortable, in the congregation I served.

Being an extrovert in pain, I talked about it. I sought out conversations not about my struggles in particular, but about social class and religion in general. I wanted to know what my new colleagues thought about the subject. In one such conversation, a soon-to-retire veteran complained, “We are an upper middle class denomination. I don’t know why we can’t just accept that and move on.” Though he couldn’t have known (after all I had a master’s degree, though I was only making $25,000 per year with no benefits as a part-time Unitarian Universalist minister) I felt as if he was telling me directly that I was
not welcome.

In the first few years of my work in this association, I traded too much of myself to become a Unitarian Universalist. I mostly left behind Christian spirituality. I stopped fishing. I read more books that didn’t interest me but I felt I ‘should’ read. I was trying to pass as upper middle class. And while I was preaching that all persons have inherent worth and dignity, I didn’t always feel included.

Eventually I took our message to heart in my own life and ministry. I began claiming and practicing a Humanist Christianity, sometimes preaching from my faith, and without fear. I dusted off my fishing gear and began using it again. And I found that as I spoke about these things, working class people in the congregations I served began sharing their stories with me.

I have learned to be hopeful, but we must also be realistic. Ten years later, that colleague’s words ring in my ears. Some might argue that his statement is justified after exploring the research. Social class divisions in religion seem intractable. Almost 100 years ago, Richard Niebuhr described stratifications in American religion that largely persisted at least through Smith’s and Farris’ 2000 research. Though a new social class survey of American religion is needed, it is unlikely that the Unitarian Universalist Association’s position at the top of the four scales has changed much, if at all. We are demonstrably a primarily middle class and upper-middle class denomination.

Further, the interviews above show that working class people struggle to find a home in Unitarian Universalism. Though most of the interviewees plan to remain Unitarian Universalists, and several express hope for a wider working class welcome, the
majority seem to plan to remain in spite of the extent of our working class welcome, not because of it.

Improving our working class welcome will require thoughtful theological reflection. As French essayist Montaigne observed: “We are, I know not how, double in ourselves, so that what we believe we disbelieve, and cannot rid ourselves of what we condemn.” Our stated beliefs and our actions do not match.

1. Unitarian Universalism Versus Market Theology

Unitarian Universalists seek a world, and a faith, in which power is widely shared. But a new religion may be thwarting our efforts. David R. Loy called this competing faith “The Religion of the Market:”

According to (Max Weber’s) The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, Calvinist belief in predestination encouraged what became an irresistible need to determine whether one was among the chosen. Such predestination made sacraments unnecessary and led to devaluation of the sacred. In its place economic success in this world came to be accepted as the demonstration of God’s favor. This created the psychological and sociological conditions for importing ascetic values from the monastery into worldly vocations, as one labored to prove oneself saved by reinvesting any surplus rather than consuming it. Gradually this original goal became attenuated, yet inner-worldly asceticism did not disappear as God became more distant and heaven less relevant. In our modern world the original motivation has evaporated, but our preoccupation with capital and profit has not disappeared with it; on the contrary, it has become our main obsession. Since we no longer have any other goal, there being no other final salvation to believe in, we allow the means to be, in effect, our end.

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The Protestant Christian splintering which accelerated during the Industrial Revolution can be seen as the sorting of winners and losers in the religion of the market. In religion as in society at large, Americans grouped themselves according to social class. Niebuhr’s complaint about Protestant denominationalism was that things should be different in the church founded by the peasant Jesus. But the religion of the market seems to have conquered the more universalist aspirations of traditional faiths.

As a religion at the top of socioeconomic measures, Unitarian Universalism has a great deal invested in the religion of the market. At times this is painfully obvious. As the interviewees point out, working class people who become Unitarian Universalists face a barrage of assumptions and questions which serve the purpose of checking a person’s social class qualifications for UU membership.

Though we aspire to do better, the interviews also demonstrate why it is easier to group according to social class. Differences in socially habituated subjectivities are difficult to transcend. The working class person often feels acutely a lack of welcome, an absence of belonging. These stories demonstrate that the social class fractures that Niebuhr described didn’t just happen once upon a time. They keep happening, Sunday after Sunday, in Unitarian Universalist congregations.

This reality is in direct conflict with our religious heritage. Before the founding of the Christian church, Jesus famously told his disciples that a person cannot serve both God and money. In another place Jesus is reported to have said that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter heaven. Following Jesus would be difficult, he told those who inquired about becoming disciples, for he had no
permanent home and lived a hand-to-mouth existence. In the topsy-turvy Kingdom of God, social norms would be reordered. The first would be last, and the last would be first.

Jesus’ ideals were never easy to enact in the institutional church. Already in his letter to the Corinthian church, Paul condemns the wealthy for attempting to eat separately from the poor. Certainly by the end of the second century, the church had enough wealthy members to pose a theological conundrum. The later adoption of Christianity by the wealthy Roman empire set up an internal conflict of values that persists today. But Jesus’ ideals still call Christians back to concern for the poor and working class, and the faith attracts working class persons around the world.

Both Unitarianism and Universalism began as Christian traditions, and this could be good news, as Christianity attracts a wider swath of social classes than does Unitarian Universalism. Perhaps there is something to learn. But over the years, Unitarian Universalism, like an adolescent child striking out on their own, has become resistant to the faith of its origin. Many Unitarian Universalists, like me, come out of Christian traditions. They come lugging baggage from their upbringing into their new faith tradition. Some are reactive against the dogma they experienced in various branches of Christianity, and rightly so. Unitarian Universalism has left behind the worst of Christianity, but also tends to leave behind its best. Jesus has become a swear word in many congregations, with some congregants counting the number of Biblical references in sermons. Too many and the minister is in trouble.

Christianity has not, however, been abandoned in favor of another religious tradition. Unitarian Universalism, though it still contains a significant minority of UU
Christians and people blending other faith traditions with Unitarian Universalism, has become a largely secular religious movement. Its few rituals, including flower communion and water communion, have borrowed from Christian sources but have removed most of Christianity’s language and theology. A reflection of American liberal culture, Unitarian Universalism is left with the Protestant work ethic absent the foundational theology.

The result is two sometimes separate strands of Unitarian Universalism. On the one hand, Unitarian Universalism can become a Humanist prosperity gospel. Unitarian Universalists are seen as, if not the chosen, certainly the enlightened. If a person is enlightened enough, and this is sometimes evidenced by success at least in achieving higher education, they can become a Unitarian Universalist. If not, it is sometimes implied that they are most likely uneducated and as such not the Unitarian Universalist demographic. When they become enlightened perhaps they will join us. The goal of this Unitarian Universalism is to move the individual adherent toward enlightenment.

On the other hand, Unitarian Universalism can also be a works-based social justice organization. The elect are those who belong to the right social justice organizations and have orthodox UU views on social issues. The goal of this Unitarian Universalism is to change the world. With less than 150,000 members, the Unitarian Universalist Association is unlikely to succeed in total global transformation.

In both of these admittedly caricatured versions of Unitarian Universalism, the middle and upper-middle class are privileged insiders. Mainly those who have the means to afford a formal education and/or those who have the time to invest in volunteer social
justice organizations are welcomed in. As harsh as this may sound, such thinking is implied in the assumptions detailed by the working class interviewees.

Still, there is a Unitarian Universalist theology calling us to something better. Humanism implies, though many of its adherents might shudder at the thought, that we are born in sin. We are seeking the promised land of true Universalism, or at least a thoughtful pluralism, which can be reached only by overcoming some of our baser inborn tendencies, which could be called sin.

One of these original human sins is the tendency, both learned and inborn, to group people so that quick judgments can be made. When Unitarian Universalists confess in our first principle that we believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person, we charge ourselves with overcoming our prejudices. We know we are falling short when our working class members tell stories of assumptions and questions which seem to be gate-keeping questions, judging whether a person belongs among us. Some would describe that gap between our aspiration and action as sin.

Here, a secular theology fails Unitarian Universalists. First, it offers us no prophet to call us back into right relationship with our own most deeply held values. Jesus? Most Unitarian Universalists afford him no such authority. The Buddha? His message of non-attachment seems to work well for middle and upper middle class meditations, but despite its condemnations of consumerism is not heard as a call to repentance. And the well-documented struggle with ministerial authority can rob Unitarian Universalist ministers of their prophetic role as well.

James Luther Adams spoke of the prophethood of all believers. Here could be
hope. Anyone could rise up and call Unitarian Universalism back to God, or love, or the faith’s most deeply held values. All faith traditions need such prophets from time to time. But just as likely, competing prophetic voices can drown one another out. The din of voices preserves the status quo. And what is more, no one can be expected to follow when everyone is a prophet.

Unitarian Universalism’s transcendentalist heritage reminds us that there is something of the holy in every person. Truly this is a call to honor every human being. But working class Unitarian Universalists tell us that often we do not honor the holy in them. They struggle to belong. The middle and upper-middle class seem to have internalized the message that there is something of God in them. But one wonders, do they believe this is so because of their good works? Has success in the market and an activist resume earned them status? The stories told in the interviews above seem to imply that this is the case.

This suggests a theological question: Is the presence of the holy in each of us by grace alone, or does it come to us by our good works? In our first principle, perhaps the most widely-known statement of Unitarian Universalist aspiration, we trumpet the inherent worth and dignity of every person. This implies a grace-based divine presence. Yet the stories in the chapter above imply that we might be acting out works-based assumptions. Perhaps Unitarian Universalism, like the American brand of Calvinism against which Unitarianism and Universalism were formed, assumes that the presence of the holy in us is by grace, but that our election is proven by good works in the world.

But in our secular/religious setting, the question is not usually set in theological
terms. It is often implied that we just can’t help it, that alas Unitarian Universalism is a middle and upper-middle class faith. No devil made us do it, to be sure, but here again is inborn sin, Humanist-style. Problematically, there is no ritual of repentance in Unitarian Universalism.

Still, here is true hope. In his essay “Guiding Principles for a Free Faith,” James Luther Adams offered five characteristics of liberal religion. If there is a theological center for Unitarian Universalism, Adams’ five smooth stones are a part. First, he argues that revelation in liberal religion is ongoing. “Meaning has not been finally captured. Nothing is complete, and thus nothing is exempt from criticism.”230 Further, liberal religion includes “the moral obligation to direct one’s efforts toward the establishment of a just and loving community… The ‘holy’ thing in life is the participation in those processes that give body and form to universal justice. Injustice brings judgment and suffering in its train; it is tolerated only at the peril of stability and meaning.”231 Adams is optimistic because, as he states in his fifth smooth stone, “the resources (divine and human) that are available for the achievement of meaningful change justify an attitude of ultimate optimism.”232 Though change may take a long time, Adams argues, it is ultimately possible.

New revelation is coming forward, in this case from the stories of working class Unitarian Universalists. Our associational attention to the issue implies we sense the need for change. We are called to create the institution we desire.

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230 Adams, op. cit., 12.

231 Ibid., 16.

232 Ibid., 19.
I am also encouraged in the hard work of change by Sean McCloud’s thinking about socially habituated subjectivities. Certainly Unitarian Universalism creates its own social habitus, varying by region but often including an emphasis on classical music in worship, for example. But McCloud suggests that a habitus can be changed with enough intentionality. So it seems congregations could, in the example of music, include more gospel and bluegrass music and explore the stories behind it. Some congregations, like the one I serve, are already doing so. Intentionally inviting working class members to help create and/or execute worship will shift the habitus over time, perhaps lessening degree to which working class persons are repelled from our congregations by the middle- and upper-middle-class assumptions experienced by the interviewees.

Sharing Adams’ and McCloud’s optimism, I suggest below a few more ways Unitarian Universalists could more fully welcome working class members.

2. Cultivate a Theology and Culture of Humility

Ralph Waldo Emerson, who briefly filled a Unitarian pulpit, helped shape American Unitarian faith along with other Transcendentalists. They wrote and spoke of the divine in every soul. Human beings could think for themselves, they proclaimed. People needed look no further than their own spirits for the answers to life’s biggest questions. In opposition to popular early American Christianity, which preached a sinful humanity worthy of condemnation in the eyes of God, the message of God in each and all as opposed to a judging, transcendent God above was a saving message. It offered hope and assurance in the face of a condemnatory faith.
If, as is sometimes said, Universalists believed God was too good to damn them and Unitarians believed they were too good to be damned, today’s Unitarian Universalist believes both (when they use the word ‘God’ at all). Certainly it remains important to assure people that they are born worthy and dignified, and to act on that assumption. But the interviewees for this project shared stories of prejudice around finances, education, and the type of work a person does. It seems Unitarian Universalists preach inherent worth and dignity, but often unwittingly assign worth and dignity along social class lines when it comes to personal interactions and welcoming in our congregations.

As a corrective, we would do well to develop humility as a core Unitarian Universalist virtue. It would help middle and upper-middle class Unitarian Universalists as well as working class members. If we scratch the surface of the exclusion noted in the interviews, we may find fear. Most middle and upper-middle class people in 21st century America are not Marx’s bourgeoisie. Though they are salaried, they work for a boss or a corporation much like the working class people they are sizing up on Sundays. Maybe middle and upper-middle class people unconsciously seek to maintain their slight edge on working class folk because they sense that they are just as close to losing their livelihood as the grocery store clerk or semi-truck driver.

Fear often puffs people up, making them seem proud, even arrogant. But when we can be honest about our similarities, our relationships deepen and our liberation can truly be collective. Middle and upper-middle class Unitarian Universalists might come to see that, as in Jesus’ upside down kingdom of heaven, they need to aspire to working class characteristics, not the other way around. Certainly Marx’s proletariat revolution within
Unitarian Universalism is unlikely, but Channing’s prescription for a working class ‘elevation’ assumes that the Brahmin class is ideal. It is not necessarily so.

That there is something of the divine in every person can be heard in more than one way. Maybe some egos are inflated by that message. But it is also a reminder that at the deepest level, we are all human. If Unitarian Universalists preached and taught that message repeatedly, if we developed rituals and spiritual practices around a humility that leads to Universalism even across social class divisions, we may finally be able to see and address our shortcomings together, without middle class defensiveness.

Trends in higher education lend themselves to greater humility, as demonstrated in Pyle’s thinking which was examined in chapter two. He suggests that education is becoming more accessible across traditional social class divisions. Though this is not breaking down social class barriers in religion since a college degree does not grant the social access it once did, it is true that information is more readily available across social classes than it has ever been. As Harris said, thinking people come from all social classes. Perhaps the radical democratization of information will lead to a humbling of what was formerly the only social class which had access to certain information.

I have seen the effects in my own ministry. Fifteen years ago, my teaching method was different than it is now. Often I stood before people and talked, for example, about the Greek words contained in some passage of Scripture, confident that I was imparting new information to most in the class. Now, my role in such classes is largely that of facilitator. People with no formal education in Biblical studies come bearing information from books or websites which is often of high quality. Access to information may be, in
admittedly limited ways, dampening the effects of the difference between formal and informal education. In such a world, humility may be the only logical position.

3. Develop a Working Class Certification Program

One interviewee specifically mentioned this idea as a way to help educate Unitarian Universalists about working class people. The truth is, people who were raised middle and upper-middle class or who have been middle or upper-middle class for many years often do not understand the daily lives of working class people. They do not, then, understand why questions about where someone grew up or why they don’t just go buy a book or guitar, or the assumption that they are a professor when they drive a shuttle bus at the university, could be offensive.

Developing a program like the Unitarian Universalist Association’s much-celebrated Welcoming Congregation program would both signal that working class issues are important to us at an associational level and begin to educate our members about their own class privilege and prejudice. It could get people from disparate classes sitting across from one another telling their stories. A certification that required renewal every few years would ensure that congregations are keeping up with the work.

This curriculum could touch on class prejudice’s many intersections, furthering our anti-oppression work in other areas even as we work on social class. For example, interviewees made clear that social class prejudices intersect with race-based oppressions. One interviewee mentioned that the working class neighborhood in which she grew up was much more diverse than her Unitarian Universalist congregation. Another spoke of his mattress delivery job, in which he was a distinct minority as a white man. Part of the
systemic oppression of black Americans has, of course, been restriction of access to the market, which leads to groupings of people of color at the bottom of socioeconomic scales including housing and job prestige. In religion, this oppression shows up when denominations which are traditionally identified with people of color are at the bottom of socioeconomic measurements of religious groups, while the denominations at the top have a scant minority of people of color as members. This could be a rich area of discussion and story-telling for Unitarian Universalist congregations.

Certainly this work can be done now. There are curricula available to help, and UU Class Conversations is doing great workshops around the country. However, there is no association-level program around social class issues. Remedying this could go a long way in helping congregations avoid writing more stories of prejudice and exclusion like the ones shared in chapter three.

4. Come (Back) to Jesus

Early American Universalists may have had the highest Christology of any Christians before or since. They believed that the salvation offered through Jesus was efficacious for everyone, whether or not they were Christian. God’s love was powerful enough to overcome any resistance. Some believed there was no hell, others that hell was purgatorial, but either way, Jesus achieved salvation for all people. This salvation was achieved, the Universalists taught, by grace. There was no earning God’s love. In Jesus, all were accepted. This implies what modern Unitarian Universalists often proclaim, that every human being is worthy of honor and love.

That this world-changing salvation was affected by the peasant Jesus was an
important part of Universalism’s message, and Christianity’s message more generally. The greatest wisdom was given not to a Roman Caesar but to a man with little standing in his community. This is a class-transcending message. It serves to elevate the powerless and humble the proud and powerful. While still powerful, the message that all are worthy of honor and love, without the figure of Jesus, loses some of its power.

Unitarian Universalism de-emphasizes Jesus in favor of being open to lessons from many faith traditions. However, in Unitarian Universalism, multi-faith pluralism is often sacrificed at the altar of a generic faith which seeks not to offend by ignoring its own origin, or by changing the sacraments of Christianity so as to make them almost unrecognizable, as is the case with Unitarian Universalism’s many derivations of the Christian celebration of communion. As in family relationships, cutoff from one’s origin is unhealthy, serving to propagate and extend conflicts and to destroy one’s sense of self. We forget why we do things and begin to worship the forms instead of the reality to which the forms were first intended to point.

It is rare to come across a Unitarian Universalist who deeply follows any specific spiritual path. Unitarian Universalism’s free and responsible search for truth and meaning, listed in the faith’s principles statement, is mostly free, but not always responsible or in community. We are often rugged spiritual individualists. As was mentioned above, when we need to be called back to right relationship with our own values, often no prophetic voice is available. Certainly there is no voice which the majority of Unitarian Universalists will lend credence.

Deeply re-familiarizing ourselves with the lessons of Jesus could help. James
Luther Adams shows the way. Adams repeatedly uses Jesus as an example in his writing, though he defines God as “that which ultimately concerns humanity” and “that in which we should place our confidence.” Reclaiming Jesus does not mean reverting to a version of God that most liberal Christians have left behind. That is, of course, not possible. But the fact that our founding prophet was a homeless Middle Eastern peasant is a significant call to more fully welcome working class persons. We would do well to talk about Jesus more openly.

I am not suggesting that Unitarian Universalism become a Christian denomination or, again, that we use more ‘God’ language. Our openness to the lessons of all faiths, and to Humanism and atheism, could be transformative were it ever lived out. But our cutoff from Jesus has resulted in a tense agreement to keep the J-word mostly to Christmas sermons. By drawing us away from the radically class-inclusive teachings of Jesus, it is costing us dearly.

5. Continue to Examine Our Rituals for Class Prejudice

In describing his theory of socially habituated subjectivities, McCloud is clear about his belief that with effort, habitus can be changed. The Unitarian Universalist ritual of a Fall water communion seems to demonstrate that this is true of religious movements as well as individuals. At one time, it was popular to ask each congregant to bring water from the favorite place they traveled in the summer recently past. Participants were invited to come to a microphone and announce to the congregation from where their water came. “This water is from Spain,” some would say, or Germany or Denmark or the

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233 Ibid., 13.
Caribbean. Others brought water from the tap in their house, a symbol of their inability to afford an exotic vacation to a faraway clime. Surely still others stayed home on Water Communion Sunday.

Lately, some are revamping this ritual with social class inclusion in mind.

Unitarian Universalist minister Amy Morganstern wrote the following in 2013:

The core symbolism of the Water Communion is that we all come from water: as a species on a planet where life began in the ocean, as mammals who float in amniotic fluid as we are readied for birth, as beings whose cells are mostly water. And yet we are separate from each other, and we have been apart—since there tends to be a slowing-down, a different rhythm in the summer months, even in churches that have services and religious education right on through the summer—and now we are reuniting. We are separate and together, the way water scatters into rain and streams and clouds and springs and ponds and puddles and yet flows together again and again, one great planetary ocean. Not only is no drop of water superior to any other; all water comes from the same place. So the class issue is only a part of what’s awry with the “where I went this summer” approach to the ritual. Even if everyone in the world had a summer home in Provence, “This water comes from our summer home in Provence” would not be what I wanted this ceremony to be about. It’s so trivial, whereas “We are separate beings and yet all one” is one of the profoundest truths we try to encompass.234

Morganstern demonstrates that the problematic water communion ritual can be improved, even crafted to become actively anti-oppressive. What about other worship traditions? Interviewees Six and Ten suggested ministers should use language which will be clearly understood by congregants, and should clearly define potentially problematic words. Interviewee Four said he would enjoy hearing country and gospel music in

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worship. Where else have Unitarian Universalists come to confuse praising social status with worship of the God who is love?

6. Get Real About Unitarian Universalist Privilege

Whether or not our demographics are changing, Unitarian Universalism is still a predominately middle and upper-middle class faith. As was stated above, there is absolutely no evidence that the social class makeup of the movement has changed dramatically. As people who have historically made a good deal of hay from praising the scientific method, this lack of evidence should cause us to be candid about the only facts we know: We have been historically and likely are today a predominately middle and upper-middle class faith.

What does seem to be changing is the reason working class people find it difficult to stick around Unitarian Universalism. Information in general, and certainly formal education, were much more difficult for the working class to access 200, 100, even 20 years ago. Now most schools, including some seminaries, offer degrees online, and the answers to most factual questions are as close as a Google search. As was demonstrated in the interviews above, working class persons are thinking persons, and thinking persons of all social strata are drawn to Unitarian Universalism. What is making it difficult for working class people to stay around is not Unitarian Universalists’ formal degrees, but our assumptions that all of our members will be middle or upper-middle class. Unitarian Universalists may well need, as Roy Interviewee One suggested in his interview, to get over ourselves.

An important step is to be transparent about our class composition. Until new
facts replace the most recent research, we have been proven to be predominately middle and upper-middle class. As such, there are certain truths which apply to us including, interviewee Elizabeth Interviewee Six pointed out, the notion that in general the more resources a person has, the less generous they are as a percentage of wealth. Interviewee Six is the administrator of a small Unitarian Universalist congregation in a working class neighborhood and is a member of one of the largest congregations in the association, a congregation the membership of which includes many more degreed professionals. “At the little congregation where I work, where people supposedly have less money, people are more generous,” she said. “And so the pledge drive went great at the little congregation. Absolutely fantastic. And at the big one we’re still hearing every week that we’re $110,000 short.”

In their report on social class in Unitarian Universalism, the Unitarian Universalist Association’s Commission on Appraisal hinted at the same tendency. The report suggested that when we have taken an honest assessment of our privilege, we can envision new ways to engage the societal problems Unitarian Universalists seek to change:

Our social position of high education and low giving offers an opportunity. We give in small amounts, perhaps because we know that the conventional solutions that our money will go to don’t work. But our response is to give little and focus on our individual spiritual fulfillment. The opportunity we have is to engage our privilege of high education to develop new, unconventional solutions and pour our resources into them.

It is not shameful to have this high amount of social and monetary capital. It

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235 Interviewee Six, *op. cit.*

236 Commission on Appraisal, *op. cit.,* 36.
would be a shame for a group with such a high degree of capital to hide it as we squabble over whether or not we really are predominately middle and upper-middle class. Instead, as the Commission on Appraisal suggests, Unitarian Universalists would do well to take an honest assessment of our capital, social and otherwise, and leverage it to make the difference we want to make.

7. Commission an Academic Study of Social Class and Religion

Unitarian Universalists could offer a great gift to the world of religion by using some of its considerable endowment to commission a major study of social class and American religion. This will only be effective if it is a nationwide, multi-faith study. An academic study of social class within Unitarian Universalism alone would be beneficial, but not enough to help understand the faith’s position among other religious groups.

In her interview, ministry student Interviewee Nine stated that as she has travelled around the country offering workshops on social class, she has encountered more social class diversity than some might expect. “There is really diversity, but we as a denomination keep on saying we are predominately white, middle to upper-middle class, and highly educated,” she said. “And so every time we say that… everybody in the audience who isn’t that feels like they don’t belong.” 237 That is true enough. I expect there is some truth in Interviewee Nine’s observation that Unitarian Universalist class demographics are changing, though I doubt Unitarian Universalism is anywhere close to a majority working class movement. I also wonder if the smartphone, which was only made widely available in 2007, has already democratized information to such a degree

237 Interviewee Nine, op. cit.
that it has contributed to a shift in American religious demographics.

However, speculation and anecdotes do not add up to solid evidence, and there is no proof that Unitarian Universalism has become more class diverse. There is plenty of proof above that working class Unitarian Universalists still feel excluded. Unitarian Universalism’s intense interest of late in economics and social class should lead us to put some money where our hearts seem to be. As the situation stands, neither we nor the leaders of any other religious movement can speak with authority to our social class makeup post 2000.

Such a study might bring the additional benefit of signaling Unitarian Universalism’s intent to be a serious interfaith partner to more mainstream religious groups by making a serious contribution to the world of faith in general. As many American religious groups are seeing declines in attendance and general participation, and consequently in funding, these partnerships may well become necessary. They have always been important. Interfaith relationships certainly play to Unitarian Universalist heritage and theology. A study of social class in American religion would benefit widely the religious world.

A discussion of social class without all the facts is not likely change hearts and minds, let alone habits. But as McCloud argues, an academic study of social class in American religion does offer the potential for transformation:

The most general goal of any humanities course is to ultimately ‘break’ habits of mind so that we can see the world from multiple perspectives and thus better perceive its socially constructed nature. This applies to teachers as much as it does to students. By putting some class back into the study of religion, we have the opportunity as researchers and teachers to open
new discussions, make our classrooms more inclusive, and fracture habituated ways of understanding. 238

As of now, as has been noted, the study of class in religion is underfunded and often ignored, if not actively avoided. Unitarian Universalists could help, as McCloud suggests, put some class back into the study of religion.

8. Covenant and Conversation Versus Robert’s Rules

At General Assembly 2016, the UUA Task Force on Covenanting, commissioned by the UUA Board of Trustees, was prepared to work with the board to test drive a new method of decision-making. The experiment was modeled on the American Baptist Church, USA’s Mission Table method. Trained facilitators were prepared to meet with groups of 100 or so delegates in various rooms and break them into ten-person discussion circles in which they would discuss a transition from membership to covenant in the Unitarian Universalist Association. The results of the discussions would inform the work of the board, staff, and congregations. This experiment was designed in part to try out ways to move away from the current congregational emphasis on membership and, as Interviewee Six suggested we should do, get back to covenant.

In the end, the General Assembly business agenda did not allow the experiment to go forward. Ironically, the task force’s work was squeezed by a contentious debate over a complicated issue to which several people spoke more than once. The line at the procedural microphone was frequently more than five persons deep.

The New England Town Hall style of decision-making, using Robert’s Rules of Order, is so complicated that it requires a professional parliamentarian to implement. It

238 McCloud, op. cit., 170.
privileges those who have experience navigating this perplexing process and who, as Interviewee Ten said, “think that… it’s their job to talk first and that they have more power in any given situation and they know more.” A more discussion-based style of decision-making levels the playing field.

As well, the move away from traditional membership and back toward covenant, the topic for the ill-fated discussions and a notion rooted deeply in Unitarian Universalism’s congregationalist history, helps make expectations explicit, leveling the playing field for those looking to become Unitarian Universalists. A report from the UUA Task Force on Covenanting reads:

According to our bylaws, Section C.2.2, “The Unitarian Universalist Association shall devote its resources to and exercise its corporate powers for religious, educational and humanitarian purposes. The primary purpose of the Association is to serve the needs of its member congregations, organize new congregations, extend and strengthen Unitarian Universalist institutions and, (finally), to implement its principles.” The first sentence of this section provides a very general mission. The first part of the second sentence describes a membership-service organization. The UUA is, of course, comprised of its member congregations. We should not be surprised that an association that services the very entities that comprises it would develop tendencies to be focus (sic) on internal structures, bylaws, and parliamentary method. Nor should we be surprised that such an atomistic model reifies the independence rather than interdependence of the congregations. Noting this quickly leads to concerns not just of efficiency, but of justice. Successful agents in this environment are likely to be experts in certain kind of very nuanced internal and long term conversations. Activists, persons in love with movements but not membership organizations, and all non-congregational entities are frustrated if not actively repelled. Non congregational UU identity organizations will find it easy to claim independence over accountability in times of trouble; in times of

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239 Interviewee Ten, op. cit.
aspiration they will become confused by the extraordinary effort necessary
to gain institutional toe hold at the cost of doing their work in the world.240

Both the shift from membership to covenant and the proposed change in decision-
making style have the potential of creating a more working class welcoming process.
Both make the implicit explicit and allow access across social class divisions. The task
force is continuing its work. Hopefully, Robert’s Rules will not exclude experimentation
at future General Assemblies.

9. Conclusion

After my initial interviews, I reached back out to the interviewees to ask why, in
the face of exclusion and prejudice, they stick around Unitarian Universalism.

"The Seven Principles are what I believe in and strive to live by,” Interviewee
One answered. “These only exist, as far as I know, in the UUA. I believe there is
nowhere else to go so I continue to attend.”241 Interviewee Six offered a note of hope:
“I've stayed because the sermons, the music, the social justice work, and the congregation
as a whole keep getting better. People are more aware of diversity. Also, more and more
people have joined who are not upper-middle class. Instead, they are social justice
savvy.”242 Interviewee Eight is staying around, for now, in part because of her theology.

“I don't believe in a monotheistic god, so other churches would not be a good fit,
spiritually,”243 she said.

240 Unitarian Universalist Association Task Force on Covenanting, “Report of the UUA Task
Force on Covenanting to the UUA Board,” online, accessed September 13, 2016, https://
241 Interviewee One, e-mail message to author, September 6, 2016.
242 Interviewee Six, e-mail message to author, September 6, 2016.
243 Interviewee Eight, e-mail message to author, September 6, 2016.
Though the interviewees spoke of the faith’s principles and activism, their own resilience plays a part as well. “No matter where a person goes for a religious community there will most certainly be something that rubs them wrong,” Interviewee Four said. “It’s just the way life is and you can’t let it stop you on your journey through life.”

Interviewee Nine, a ministry student, said she realized some time ago that she herself was classist in her thinking. How, then, could she be upset with others for being the same? Afterward, a workshop featuring a prominent theologian persuaded her to change things for the better:

I went to a Parker Palmer workshop based on his book, A Hidden Wholeness. Palmer explains that we live in the “tragic gap” -- the gap between our current reality and what we aspire to be. Palmer's lens helped me see that this gap is part of trying to better ourselves and the world. This gap is not something unique to Unitarian Universalists. All religions have it. There will always be a gap between who we are and who we want to be. So I told myself to pick a place to start and work on reducing the gap. For me, the place to start is Unitarian Universalism. Since my first worship service, it has felt like home. I do not believe in any other religion's aspirations as much as I believe in ours. This is the only place that I can be.

Though I admire their strength, I hope Unitarian Universalism will require less courage on the part of working class people in coming generations.

The chasm between the egalitarian aspirations of faith traditions and their economic realities is certainly nothing new. Jesus drew attention to it two millennia ago.

To truly welcome working class persons fully, Unitarian Universalists will need to seriously question the rugged intellectual individualism it has inherited from many of its...
sainted figures, including Emerson and Channing. Leaders will be required to develop a more community-oriented approach to the faith. They may need to mention Jesus every now and then. But the weakness and strength of Unitarian Universalism is that ours is a living, malleable tradition. It is never too late to learn ancient lessons.
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