

God-Optional Religion in Twentieth-Century America: Quakers, Unitarians,
Reconstructionist Jews, and the Crisis Over Theism, 1920-1965

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"Steer your path through the pain
That is far more real than you
That smashed the cosmic model
That blinded every view
And please don't make me go there
Tho' there be a god or not"
- Leonard Cohen

"When the half-gods go, Gods arrive"
- Ralph Waldo Emerson

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Introduction

In January of 2018, the Unitarian Universalist Church of Akron, Ohio tweeted a photograph of a chart that had been produced by a religious education class of middle schoolers. The photo of the chart was captioned with the message, “In Unitarian Universalism, different ideas about God are welcome and celebrated.”¹ The chart was written in marker and divided into two columns; the heading on the left-hand side listed “Ideas of God” while the right-hand side allowed the students to place stickers in support of ideas of God with which they agreed.² The God that most students believed in was not based on the Bible, did not work miracles and was not a person in any meaningful sense.

Blue, red and purple star-shaped stickers crowded each other next to the statements “I find God in nature” and “God is my conscience telling me to make the world a better place.” Many of the children had placed their marks next to the phrase “There’s a spark of divinity in each of us,” an immanent notion of God. Atheist or agnostic views of God were also popular. “We can use science and reason to understand our universe” and “There’s no way we can know whether or not there is a God” had a colorful array of stars and circles next to them, while a slightly smaller number were beside “there is no such thing as God, and even the word is meaningless.”

The traditional, personal and interventionist God that Americans worshiped in churches for centuries had the least appeal to these middle schoolers. A mere six stickers were clustered next to the phrase “God cares for us and our prayers.” Only a single sticker was left in agreement next to the sole Christian affirmation on the chart, “my beliefs about Jesus make me feel closer to

¹ UU Church of Akron (@UUAkron), “In Unitarian Universalism, different ideas about God are welcome and celebrated,” photo, Twitter, January 24, 2018, <https://twitter.com/UUAkron/status/956248664443322368>.

² UU Church of Akron, “In Unitarian Universalism.”

God.” The first, and one of the most popular items on the chart, perhaps expressed the view of the teacher when they had begun the religious education lesson: “There are probably as many views of God as there are people.”³ For most of the class their God was not the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the Apostle Paul, or more recent theological formulation by Americans like Jonathan Edwards or Henry Ward Beecher; rather, the word “God” had come to signify something else, or perhaps come to mean whatever one wanted it to be. There was no punishment for not believing in God for these students. All views of God were valid.

The poster was only the product of a single class of young teens in a church, and not a work of systematic theology. Yet the poster reflected over a century of intellectual debates and upheavals about the nature and existence of God that had convulsed American religion. By the start of the twentieth century, historical criticism, scientific advances, rapid industrialization, changing demographics, and cultural shifts associated with “modernity” combined to make the existence of an interventionist and supernatural God seem less credible among American intellectuals. These challenges to theism reached the broader population. Religious groups struggled to adapt to the changes that cultural critic Walter Lippmann called the “acids of modernity” and to find a firm basis for their faith.⁴ That these children could believe in so many different notions of God was a radical disjuncture from what had been theological orthodoxy, yet past generations of liberal theological thinkers had long fought for such ideas.

This dissertation is effectively an origin story, an intellectual history of how the views that were displayed on the poster took shape in the United States, and the genesis of what I term God-optional religion. I use the term God-optional religion to identify religious groups that began to permit their members a broad leeway in what they chose to believe about God. To be

³ UU Church of Akron, “In Unitarian Universalism.”

⁴ Walter Lippmann, *Preface to Morals* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1929).

God-optional did not mean these groups tried to eliminate belief in God; it meant they tolerated a range of views. Belief in a pantheistic God, an immanent God, or even no God at all, could all exist together in one religious community. The specifics of a person's theology became a matter of personal conviction and choice.

The most common reason people gravitated to God-optional religion was because it seemed to offer a way to remain devout and maintain intellectual integrity in an era when the existence of a traditional God had begun to seem at best an uncertain prospect. They saw the world through the prism of what philosopher Charles Taylor and other scholars of religion have derided as a “subtraction stories,” an approach that understands developments in science and society as rendering religion increasingly implausible because it showed that many of the supernatural premises of religion were either untrue or not verifiable.⁵ While Taylor is critical of such narratives, this dissertation contextualizes its historical subject's claims about their own faith. Subtraction stories, after all, were a lived religious experience for some Americans. When they found that evolution seemed to provide an explanation for humanity's existence without the need to invoke God, or they learned from historical criticism that the Bible was a historical text written by another society and contained human errors, these things could cause people to discover that what they had seen as core aspects of their religious beliefs were in need of revision.

There is an incongruity; to become God-optional was a theological rebellion, a radical break from the past, but at the same time the move was almost always motivated by the desire to

⁵Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 22, 26-29; Benjamin Schewel, *7 Ways of Looking at Religion: The Major Narratives* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 11-31.

maintain faith traditions and identities but update them enough so that they could be made plausible and defensible. Scholars of religion have been attentive to the turn towards fundamentalism, which embraced Biblical inerrancy, battled against scientific findings like evolution, and trumpeted its adherence to tradition while really being a thoroughly modern Enlightenment project.⁶ God-optional religion was the inverse. Most of the public pronouncements of its supporters were about the bold changes that they were undertaking to make religion relevant for the contemporary world, but the reason they were actually making any of these changes was that they loved the traditional forms of institutionalized religion enough to want to save them.

These ideas were in wide circulation among religious liberals, but were nurtured within and put into practice by individual religious communities. Three small bodies in particular—liberal Quakers, Unitarians, and Reconstructionist Jews—were formative for the emergence of God-optional ideas. Each of these groups began to permit members to hold a broad range of theologies, and eventually developed substantial constituencies that did not accept the existence of a personal, interventionist God.⁷ Denominations served as incubators for a theological change,

⁶George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism in American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); Molly Worthen, *Apostles of Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

Scholars of American religious history have shown the evangelical and fundamentalist responses to this theological crisis of belief. George Marsden's classic *Fundamentalism and American Culture* and Molly Worthen's *Apostles of Reason*, for example, show how ideas of Biblical inerrancy and common-sense realist philosophy were enshrined by theological conservatives in an effort to preserve the intellectual foundations of their faith.

⁷ This dissertation opts to describe these groups as being religious denominations. Quakers have called themselves a movement, using the term branches to describe their own divisions. Unitarians used the term denomination. Jewish groups have sometimes opted to use the term branches to describe divisions in the Jewish community but also commonly use the term denomination. Reconstructionist Judaism was originally a movement inside Conservative and Reform Judaism, before becoming a separate denomination in the 1960s. While the term denomination has Christian origins the term is used to here to describe organized religious communities that do not claim monopoly on truth.

which by 1960 had begun to spread into Reform Judaism, the Protestant mainline, and the wider culture.

God-optional religion was (and still is) demographically small, counting less than half a million members, but it represents more than a footnote in American religious history. God-optional views became visible in mainline Protestantism, finding voice from figures like the late Biblical scholar Marcus Borg, former Catholic priest John Dominic Crossan, and Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong. There are still adherents of God-optional religion, and the three groups most prominently featured in this dissertation continue to exist, although Unitarians have merged with the Universalists to become the Unitarian Universalists, and Reconstructionists have renamed their organization Reconstructing Judaism.

The ideas that God-optional religion developed were instrumental in reconceptualizing what it meant to be part of a religious organization in America. God-optional religions became one important part of the decoupling of religious belonging and specific religious beliefs, and in the twenty-first century there are many manifestations of this trend. Large numbers of American Jews see Judaism as a cultural identity rather than a religious belief, and there are many Catholics who disagree with church teaching, some of whom even profess a hostility towards ecclesiasticism and the very structures of the church. Perhaps most surprising, there are now self-proclaimed ethnic and cultural Mormons, who identify with Mormonism either as a form of white ethnic heritage or as a collection of foodways, folk stories and insider references.

I am drawn to write about God-optional religion because it is the genesis of my own tradition. I feel a sense of kinship with each of the three groups. Many of my forebears came from the same eastern European Jewish world where most Reconstructionists originated, I earned my first master's from Harvard Divinity School, an intellectual center of Unitarian

Universalism which has strongly informed my views, and by choice I am a liberal Friend. In the history of how religious leaders wrestled with the place of their faith in the modern world, I have found a story that is both beautiful and melancholy. Like surgeons, God-optional religious leaders were forced by circumstance to perform the painful operation of trying to remove what they felt were implausible beliefs, even permitting the denial of the existence of deity itself, in an effort to save an intellectual space to continue their communities. They emphasized the socially progressive parts of their traditions, seeing the struggle for peace or improvement of the conditions of the economically or socially marginalized as priorities even if God was not.

Sometimes they failed, and their writings can showcase sexism, racism, and colonialism that seems shocking coming from people who professed noble religious sentiments about the innate worth of all humanity. Often, they sacrificed too much in the name of modernizing religion. They ignored the transcendental, dropped the poetry of God-language from their services, or extolled scientific progress and humanity in a way that seems naive in a century shaped by the world wars and the Holocaust. They could be too strict about religious labels, squabbling with co-religionists over matters that appear in hindsight to have been largely quibbles over the definitions of words rather than substantive disagreements, with humanists fighting against any mention of theism while many God-optional thinkers derided atheism.

While I have striven to do more than write an apologetic by aiming to provide a thorough picture of this movement, including its many faults, I hope this account will make clear that whatever their mistakes, liberal religious practitioners did something that was necessary in making forms of religion that could stand up to intellectual scrutiny. They felt, as many

innovative thinkers in religion often observed, it was not a choice between these radical ideas and traditional religion, it was between these ideas and not being religious at all.⁸

God-Optional Religion as American Religion

It is important to understand these God-optional views in the wider scheme of American religion and religious liberalism. Religious liberals were defined by the idea that religion should draw heavily on human reason and contemporary knowledge.⁹ Much like fundamentalism, religious liberalism served as an adaptation to the pressures of modernity. In the case of fundamentalism, however, believers bent their conception of the modern world to suit their religion; liberals, meanwhile, altered their views of religion to accommodate the modern world.

In the past decade, American religious liberalism has become the subject of considerable attention by scholars, and this dissertation is a contribution to that ongoing conversation.¹⁰ The

⁸ Kenneth Cauthen. *The Impact of American Religious Liberalism* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), xiii.

Kenneth Cauthen, writing in the mid-twentieth century described religious liberalism as “the faith that saved many from unbelief or agnosticism.”

⁹ The conception of religious liberalism used in this dissertation is adapted from Gary Dorrien’s definition of liberal theology. It also follows Dorrien in its understanding of the intellectual heritage of religious liberalism, seeing liberal ideas as having their origin with Kant and spreading to the United States through transcendentalists and nineteenth century Unitarians. However, it departs from his work because it does not confine its consideration to Christian theology, suggesting that Post-Christian groups and Jews also made use of religious liberalism.

See:

Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), xiii-xiv.

¹⁰ Jennifer Schuessler, “A Religious Legacy, With Its Leftward Tilt, Is Reconsidered,” *The New York Times*, July 23, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/24/books/a-religious-legacy-with-its-leftward-tilt-is-reconsidered.html>.

There is an abundance of work on the subject, for example see:

Elesha J. Coffman, *The Christian Century and the Rise of the Protestant Mainline* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Matthew Bowman, *The Urban Pulpit: New York City and the Fate of Liberal Evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Christopher H. Evans, *The Social Gospel in American Religion: A History* (New York: NYU Press, 2017); Leilah Danielson, *American Gandhi: A.J. Muste and the History of Radicalism in the Twentieth Century* (Pennsylvania, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014); Joseph Kip Kosek, *Acts of Conscience: Christian Nonviolence and Modern American Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Amy Kittelstrom, *The Religion of Democracy: Seven Liberals and the American Moral Tradition* (Penguin Press, 2015); Dan McKanan, *Prophetic Encounters: Religion and the American Radical Tradition* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2011);

lasting influences of liberal religion on American life, despite the movement's numerical decline, has been a persistent theme of this new era of scholarship. Religious studies scholar Matthew S. Hedstrom's *The Rise of Liberal Religion*, which focuses on liberal religious book culture in the mid-twentieth century, offers an account of how liberal religion's successes ultimately led to their institutions' weakening. Hedstrom recounts how a "psychologically and mystically rooted cosmopolitanism" that took shape within liberal religious circles spread outside of religious control and entered the wider American culture, but because this new notion of American spirituality saw religious truth as coming from many sources, it also undermined entrenched Protestant and Jewish religious hierarchies, and led people away from organized religion.¹¹ Historian David A. Hollinger has made similar points in his analysis of Protestant liberalism in his book *After Cloven Tongues of Fire*, contrasting the cosmopolitan views of those liberals with white American evangelicals who retained members by "continuing to espouse several ideas about race, gender, sexuality, nationality, and divinity that remained popular with the white public when these ideas were abandoned by the leaders of the mainline, ecumenical churches as no longer defensible."¹² Support for civil rights and opposition to Vietnam was particularly costly. Protestant liberals declined precisely because they advocated values of pluralism, diversity, racial, and gender equality. These ideas were not always popular, though in their defeat religious liberals helped to make these views gain wider currency in public life.¹³ These works

David Burns, *Life and Death of the Radical Historical Jesus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Gary Dorrien, *Social Ethics in the Making: Interpreting an American Tradition* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011); David Mislin, *Saving Faith: Making Religious Pluralism an American Value at the Dawn of the Secular Age* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015).

¹¹ Matthew S. Hedstrom, *The Rise of Liberal Religion: Book Culture and American Spirituality in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 11.

¹² David A. Hollinger, *After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Protestant Liberalism in Modern American History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 18.

¹³ Historian Jill K. Gill's history of the National Council of Churches (NCC) reaction to the Vietnam War *Embattled Ecumenicism* supports these views, and reveals how the NCC, the central institutional bastion of mainline Protestantism, made itself increasingly marginal in the lives of the laity through its

provide a necessary backdrop to the story of God-optional religion, though with a few notable exceptions Hedstrom and Hollinger tended to focus principally on the moderate parts of religious liberalism, such as the ecumenical movement, mainline Protestant denominations and Reform Judaism. God-optional religious denominations were the leftmost edge of liberal religion, so while their ideas did spread, their position as outliers to the rest of religious liberalism insulated them somewhat from the sharp decline that the Protestant mainline suffered, something that makes their history distinctive from other religious liberals.¹⁴

Other works on liberal religion like Leigh Eric Schmidt and Sally M. Promey's edited collection *American Religious Liberalism* have made the compelling argument that liberal religion should not be understood as synonymous with mainline Protestantism, but instead as often in tension with the Protestant establishment.¹⁵ Liberal religion as a category is increasingly seen as encompassing Christians, Jews, Buddhists, practitioners of metaphysical religions and various kinds of religious skeptics. In the past, when these liberal religious groups departed from orthodox Christian theology, scholars turned their focus elsewhere. This usually precluded detailed scholarly analysis of God-optional denominations, leaving them comparatively understudied in the context of the larger literature on American religion.¹⁶

progressive policies in opposing the Vietnam War and supporting Civil Rights. Gill's work is a useful look at how organizations and individuals contributed to larger religious trends.

See: Jill K. Gill, *Embattled Ecumenism: The National Council of Churches, the Vietnam War, and the Trials of the Protestant Left* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2011).

¹⁴ The conclusion does address the numerical stagnation of these groups.

¹⁵ Leigh E. Schmidt, Sally M. Promey, introduction to *American Religious Liberalism*, ed. Leigh E. Schmidt, Sally M. Promey (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012), 7.

¹⁶ Michael Langford's study of liberal theology excludes all groups that are not Trinitarian Christian, for example, arguing that anyone who is outside his notion of Christian orthodoxy is not really a "liberal," but a "radical." The work of William R. Hutchinson on Protestant modernism and Gary Dorrien's three volume study *The Making of American Liberal Theology* are more inclusive, but both scholars try to avoid focusing on Unitarians past the second half of the nineteenth century, arguing they are not really Christian after that point and not part of the tradition of liberal theology. One advantage of employing the broader category of "liberal religion" as a category of analysis, instead of "liberal theology," is that it can more easily encompass non-Christians and groups that left Christian orthodoxy.

This study is also heavily informed by Leigh Eric Schmidt's history of religious liberalism in *Restless Souls*. In that work, Schmidt charted the growth of spirituality in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as spiritual seekers sought to go beyond Protestantism and began to conceive of religion as an individual project, increasingly drawing on many faith traditions. The spiritual seekers that Schmidt documents, who were Unitarians, Quakers, Jews, Baha'is, skeptics and a variety of other traditions, often overlapped substantially with what I am calling God-optional religion.¹⁷ The difference between this work and *Restless Souls* lies in emphasis; whereas Schmidt's concern is the personal nature of spirituality, I want to cover the story of how this kind of religious liberalism was worked out theologically and in organized communities. At the end of his book, Schmidt devotes considerable attention to Indiana poet Max Ehrmann, recalling the line of his popular poem "Desiderata," which reads "BE GENTLE WITH YOURSELF" as a defense of the personal focus of religious liberalism. This study of God-optional religion could equally invoke "Desiderata," but instead would find its warrant in another line, Ehrmann's acceptance that there can be multiple ways for individuals to think of the divine: "Therefore be at peace with God, whatever you conceive Him to be."¹⁸

See:

Michael J. Langford, *The Tradition of Liberal Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 7; Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism and Modernity 1900-1950* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003); Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion, 1805 - 1900* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001); Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Crisis, Irony, and Postmodernity 1950-2005* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 3,7; William R. Hutchinson, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992), 39–40.

¹⁷ Both Schmidt and Hedstrom focus on Quaker leader Rufus Jones, who is a major figure in chapter 2 of this dissertation.

¹⁸ Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality*, second ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 269 –290; Max Ehrmann, *Desiderata*, 1927, <https://www.desiderata.com/desiderata.html>.

The study of religious liberalism reveals that in the United States there were many kinds of religious liberals, of which God-optional was only one option. One could be a religious liberal and take a relatively moderate stance, and most frequently, people did. For instance, many evangelical liberals accepted that the Bible was a historical text from another era and believed in the validity of evolution, yet strove to maintain a faith in a personal God and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Protestant evangelical liberals understood that their liberalism let them view Old Testament miracles as the invented products of another age, but they felt they also had to protect a core of views about Jesus's life lest they undermine the basis of Christianity. The dominant position of Reform Jews at the start of the twentieth century was that Judaism was a specially chosen vessel to give pure monotheistic religion to the world, a claim that positioned them near this more moderate end of liberalism.

Other religious liberals went further and were modernists, some of whom, like Baptist theologian Shailer Mathews, held to naturalistic theology or simply saw God as abstract (a view later described here as belief in a Distant God). God-optional religious groups gradually permitted a spectrum of religiously liberal beliefs, with most members adhering to some form of modernist theology, but these groups also contained a few atheists or agnostics. God-optional was not an agnostic religious community; though a handful of adherents to God-optional religion might think the question of God's existence was unknowable, the majority had clear opinions on the matter one way or the other. Whatever their personal viewpoint, however, they thought the question of theism should be left up to individuals. The one view that God-optional communities excluded was religious conservatism, as claims to exclusive truth and orthodoxy were not compatible with their intense theological liberalism.

On the theological left of God-optional groups were Godless religious groups like the American Humanist Association and the Society for Humanistic Judaism, who made clear that non-theism was normative for their membership. They were often critical of God-optional faiths as wishy-washy because they had opted to privatize the question of theism, rather than make the explicit rejection of theism a part of their beliefs. God-optional was a kind of religious liberalism, but it was by no means the only kind of religious liberalism, nor was it even the most theologically unorthodox view available.

God-optional religion particularly flowered in Quakerism, Unitarianism and Reconstructionist Judaism, though it was not just confined to these three groups. Yet there was a critical difference between the three God-optional denominations and the mere existence of these perspectives in other contexts: these three denominations made tolerating a broad range of views about God an objective and a matter of their official positions. There have been many studies of intellectuals who were just as religiously radical as the pioneers who developed God-optional religion, but these figures were not religious leaders, and their writings and philosophy did not have to explain how these views should be practiced by communities. In England, Matthew Arnold's 1873 *Literature and Dogma* advanced a poetic understanding of the Bible and God for Victorian audiences decades before any of the God-optional figures were writing, but Arnold was a literary critic outside the Anglican church. In the United States, there is the highly visible example of Ralph Waldo Emerson's writing, particularly the 1838 *The Divinity School Address* and 1841 *The Over-Soul* as pointing away from belief in a traditional God. Yet Emerson left the Unitarian ministry before beginning to articulate his views, finding even the most theologically liberal community in the nation too confining for his convictions. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth century it was possible to talk about individual clergy and laity in the mainline

Protestant churches or Reform Judaism who expressed similar religious views to God-optional denominations, but even when denominations were dominated by religious liberals, they stayed officially theistic; and though it was seldom enforced, they typically understood theism to be a requirement for membership.

Denominations matter to this history, so this dissertation places the religious changes among the three denominations it examines in an institutional context. Unfortunately, as church historian Keith Harper has observed, denominational history is an enterprise that scholars of American religion have largely neglected since the 1960s.¹⁹ The intellectuals featured in this dissertation were members of these groups and understood their primary identification to be with these denominations before their other loyalties; their philosophical positions, political parties and sometimes even their friends, were secondary. Their religious ideas had to be viable within these communities; they could not afford to be too abstract or they risked not being understood by fellow denominational leaders or the laity. Being too radical or too conservative theologically also risked alienating their constituencies. Their ideas shaped the course of these religious groups, but this was a reciprocal relationship; denominational conditions also shaped what was thought in the first place.

Another reason that this dissertation documents the development of God-optional views in denominational communities is because it also provides a clear understanding of how these

¹⁹Keith Harper, introduction to *American Denominational History: Perspectives on the Past, Prospect for the Future*, ed. Keith Harper (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama, 2008), 1-6.

These complaints echo those voiced by scholars in the decade prior, see:

Russell E. Richey and Robert Bruce Mullin, introduction to *Reimagining Denominational History: Interpretive Essays*, edited by Russell E. Richey and Robert Bruce Mullin (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 3-9.

communities exchanged ideas. It is especially important to understand how closely the Jewish world of Reconstructionism and the post-Protestant world of Quakerism and Unitarianism were interconnected. Shared affinities for liberal theology, and God-optional beliefs made them closer to each other than they were with their ostensible co-religionists. Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionism, once explained, “In the matter of religion, there is more in common between the liberal Jew and liberal Christian, or between the orthodox Jew and orthodox Christian, than there is between the liberal and the orthodox either in the Jewish or in the Christian group.”²⁰ Many Quakers and Unitarians would eventually abandon the idea that their denominations were part of Christianity at all, seeing their only kinship as being with other religious liberals, at one point even flirting with the prospect of joining with liberal Jews to create a unified liberal religious counterpart to the National Council of Churches.

A critical intervention this dissertation is making is to point out that in modern American life, the categories of religion, atheism, secularism and theism have been far more blurred and intertwined in lived religious experience than has been recognized. For example, in historian James Turner’s *Without God, Without Creed*, an otherwise seminal history of how religious skepticism became intellectually plausible in the United States, Turner simplifies the complexity of American religious life by opting to treat belief and unbelief in God as binary opposites. In his introduction, Turner states that his work is simply about how it became intellectually possible for the American people not to believe in God, but he states that “I care... not what personal

²⁰ Mordecai M. Kaplan. *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life* (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 2010), 230.

Rabbi Ira Eisenstein, Kaplan’s son-in-law and a founder of Reconstructionist Judaism almost completely echoed this sentiment in his autobiography when he explained that he had far more in common theologically with Unitarian minister John Haynes Holmes than he did with Orthodox Rabbis. See: Ira Eisenstein. *Reconstructing Judaism: An Autobiography* (Wyncote, PA: The Reconstructionist Press, 1986), 148.

resonances the idea of God set off, not what forms it took, not even whether people bothered to worship the God they believed to exist.”²¹ This dissertation is about all things Turner did not care about, and suggests that they are key to understanding American religion and intellectual history. For God-optional groups the meaning of the term “God” (what Turner calls the “forms” of the idea of God) could be so different from their mainline and evangelical counterparts that it was not clear that they were debating about the same entity. Even when they chose not to believe in God, these God-optional groups often kept worshiping a God they did not believe to exist. What divided Americans was not just whether they believed in God, but what “God” was, and whether belief in God should have anything to do with membership in a religious community.

The historian William B. Hesseltine compared the task of writing intellectual history to “nailing jelly to the wall,” meaning that concepts and ideas were harder to describe with precision than other historical events. Writing the intellectual history of religion compounds that difficulty. Concepts of God are especially hard to pin down; how do we know if two people are talking about the same thing? The concept of God also changes rapidly, as a number of recent works of scholarship have revealed. Jack Miles’s biography of God uses the Hebrew Scripture to look at God as a literary character. Miles’s work reminds us that God is not simply a concept, but is often portrayed with a personality and identity. This is a God that dines with Abram and forcefully rebuts Job’s claims of the universe’s injustice with a reminder that He subdued leviathan in the primordial waters before time began. Thomas E. Jenkins’s *The Character of God* offers a detailed study of how Protestant portrayals of God in the nineteenth century became increasingly vague, focused on one emotion or attribute of God. Jenkins attributes this shift to

²¹ John C. Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1985), xiv.

the dominance of neoclassical and sentimental literature, which encouraged portrayals of God in that fashion.²²

Writing in 1941, Conrad Wright, a graduate student of history at Harvard and a Unitarian who would go on to become one of the denomination's most able historians, pointed out that the fact that God was no longer an agreed-upon term was itself a major change in American life. As he put it:

It has occasionally happened in the course of an argument or discussion that someone inquired, 'Do you believe in God?' Put blankly and without definition it can be a very difficult query, so I usually retort, 'What do you mean by *God*?' And I dare say that is the reply that most people today would give.

It is not the answer that our ancestors would have made. Most of them would have said, 'Yes'; a few might have said 'No'; but in any event it is very unlikely that they would have asked for a definition.²³

As Wright describes, to say that someone believes in God does not reveal any of the complexity of their religious convictions. For religious liberals, the way to preserve religion was to reject traditional notions of a personal and supernatural God. They did not simply accept the findings of historical criticism and evolution and go on with their lives, but instead developed a radically changed notion of the deity that they hoped could better endure the tribulations of further shocks. This new God could not be debunked or disproven by science, because "God" was coextensive with reality, or was used to simply discuss the predictability of natural laws, or was a word to describe the highest ideals of humanity. These changes in the definition of "God" generated frequent controversies over what it meant to profess or deny belief in God.

²² Jack Miles, *God: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995); Thomas E. Jenkins, *The Character of God: Recovering the Lost Literary Power of American Protestantism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

²³ Conrad Wright, "The Meaning of 'God' in Flux," *The Christian Register* 120, no. 4 (February 15, 1941): 69–72.

In 1929 George R. Dodson, a prominent Unitarian humanist minister from St. Louis, let loose a rhetorical tirade in print directed at a small group, the American Association for the Advancement of Atheism, that was growing on campuses. He accused the leaders of the group of not actually understanding the God they were denying, of arguing against a straw man, a parochial God that only fundamentalists actually believed in. As he put it:

The American Association for the Advancement of Atheism leaders declare they are trying to rid the world of the idea that some big man up in the sky somewhere is going to punish us if we do something wrong. They say that there is not a particle of evidence for his existence and that they do not believe in him.

But who does? The idea of an absentee God who, since the first Friday evening, has been sitting idly on the outside of the universe seeing it go, has long been obsolete in enlightened communities. What is astonishing is that students in American colleges and universities should take the matter seriously. Will they next form an association to combat the belief in Santa Claus as pernicious superstition? How did so many people get so far behind the times while regarding themselves as advanced thinkers?²⁴

Though Dodson was on the extreme theological left of American religious liberalism, this particular point would have resonated very broadly with his co-religionists. For most religious liberals God did not perform miraculous intervention into human lives; instead, the term signified an entirely different kind of category. Dodson wryly observed that, according to the definition of the “God” used by the Atheist Association, Charles Clayton Morrison, the editor of *The Christian Century*, and a sizable portion of his readership, would be classified as atheists, as would many denominations, because “Many liberal churches, not only the Unitarian but of the various denominations, do not themselves believe in the God these so-called atheists reject.”²⁵ Both men were getting at one of the most important parts of God-optional religion. The issue

²⁴ George R. Dodson, “Analyzing the Atheist,” *The Christian Register* 108, no. 33 (August 15, 1929): 676–677.

²⁵ Dodson, “Analyzing the Atheist,” 676–677.

was not only whether to believe in God, but what kind of God you chose to believe or not believe in.

God of the Elite

The most significant examination of Americans' conceptions of God is *America's Four Gods* by sociologists Christopher Bader and Paul Froese. Bader and Froese divide beliefs about God in the American religious landscape into a typology with four major classifications: an "Authoritative God" who is judging and interventionist, the kindly and personal "Benevolent God," the "Critical God" who judges in the afterlife, and finally the remote and often abstract "Distant God." Most religious liberals are believers in the last of these, the Distant God. According to Bader and Froese's data, in the early twenty-first century, twenty-four percent of Americans believed in this distant God. Those holding this belief tend to be politically liberal, have college educations and be significantly wealthier than their neighbors.²⁶ The category of distant God is helpful because, except for a small constituency of atheists or agnostics, God-optional religious groups, even in the early twentieth century, were believers in such a deity, and were in fact pivotal champions of the acceptance of such views of God in the first place.

Froese and Bader's category of the Distant God, the kind of God most frequently embraced by God-optional denominations, has gone under several different names. It is functionally identical to the impersonal, unknowable God of the Philosophers. Intellectuals across the centuries from Blaise Pascal to Martin Buber have remarked that despite the fact that the Philosopher's God was often invoked in Christian and Jewish theology, a discrepancy appears between that entity and the Biblical God who could stroll through the Garden of Eden

²⁶ Paul Froese and Christopher Bader, *America's Four Gods: What We Say About God- & What That Says About Us*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 26, 56, 71, 114.

during the cool of day.²⁷ Richard Dawkins, meanwhile, in his popular atheistic polemic *The God Delusion*, derides what he refers to as “Einsteinian religion,” meaning religious views expressed by scientists who assert either belief in a distant God or claim they adhere to religion out of a sense of community and tradition.²⁸

Both these terms, “God of the Philosophers” and “Einsteinian religion,” exaggerate when they portray these views of the deity as only belonging to the most rarefied intellectuals. There is a kernel of truth in it, to be sure; in the first half of the twentieth century, American believers in a distant God tended to come from privilege, as noted earlier, and they were more likely to be college-educated and considerably wealthier than average. Likewise, God-optional denominations, despite their small size, were disproportionately financially and socially prominent. Quakers and Unitarians were almost exclusively white, and Reconstructionist Jews, like most Jews, occupied a more ambiguous racial status (which is discussed in chapter 3) but generally aspired toward whiteness. The most visible figures of God-optional groups were typically men with graduate educations; each of these groups had a rhetorical commitment to women’s equality only rarely visible in their leadership (this trend was true even of liberal Quakers, who lacked paid clergy). Most of these leaders were employed either directly as

²⁷ The God of the philosophers is similar to the classical theistic conception of God. Theologian David Bentley Hart makes the argument that this conception is actually the established orthodoxy in several major religions, including Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Sikhism and Vedantic and Bhaktic Hinduism, though even modern believers in these traditions often make the mistake of regarding God as a creator, a being within the universe, rather than as “the truly transcendent source and end of all natural reality.” One area that this dissertation does not delve into is whether liberal and God-optional nonpersonal notions of God or religious atheism may actually be a return to something closer to these classical theistic approaches to God, and hence may be more “orthodox” than they appear. Such a question would be interesting, but it would be better addressed in a philosophical and theological project rather than a historical one.

See:

David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 4, 28.

²⁸ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 12-20.

clergy, in religious service organizations or in academia studying religion or philosophy. Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan mused in the late 1920s that the only people he knew who were interested in having Judaism change to keep up with the times had a vested interest because of their employment by Jewish organizations, and he confessed that he had *never* seen a layman with this interest.²⁹ Yet one would be mistaken to think all believers in a distant God were professors, theologians or scientists. The practice of God-optional religion was certainly the provenance of a social elite, but it was a lived religious practice and not something that dwelt entirely in the realm of theory.

God-optional religious communities could be just as viable and intellectually coherent as their more traditionally theistic counterparts (and they could be just as unsuccessful as well). This cuts against claims by sociologist Rodney Stark, who has argued that recent history demonstrates that belief in a non-personal God cannot be accepted by most people. It may be possible for a religion to conceive of God as something other than a conscious being, or even to be Godless, but Stark argues that these groups soon see their membership dwindle to “a few intellectuals as most of their rank and file members shift to more Godly faiths.”³⁰ For Stark, a viable religion requires a belief in a supernatural, personal God. Yet, in contrast to Stark’s assertion, the history of these groups indicates that God-optional denominations were small to begin with and their membership could plausibly make the claim that it was precisely their extremely liberal theology and belief in a distant or non-existent God that helped them endure as coherent communities. Nor were they worried about their members becoming part of “more

²⁹ Kaplan, Mordecai M. *Communings of the Spirit: The Journals of Mordecai M. Kaplan Volume I 1913-1934*. Edited by Mel Scult (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2001), 259.

Kaplan did not observe that this also might have been connected with the fact that those interested in Judaism were likely to become employed by Jewish organizations in the first place.

³⁰ Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-Hunts and the End of Slavery* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 5-11.

Godly faiths.” Rather, they were far more concerned with trying to offer their members an alternative to skepticism, to keep them from leaving religion altogether.

Claiming Tradition

Can these groups be properly termed “religious” if they had no unified views on theology? Could they be religious if they contained people that did not believe in God? The field of religious studies has long maintained that religion is a second-order category, or, as Jonathan Z. Smith put it, a system of classification that is the invention of the scholar. Religions exist as a label that is used to describe certain kinds of practices and beliefs while excluding others. In the case of God-optional religion, the practitioners’ vocal assertions’ that they were religious is also hard to ignore.³¹

God-optional thinkers were vigorous in asserting that they were still religious. The identification of being perceived as religious mattered deeply to them; they did not want to be seen as merely practicing a set of indifferent religious habits or as unmindful members of a social club. Even Unitarian humanists, the most fiery and outspoken group in their religious radicalism, who would proudly aver that they were not theists, were adamant that they were part of the religion of the future. In viewing their beliefs as religious they were in agreement with the contemporary sources in the academy. In his 1902 *Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James cautions against taking the word “divine” in “too narrow a sense.” In addition to arguing

³¹ Having practitioners define practices as religious or not religious is not an uncommon phenomenon. Hugh Urban’s work on Scientology documents how that group took on more overtly religious trappings in order to secure legal protections as a religion. Jason Ānanda Josephson addresses how starting in the mid-nineteenth century the Japanese employed the idea that Shinto was a national ideology to engage in regulating other practices, which they viewed as superstition, while ostensibly adhering to religious freedom.

See:

Hugh Urban, *The Church of Scientology: A History of a New Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013); Jason Ānanda Josephson, *The Invention of Religion in Japan* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

that Buddhists do not believe in God, he specifically pointed to the example of Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Divinity School Address*, which he regarded as a “frank expression of [the] worship of mere abstract laws.” James put the matter plainly, “We must therefore, from the experiential point of view, call these godless or quasi-godless creeds 'religions.’”³² There were also practical reasons to want to be labeled religious; religion was seen as a social good and if one could not profess pious belief in a traditional God it was at least something to be religious, akin to professing to be a moral, good person. In the United States, to be religious was also to have legal protection through the First Amendment, something that was not extended to mere political or social views.

Moreover, cultural acceptance of this movement did hinge on whether others perceived it as religious. The way these groups practiced their faith looked like what most Americans pictured when they thought of “religion.” The three major God-optional groups, Quakers, Unitarians and Reconstructionist Jews, came from traditions that were originally theistic along conventional lines, and their practices did not change substantially when they began starting down the path of God-optional. Like other American denominations, they had weekly worship services held in a dedicated building (a Meetinghouse for Quakers, a church for Unitarians, and a synagogue for Reconstructionist Jews). Both Unitarians and Reconstructionist Jews continued to have clergy that filled the same role that they had before the theological shift, while Quaker use of committees and “weighty” Friends (prominent unpaid leaders) for governance remained unchanged as well. The wording used in worship services or in prayers changed slightly, but the theological and intellectual changes that God-optional groups underwent were rarely visually apparent. When a group of Unitarians met in a church on Sunday and heard a sermon by their

³² William James, *William James: Writings 1902-1910* (New York: Library of America), 36, 38.

minister, it looked as much like religion as what the mainline Protestants down the street were doing. God-optional religion succeeded in part because while the ideas animating it represented a break with their traditions, denominations kept continuity with how religion had been practiced in the past. For many of the people in the pews, the very appeal of these radical theological ideas was that these concepts let them sit in what were generally conventional religious services while feeling intellectually honest with themselves.

If the appearance of religion among God-optional groups was utterly conventional, the groups that took this path were not. These God-optional religious groups were what historian R. Laurence Moore has called religious outsiders, and they took pride in this fact.

Reconstructionists, like other American Jews, saw their Jewishness as separating them from other religious groups in America. Unitarians emerged from Protestantism but had long been kept at arm's length by Christians; their rejection of the trinity and the Nicene Creed meant that most other American Christians did not consider Unitarians to be Christians at all. Unitarians were not allowed to join the Federal Council of Churches, and they were generally bitter about this exclusion. Quakers had a long history of seeing themselves as a "peculiar people," and although their practice of wearing plain dress, using plain speech (a relic of when English had formal and informal modes of address, similar to *usted* and *tú* in Spanish) and practicing endogamy had ended by the beginning of the twentieth century, they were still very different from other religious groups. The inclusion of women in ministry and other leadership positions, and the lack of paid clergy, also served to make Quakers different from other Christian groups. All of these groups were deeply committed to their own traditions and history, taking great pride in the sectarian distinctiveness that made them different from their mainline Protestant and Catholic neighbors. These sectarian identities enabled them to weather massive theological

changes, even helping them endure the end of theism. Theological innovation was enabled by a focus on religious tradition.

God-optional religion appealed to tradition in one other significant way. Believers in a distant God both within God-optional groups and outside them noted similarities between their beliefs and older established forms of theology. They argued, for example, that their belief in a distant God was substantially the same as the unknowable God of apophatic theology presented in texts like the medieval *Cloud of Unknowing*, which claimed that because of the limits of human finitude, the most effective way to talk about God was by only making negative statements about what God was not. Followers of God-optional religion were quick to find ancient pedigrees for their beliefs, hopeful that appeals to tradition would buttress their legitimacy. Quaker leaders like Rufus Jones suggested that Quakerism was simply the realization of a kind of positive Christian mysticism that had existed since the early church. Unitarians were often heavily interested in patristics, particularly seeing their predecessors in the Arian controversy. In Reconstructionist Judaism, Kaplan observed that his impersonal notion of God resembled that of Jewish medieval theology.³³ Whether the kinship of ideas that these thinkers claimed was valid is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but the reasons they made these connections are important to understand. They wanted to make clear that God-optional was more than an innovation, and just as much a legitimate way of being religious as any other.

The cloak of tradition sometimes sat uneasily with the radical ideas that were at the center of God-optional thought. Conrad Wright, speaking to a denominational audience, observed, “Let no one make the mistake of thinking that traditional Unitarians believe, or have to believe, in the kind of God in whom Thomas Aquinas or Jonathan Edwards believed, or in whom

³³ Mordecai Kaplan, *Communings of the Spirit: The Journals of Mordecai M. Kaplan, Volume 2: 1934–1941*, ed. Mel Scult (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2016), 67.

fundamentalists believe today, any more than the Prophet Jeremiah believed in the kind of God that is referred to in the first few chapters of Genesis.”³⁴ Wright’s words could have applied equally to the other two traditions; however much they tried to emphasize their continuity with the past, they were still engaged in something that was unmistakably a religious innovation.

Structure of the Dissertation

This dissertation tells the history of the development of God-optional religion over seven chapters. The first chapter chronicles how God-optional ideas took shape in the wider American religious landscape, not just in the three primary God-optional denominations, and examines the lives of Christian ministers and Rabbis to address how belief in God was threatened by developments in science and history in the early twentieth century. It suggests that it was extremely common by the 1920s for clergy to experience a crisis of faith, and that often the reaction was to gravitate towards belief in a distant God or express skepticism about the existence of God.

The second chapter deals with the creation of liberal Quakerism and considers how Quaker conceptions of God changed from the end of the First World War until the mid-1930s. There are three central figures in this chapter, Jesse H. Holmes, Jane Rushmore, and Rufus Jones, who each represent different poles of the liberal Quaker response to the theological challenges that appear in chapter one.

The third chapter focuses on the difference between Mordecai Kaplan, the rabbi who would found Reconstructionist Judaism, and his former teacher Felix Adler, who founded a non-theistic religious group called Ethical Culture in the late nineteenth century. Both Kaplan and Adler rejected a belief in a supernatural God, but they differed on how much importance they placed on

³⁴Dana McLean Greeley, “Frankly Old-Fashioned.” *The Christian Register* 128, no. 3 (May 1949): 20–21.

being Jewish. Adler insisted that if monotheism was debunked, that meant that he and his followers should cease to be Jews. Kaplan rejected this idea and instead tried to find a way to separate being Jewish from having belief in the Jewish religion.

The fourth chapter tells the story of two Unitarian ministers who were participants in a prolonged debate in the late 1920s about whether Unitarians should believe in God. William Sullivan was a former Catholic priest, excommunicated for his radical theology. Yet once he became a Unitarian minister Sullivan worried the denomination had become too extreme, replacing worship of an unknowable God with worship of fallible human beings. Sullivan's foe was John Dietrich, leader of the humanists, who believed faith in science and human progress should replace faith in God. Dietrich won, allowing Unitarians to be atheists or agnostics, but found his victory hollow. By the end of his life he had begun to believe he had been wrong about the non-existence of God.

The following three chapters are not focused on specific denominations but are topical. The fifth chapter examines how Godless religions (explicitly atheist and agnostic groups) worked to distinguish themselves from God-optional religion. The central focus of the chapter is Charles Francis Potter, a Unitarian minister whose combative and hostile style led him to be ousted from his church pulpit, break with the denomination, and become a pioneer in the humanist movement. Yet Godless religion never entirely separated itself from God-optional religion. The two communities were distinct but their memberships heavily overlapped.

Chapter six looks at how a focus on social and political action around the time of the Second World War filled a void in these groups caused by making theism a personal belief rather than a shared point of unity. For Quakers and Unitarians, doing good for others became the central value in religion, the reason to keep going to worship services and make the commitment to the

denomination. This led them to become increasingly politically active and progressive. For Reconstructionist Jews it was Zionism and support for Israel that provided that sense of unity. The chapter suggests that these efforts to replace the role of God were only partially successful, as such substitutes did not always provide the same sense of cohesion that shared theology did.

The final chapter addresses how God-optional religion spread widely in the culture of the 1960s. It focuses on the 1965 Supreme Court case *Seeger v. United States*, in which Quakers and Unitarians backed an agnostic who tried to be listed as a religious objector to war. These groups won, and the Supreme Court agreed that any belief or practice that resembled belief in a traditional God was legally the same as traditional religion. The *Seeger* case shows how God-optional ideas entered into spheres that would usually be considered secular. The conclusion builds on these observations and briefly charts the impact of God-optional religious movements from the 1960s until the present, when they have become an ingrained part of contemporary life.

God-optional views have become a part of the modern religious landscape because they respond to a dilemma that is not going away. Richard Niebuhr once observed that theological views had “roots in the relationship of religious life to the cultural and political conditions,” and in the case of God-optional religions, those conditions were the loss of religious credibility and the need to find alternatives.³⁵ In the mid-nineteenth century Matthew Arnold wrote in “Dover Beach” about how the receding “sea of faith” had exposed the “naked shingle of the world.” The challenges facing people who seek to be religious have not gotten simpler. Religious groups in the western world have eventually had to confront the reality of secularization, that receding sea of faith. God-optional religion faced the challenge of that crisis of belief more boldly than most. The leaders and participants in these religions looked squarely at the problem and tried to

³⁵ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (Meridian Books. Cleveland, OH, 1929), 16.

imagine a religion that might be compatible with modernity. In the short term, at least, the gambit worked; their religious communities survived, giving their members the latitude to believe what they liked about God.

Chapter One: Putting Away Childish Things

The first letter that Reverend Curtis Reese received from his father when he resigned from his pulpit at First Baptist Church of Tiffin, Ohio was full of misspellings and stilted sentences. But despite the flaws in its form, it contained an outpouring of heartfelt sorrow. Reese's father was a farmer, and he had sacrificed for his son to receive an education and become a minister. Now he felt his son was throwing away a promising future. It is easy to imagine him crying as he wrote, "as dear as I love you I wold almost Rather here of your death than to here you left the Baptist and gone to a Church that dont beleave in Jesus Crist."

Curtis Reese was not leaving the ministry, however, and he was not abandoning Christianity. Instead he was leaving Tiffin in the summer of 1913 to change denominations and take up ministry in the Unitarian Church. When he broke the news to his family Reese had stressed the reasons for his decision. His education at several Baptist colleges, independent study and exposure to recent Biblical scholarship meant that Reese could no longer convince himself of the Bible's literal truth. Although he still sought to follow Jesus's teachings, he could no longer agree with the Southern Baptists and the rest of orthodox Christianity that Jesus was God. His father discounted these explanations, and instead insisted that occult forces had prompted Curtis's abandonment of his Southern Baptist upbringing; his son's doubt was "brout about by the instergation of the Devel to destroy [his] usefulness as a minster." If only his son would read the New Testament prayerfully, the elder Reese declared, all of his intellectual objections would be resolved. He signed the letter "Pa Pa," eager to remind Curtis of the affection he still bore him.¹

¹Paterson Reese to Curtis Reese," May 1, 1913, Unitarian Universalist Association Inactive Ministerial File, bMS 1446, Curtis Reese, Box 178, Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School.

The rest of the Reese family responded no more hospitably to the young minister's altered religious convictions. His beloved sister Leila wrote him during the bustle of the corn harvest, echoing their father's wish that Reese had died rather than become a Unitarian, a prospect which would have still left the chance he might get into heaven. Leila had named her six-month-old son after Reese, her favorite brother, believing that Reese's intelligence and promising future in the ministry made him the "star" among her four brothers. After Reese's apostasy, however, Leila renamed the unfortunate child Bruner Truett, after two prominent Southern Baptist revivalists.²

The most painful letter came from Curtis's older brother Otto, a solid, theologically reliable and thoroughly average small-town Baptist minister who had a healthy rivalry with his promising younger sibling. When starting out on his own preaching, Curtis had borrowed his elder brother's sermon outlines, which were often derivative, half-plagiarized from the collected writings of Dwight Moody, Thomas De Witt Talmage and other ministers. Reese felt a debt of gratitude for his brother's help in getting away from the toil of the farm and into the ministry. Now Otto sought to bring his wayward brother back to the Baptist faith through argument.

Otto mocked Curtis's assertion of intellectual objections to the Baptist faith and his insistence that as new knowledge of science and the Bible emerged, modern universities and colleges were embracing a Unitarian view. Otto touched only lightly on his brother's departures from Baptist orthodoxy; the bulk of his argument focused on what he perceived as Curtis's overinflated claims to be educated. Who was Curtis Reese, the son of barely literate farmers, to take on such airs, he wrote, challenging any declarations Reese could make about his learning? "As for modern scholarhip -- you nor I know anything about it," Otto chided his brother. "We

² Curtis W. Reese, "Notes from *My Life Among the Unitarians*," 1961, Unitarian Universalist Association Inactive Ministerial File, bMS 1446, Curtis Reese, Box 178, Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School.

are mountain boys with nothing more than a High School education.” New concepts of God and religion were absurd to consider when the rarified world of learning that might make such things intellectually tenable was closed to small town Baptist ministers. Otto was emphatic that Unitarianism and liberal religion were not meant for people who grew up making their living from toiling on the land; “The world of Scholarship laughs at a man who claims scholarship who does not know Hebrew and Greek, let alone higher mathematics. Let us not try to get our head among the stars when we know just a little more than the mole burrowing the ground.”³

Curtis Reese was not cowed by this challenge. He admitted to his elder brother that “no one is more conscious than I am of my own smallness.” He knew he hadn’t attended a “big school” like Harvard, but his knowledge was honestly attained, he contended, and he knew enough to legitimately make his way to Unitarianism. Curtis walked Otto through his educational accomplishments, his studies of Latin and the months of private tutoring he spent trying to acquire some knowledge of Greek. He listed his achievements: a bachelor’s from Ewing, the Southern Baptist denominational college, his studies at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, a Ph.D. completed at Oskaloosa College and an honorary Doctorate of Divinity from the same school. Reese bragged that his 12,000-word doctoral thesis was far longer than any sermon Otto had ever written, although he did not mention that Oskaloosa College was widely perceived to be a diploma mill. What mattered was not simply the degrees, Reese claimed, but having a “free, modern attitude” towards scholarship, a willingness to be open to new religious ideas.⁴ The era

³ T.O. Reese to Curtis Reese, May 1913, Unitarian Universalist Association Inactive Ministerial File, bMS 1446, Curtis Reese, Box 178, Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School.

⁴ Curtis W. Reese to T.O. Reese, December 6, 1914, Unitarian Universalist Association Inactive Ministerial File, bMS 1446, Curtis Reese, Box 178, Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School.

Oskaloosa did not have a permanent faculty, required no time spent in residency, had no regularly constituted board of trustees and was essentially run out of one room by the institution’s president. It is possible that Reese might have initially believed his PhD from that institution was legitimate, as he did

when the Baptist faith of his childhood could seem plausible to the educated, or the merely curious, had passed.

The doubts Reese's family shared about his religious course proved correct; his path into the Unitarian ministry eventually led to complete apostasy from all he had believed. As a Unitarian he would become one of the leading voices within the denomination urging the acceptance of humanism, rejecting the idea of a personal or interventionist God's relevance to religion, and promoting pacifism, socialism and civil rights for African Americans. But Reese's family members also wavered on some of these points; after five years Reese's sister Leila decided that religious orthodoxy mattered less than kinship and she changed her son's name back to "Curtis Reese," and a few years later she started attending Unitarian services. Otto remained a Baptist but eventually made peace with his brother, even privately voicing his pride in Curtis's accomplishments (though he was always careful to make sure his brother's books were kept in his study, out of the reach of his children).⁵ What it meant to be religious was in flux in the early twentieth century, and Curtis Reese was at the vanguard of that change. These shifts—which altered how people thought of science, history and the place of God—were so profound that within a few decades most of the Reese clan, like many other Americans, would also be affected.

The Gods of Fathers and Mothers

write a thesis for it. However, it took a huge number of transfer credits from work Reese had done at Ewing, which should have raised his suspicions. For information on Oskaloosa College as a diploma mill see:

"Death Pact Follows Fraud Expose," *The Daily Iowan*, May 9, 1926; Virginia A. McConnell, *Fatal Fortune: The Death of Chicago's Millionaire Orphan* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2005), 50.

⁵ Curtis W. Reese. "Notes from *My Life Among the Unitarians*," 1961. Unitarian Universalist Association Inactive Ministerial File, bMS 1446, Curtis Reese, Box 178. Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School; Joy Reese Shaws, "Notes from Rees Genealogy Vol. 12," 1979, Unitarian Universalist Association Inactive Ministerial File, bMS 1446, Curtis Reese, Box 178. Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School.

This chapter documents how secularizing forces were perceived by many intellectuals and religious leaders in the United States as threats to the plausibility of religion in the early twentieth century. These forces, what cultural critic Walter Lippmann evocatively described as the “acids of modernity,” led many educated Americans to question traditional religious beliefs, particularly about the nature of God, and caused some of them to seek out new ways to maintain their religiosity. Religious liberals, including the subset of religious liberals who drove the rise of God-optional religion, were usually not pleased about the need for religious innovation. Most saw themselves as adapting religion only in order to preserve it from certain destruction. At the end of the twentieth century, Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong would title his own God-optional book *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, but the sentiment that he was invoking, that religion needed to evolve to prevent its demise, had a much older pedigree.⁶

Many liberal religious figures narrated their conversion away from traditional religion as a maturation from childhood to adulthood. In autobiographical memoirs, which by the early twentieth century had become the quintessential form of literary expression for mainline and liberal clergy, they wrote about how their parents and grandparents had been pious and believed in a traditional interventionist God, but that in their adolescence they had wrestled with doubt; only in college had they begun to conceive of new ways to stay religious. They consequently

⁶ John Shelby Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die: A Bishop Speaks to Believers In Exile* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998). Sociologist Christian Smith usefully distinguishes between liberal Protestants who he claims “capitulated” in response to pressure from secularizers and secularizers themselves, who drove this process. However, Smith was an evangelical when he wrote and displays his hostility towards liberal Protestantism in his account. I would suggest that describing this an “adaptation” rather than “capitulation” might be a more moderate way of expressing this. See: Christian Smith, “Introduction: Rethinking the Secularization of American Public Life,” in *The Secular Revolution: Power, Interests, and Conflict in the Secularization of American Public Life*, ed. Christian Smith (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 35.

portrayed traditional religion and its beliefs about God as childish in comparison to their developed, mature views.

Overwhelmingly, those who became liberal religious leaders saw themselves in a crisis of belief of relatively recent origins, at a time when belief seemed impossible. The “acids of modernity” that they saw as breaking down belief seemed very clear to them; it was a four-fold attack on religion. First, the most dire challenge to faith came from new scientific knowledge, most notably the theory of evolution, which explained away human origins without appealing to a creator God. Second, it also followed new developments in the study of religion. The growing field of comparative of religion made Judaism and Christianity seem less unique, while historical critical approaches to the Bible made it clear that the Biblical text had not come down fixed and immutable from God, but rather was the product of human beings. Third, industrialization and urbanization constituted another acid, displacing rural populations and disrupting older patterns of life. In cities individuals encountered religious and cultural diversity that challenged their notions that their own traditions held a monopoly on truth. Fourth, the development of psychology offered a theory that explained human actions and behavior without the need to mention God or sin. While these developments had earlier antecedents in the United States, they coalesced in the late nineteenth century. Any religion that was going to survive, liberal religious leaders felt, had to address these four challenges.

The voluminous scholarship on the secular, secularization and secularity has nuanced and critiqued these understandings, taking them in directions that would not have been imagined by liberal religious thinkers. The work of sociologist Christian Smith has called attention to the idea that these forces of secularization did not operate without the agency of secularizers, who, starting in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, consciously sought to remove religion from

American institutions and public life.⁷ Anthropologist Talal Asad has pointed out the specifically Christian and Protestant genealogies implicit in the concept of the secular, rather than a simple stripping away of Christianity.⁸ More recently, scholars such as John Lardas Modern have described secularism more broadly as a “conceptual environment... which has made ‘religion a recognizable and vital thing in the world.’” Secularism helped Protestants figure out what true religion was. In Modern’s understanding “the secular imaginary occurred at the levels of emotion and mood, underneath the skin,” rather than being something motivated by a principally rational or utilitarian calculus, and it cannot be seen as simply the antithesis of religion.⁹

Perhaps the dominant influence in the contemporary study of secularism has been philosopher Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age*, an exhaustive work that addresses how belief in God became only one possible choice among many religious options, a process that he suggests began around the time of the Reformation. Taylor contends that “belief in God isn’t quite the same thing in 1500 and 2000,” in part because belief is no longer reflexive and automatic.¹⁰ Taylor’s account, however, minimizes the impact of nineteenth and early twentieth century developments to secularization. He labels any narrative that sees developments such as

⁷ Christian Smith, *The Secular Revolution*, 1-96.

⁸ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

⁹ John Lardas Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America: With Reference to Ghosts, Protestant Subcultures, Machines, and Their Metaphors; Featuring Discussions of Mass Media, Moby-Dick, Spirituality, Phrenology, Anthropology, Sing Sing State Penitentiary, and Sex with the New Motive Power* (Chicago, IL: University Of Chicago Press, 2011), 6-7.

¹⁰ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 13. Taylor’s linkage of secularization to processes in place by the Reformation is not unique to him. Historian Brad Gregory’s more straightforward account of the same process in his book *The Unintended Reformation* argues that the philosophy of Duns Scotus and William of Occam in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries “domesticated God” by stripping the attribute of transcendence from the deity, and rendering God as merely a powerful being that existed like any other creature. According to Gregory by reducing God to a being these philosophers reduced God to something that could be proven or disproven.

See: Brad S. Gregory. *Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2012).

urbanization, science, psychology and higher criticism, perceived as undermining the plausibility of religion, as being reductionist “subtraction stories.” He is deeply critical of such narratives and tries to make the book a “continuing polemic” against them.¹¹ As historian David Hollinger has observed, while theologians and philosophers have found great value in *A Secular Age*, “historians found Taylor’s book as much a distraction as a source of insight.” He points out that Taylor has created essentially a non-falsifiable account of secularization, one that uses recent history selectively.¹²

Taylor insightfully notes that secularization cannot be conceived as simply documenting the presence or absence of religion, but rather is a climate where shades between belief and nonbelief are possible, and that the kinds of belief individuals hold about God are also important. However, I want to push back against Taylor in one critical way, and suggest that telling what might seem to be subtraction stories is essential in a history like this one.¹³ Close attention to these narratives is key to understanding the lived religious experience of American liberal

¹¹Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 61-89, 95; James K. A. Smith *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2014), 35-40, 22. Taylor is particularly dismissive of the value of historical accounts of people losing faith based on evolution. When discussing Victorian accounts of the loss of faith based on the findings of Darwin he suggests that individuals were not moved by “brute facts”, but simply choose another “moral outlook” over a religious one. This seems to underestimate the impact of evolution on belief, and requires minimizing the importance of the actual accounts of this experience. See: Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 563.

¹² David Hollinger, “Christianity and Its American Fate: Where History Interrogates Secularization Theory,” In *The Worlds of American Intellectual History*, ed. Joel Isaac, James T. Kloppenberg, Michael O’Brien, Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 292-293. Hollinger is critical of the fact that in Taylor’s work, the United States assumes almost no significance, because all the key elements that fueled the possibility of secular perspectives existed centuries before the country was founded, from the Reformation onwards. The account also posits that all human beings need transcendence, and seek to find it in some sphere, while Hollinger argues that many people claim to be fine living life without this supposedly universal dimension of experience.

¹³ I am also critical of other aspects of Taylor’s work, particularly the contention that only theistic beliefs (specifically Jewish or Christian) can lead to transcendence. However, this contention of Taylor’s is not widely accepted throughout religious studies and is ably contested by historian Peter E. Gordon so I have not addressed it here. See: Peter E. Gordon, “The Place of the Sacred in the Absence of God: Charles Taylor’s ‘A Secular Age,’” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69, no. 4 (2008): 647–73.

religious thinkers in the early and mid-twentieth century, leaders who were critical to the rise of God-optional religion. The very reason so many people sought liberal and God-optional alternatives to traditional faith was because they felt that the acids of modernity undermined their faith. They encountered new information through education and the wider culture, learning that the human beings evolved through natural selection or that the Bible was the historical product and contained human errors, and they had to figure out how to fit these views with their existing convictions. To Jews and Christians raised in communities that believed in a creation account where man is made out of dust by God, who took seriously miracles in which donkeys talked, seas parted and staffs turned into serpents, encountering views to the contrary could be shocking and cause them to question the central historical claims of their faith; did Moses really receive the law from God, did Jesus really rise from the dead? A few left religious communities forever over these questions while others rejected the aspects of modern knowledge that clashed with faith, and whether they became religious liberals or not, most believers had to find some way to reconcile themselves to these ideas.

In 1929, progressive economist Stuart Chase wrote a passage that might easily have been taken from Taylor's *A Secular Age*, stating:

The machine, having destroyed many of our old folkways, has forced us to experiment with new ones... We have no standard religious code. One may take one's pick among two Catholic churches, more than one hundred Protestant sects, and heaven know how many cults founded by prophets from the hinterlands. If you rush up to a New York policeman and announce you are an atheist, he will tell you to stop blocking traffic. You can have, in urban centers, One God, a whole pantheon, or none at all, and nobody—unless you are running for high public office—particularly cares. How far this is from the unified pattern of worship in the Middle Ages, with its ordered processions of masses, fast days, feast days, penances, celestial bookkeeping for every variety of conduct with debits and credits all duly balanced, and the bells of the great cathedrals tolling over evening meadows, proclaiming their benediction upon the eternal unity of mankind.¹⁴

¹⁴Stuart Chase, *Men and Machines* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1929), 278-279.

Both Chase and Taylor point to the proliferation of religious options as a key difference from the enchanted past, but they differ in theories of causation to explain how this came to be. For Chase and many of his contemporaries, this cacophony of religious options and the resulting social upheaval resulted from the pressures of industrialization, scientific and technological progress, a subtraction story. Modern scholars as a result cannot afford to dismiss these narratives; they need to explore them if they seek to understand the past.

How ubiquitous was religious doubt and the turn to new ideas of God, or God-optional religion? After World War I they were surprisingly common. Sociologist Christian Smith argues that by the 1920s key American institutions like universities, the scientific establishment, and publishing had become secular, and popular culture was also beginning to reject religion. As Smith memorably puts it, this was the era when “Secularism’s rising current crested, overflowed the banks, and began flooding the Main Streets of America.”¹⁵ While it would be a vast overstatement to suggest that atheism, agnosticism or liberal religious views were ubiquitous in the United States, there is reason to believe they were well represented among the minority of the population that had attained higher education. A study of 249 American college students in the late 1920s found that all but four of them claimed to believe in God, but fewer than 35 percent of them thought that God was a personal being or a conscious entity.¹⁶ Even if they remained theologically orthodox educated Americans were inevitably exposed to these ideas.

Understanding why these intellectuals felt their “childlike” faith had failed makes clear why they constructed their “adult faith” in the way they did. Religious liberals embraced new notions of “God” to get around the intellectual problems that had been introduced, or in a few cases they

¹⁵ Christian Smith, *The Secular Revolution*, 27.

¹⁶Dilworth Lupton “Personal, Impersonal or Nebulous?” *The Christian Register* 106, no. 32 (August 11, 1927): 640–41. The research discussed here was done by Durant Drake.

dispensed with God altogether. In American mainline and Jewish denominations, there was a notable contingent of people with this radical theology, though only Quakers, Unitarians and Jews as groups would officially embrace the most extreme visions of God-optional theology.

The Problem: The Acids of Modernity

In the nineteenth century, for the first time, it became possible for educated people in the United States to openly and publicly doubt the existence of God. The discovery of evolution by means of natural selection meant that God was not needed to explain human origins, while historical criticism made it clear that the Bible was not a stable text upon which to base belief. Not only did its manuscripts vary, but it was the product of another culture and time, subject to changing historical interpretations. More than these intellectual developments, as James Turner addresses in *Without God, Without Creed*, his seminal study of the intellectual roots of unbelief, at the dawn of the nineteenth century American Christianity accepted the most plausible apologetic argument for God as that derived from the work of theologian William Paley, who had portrayed God as a benevolent designer of the universe.¹⁷ Darwinian evolution spelled the end of the belief that human origins could only be explained with intentional design, and many of the horrors of the nineteenth century, especially the vast deaths of the Civil War, made it seem less and less likely that any overseeing creator would be wholly benevolent, even if they existed.

One of the most articulate postwar diagnoses of the eroding credibility of traditional religion came from Walter Lippmann. In his 1929 *Preface to Morals*, Lippmann reported the unprecedented secularization of the twentieth-century West with a sense of dread. Deeply concerned, he wrote, “This is the first age, I think, in the history of mankind when the circumstances of life have conspired with the intellectual habits of the time to render any fixed

¹⁷, James C. Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 96-98.

authoritative belief incredible to large masses of men.” In other moments in American history, religious faith waned before an eventual revival or a reformation, but this was something drastically different. He noted, “The irreligion of the modern world is radical to a degree for which there is, I think, no counterpart.” Lippmann argued that the “acids of modernity” had melted away traditional beliefs in God, supernaturalism and immortality. Moreover, they made it impossible to construct anything new because “the acids of modernity are so powerful that they do not tolerate a crystallization of ideas which will serve as a new orthodoxy into which men can retreat.”¹⁸ Where a few contemporary authors saw the possibility of something positive arising from what Lippmann derided as the “smashing of the idols,” the great breakdown of religious traditions was horrifying to him, leaving life without purpose, ethics without a firm foundation and throwing the entire social order into question.

Was Lippman accurate in his predictions? American history is replete with jeremiads about the inexorable decline of religion, which often bear little or no relation to the actual attendance, fervor or apparent commitment that can be documented.¹⁹ Was Lippmann simply writing another exhortation to greater piety? There is reason to take his assessment of the state of American religion seriously. Reviews at the time were positive, though a few noted some shortcomings. One reviewer, Union Theological Seminary professor Reinhold Niebuhr, soon to become one of the most important American religious thinkers of the period, lauded the book and singled out for praise Lippmann’s evaluation of the contemporary religious crisis, writing that “No one has made a better analysis of the moral confusion of our day than does Mr. Lippmann in the first

¹⁸ Walter Lippmann, *A Preface to Morals* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1929), 12, 19-20.

¹⁹ Charles Mathewes, Christopher McKnight Nichols, introduction to *Prophesies of Godlessness: Predictions of America’s Imminent Secularization from the Puritans to the Present Day*, ed. Charles Mathewes, Christopher McKnight Nichols (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3–21. Another classic study of jeremiads about religious decline is: Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

chapter of this book.”²⁰ The editor of the Unitarian *Christian Register* declared, “The first half of the book is as keen and courteous a dissection of religious thought (or lack of it) as one will find.”²¹ While these critics did not entirely agree with Lippmann’s proposed solution to growing unbelief, they thought he had done a service by documenting the problem. Lippman’s conclusions reinforced the findings of contemporary social scientists. The famous study of Middletown (about Muncie, Indiana), published in 1929, had documented that while “questioning of the dominant Christian beliefs in public may have declined since the [eighteen]nineties... one infers that doubts and uneasiness may be greater than a generation ago.”²²

Lippmann's ideas found their way into liberal pulpits.²³ Outside of the Protestant mainline and liberal Protestant denominations, Lippmann’s analysis was accepted as just as insightful. Though he never mentioned it explicitly in the book, Lippmann’s ambivalence about his own Jewishness affected his perception of religion. His family were wealthy German Jews who had immigrated to New York City. Growing up Lippmann had a powerful sense of being an outsider in a Protestant world; he had attended Harvard in the era of Jewish quotas, and according to his biographer Ronald Steel in his later life Lippmann often served as “the token Jew” in elite social settings such as the River Club in New York City and the Metropolitan Club in Washington D.C.

²⁰Reinhold Niebuhr, review of *A Preface to Morals*, by Walter Lippmann, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 149 (1930): 199–200. For a slightly more critical take see: H. G. Townsend, review of *A Preface to Morals*, by Walter Lippmann. *The Philosophical Review* 40, no. 5 (1931): 501–2.

²¹ Alfred Diffenbach, “Walter Lippman Writes.” *The Christian Register* 108, no. 21 (May 23, 1929): 434.

²² Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in American Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929), 331.

²³ For an example of this addressing the Unitarian Layman's League First Parish of Milton, Massachusetts minister Vivian T. Pomeroy declared that Lippmann was correct that the "Acids of Modernity" had destroyed the traditional idea of God as a king and rendered the term "father" anachronistic. See: Vivian T. Pomeroy quoted in Ivan McPeak, “A Workable Idea of God,” *The Christian Register* 108, no. 22 (May 23, 1929): 468–70.

He had little sense of rootedness in Jewish tradition, and saw assimilation as inevitable as traditions faded away.²⁴ Yet even Jewish writers wanting to avoid assimilation and placing a higher value on religious loyalty than did Lippmann felt that his conclusions about the “acids of modernity” were sound. Rabbi Mortimer J. Cohen, later one of the founding members of Reconstructionist Judaism, thought Lippmann had captured the zeitgeist at the dawn of the twentieth century. As he put it, “Just as acids eat into metals and dissolve them away, so intellectual acids were eating into and wasting away ancient traditions and ancient faiths. Especially did Jewish youths of Orthodox backgrounds find their spiritual and intellectual moorings slipping away and disappearing.”²⁵ Lippmann recognized a phenomenon that went beyond the experiences of one religious group, one that was occurring widely among educated Americans.

Writing a year after Lippmann, the acerbic cultural commentator H. L. Mencken, a harsh critic of organized religion, echoed many of his observations. Mencken observed, “today skepticism prevails in ever-widening circles, and has become the common attitude of all men who may plausibly pretend to education.” While he acknowledged that there were still many religious people, dividing them into intellectuals who had yet to break from childhood superstitions and an uneducated rabble, he firmly believed that true religious belief was quickly becoming impossible for intellectuals. Forms of religion might endure out of a misplaced fidelity to tradition, he suggested, but the contents were being rejected because “no really civilized man or woman believes in the cosmogony of Genesis, nor in the reality of Hell, nor any

²⁴ Ronald Steel, *Walter Lippmann and the American Century* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 9, 28-29.

²⁵ Mortimer J. Cohen, “Mordecai M. Kaplan as Teacher,” In *Mordecai M. Kaplan: An Evaluation*, ed. Ira Eisenstein and Eugene Kohn (New York: Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation, 1952), 9.

of the ancient imbecilities that still entertain the mob.”²⁶ The intellectuals who claimed to be religious, he argued, were not authentic in their beliefs. As he put it, “The intelligent ‘Christian’ is quite as doubtful about theology that he is supposed to have learned at his mother’s knee as the intelligent Japanese is doubtful about Shinto, the intelligent Turk about the heavenly authority of the Koran, or the intelligent Jew about Leviticus.”²⁷ For Mencken, childhood religion, the traditional religion that believers learned at their “mother’s knee,” was the only valid form. Modern life stripped that away, and as a result Mencken contended that one could not honestly retain a religious belief. Neither Mencken’s sharp tongue nor his unabashedly elitist sensibilities should obscure the basic truth of his remarks: that for those who aspired to intellectual, scholastic or social prominence, it was increasingly hard to maintain a genuine belief in the supernatural God of the Bible.

Conventional notions of God were increasingly denounced from lofty quarters. The editor of the Unitarian *Christian Register*, Alfred Dieffenbach, observed, with perhaps a touch of exaggeration, “Theism in the old sense of a fatherly deity is disbelieved in the higher and freer circles of religious thought.”²⁸ The same thing was true in academia. In 1928 the well-regarded sociologist and Smith College professor Harry Elmer Barnes gave an address at the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) which portrayed traditional Christian notions of God as relics of a bygone, primitive age that humanity should have outgrown. In the published version of the address Barnes indicated that scientific knowledge and Biblical criticism had made faith intellectually untenable. The Bible was discredited, he claimed, as “We now know that it was written by scores of human authors at different times and for different purposes,

²⁶H.L. Mencken, *Treatise on the Gods* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1930), 297.

²⁷ Mencken, *Treatise on the God*, 327-328.

²⁸Albert C. Dieffenbach “On Redefining God.” *The Christian Register* 107, no. 89 (May 10, 1928): 388.

and it cannot be regarded as divinely inspired to any greater degree than any other literary product that preceded it.” Even if believers gave up the idea that Jesus was the only begotten son of God, the remaining modernist claim that he was a uniquely influential religious teacher did not hold up under scrutiny. Barnes argued that his words were not any more impressive than those of Plato or Aristotle, and historians could not vouch for the accuracy of the transmission of his teachings. Barnes urged the scientists present to “drop the concept of God altogether.”²⁹ Yet while he was working to excise God, Barnes remained eager to keep religion, which he saw as invaluable. Religion “must base its reconstruction upon the facts of the cosmos, of the world, and man as we know them, and then determine what valid religious concepts and practices can be worked out in harmony with new knowledge and perspectives.” Barnes’s talk inspired outrage from both clergy and from scientists. The harshest rebukes were not from fundamentalists, who saw Barnes as merely channeling what they had always assumed their religious opponents to believe, but rather from Henry Fairfield Osborn, president of the AAAS and curator of the American Museum of Natural History. Osborn blasted Barnes in the press for having asserted a conflict between religion and science. Barnes fought back, pointing out that supernatural beliefs contradicting science were ubiquitous in American churches, and that while some religious worldviews like Unitarian Humanism withstood scientific scrutiny, belief in traditional notions of God, or a faith in a divine Jesus Christ, could not.³⁰

Religious liberal intellectuals saw some hope of retaining a core of religious truth, but they usually agreed with the assessment that traditional religion was being destroyed. Edwin Ewart Aubrey, a professor at the University of Chicago Divinity School, lamented about how scientific

²⁹ H.F. Manchester, “Dr. Dietrich Urges Religion of ‘Reality,’” *The Boston Herald*, January 27, 1927

³⁰ H.F. Manchester, “Dr. Dietrich Urges Religion of ‘Reality,’”; John Clarence Petrie, “Dr. Barnes and Reality,” *The Christian Register* 108, no. 21 (May 23, 1929): 433; “Science Takes Stock of Its Conquests,” *Popular Science Monthly* 114, no. 3 (March 1929): 28,174.

advances, particularly those of Darwinian evolution, had caused educated people to lose a sense of purpose. He declared, “‘rationalization’ became a word that like a nemesis pursues our every thought. Not only, then, have we lost faith in the accepted ends of life, but we have lost faith even in our ability clearly to formulate the ends of actions for ourselves.”³¹ Aubrey did not question the validity of Darwinian evolution or view rationalism as avoidable; he was utterly alienated from those in the fundamentalist movement who doubted these things. Their skepticism undermined the faith that he held dearly, he suggested.

Durant Drake, a philosophy professor at Vassar College, put the matter bluntly. “The old naive faith in the Biblical legends of a Jehovah who walked in the garden in the cool of the afternoon, who conversed with the saints, and wrote the Decalog with his finger upon tables of stone, is obsolete,” Drake wrote.³² Philosophical apologetics were just as thoroughly debunked; no purely logical argument that God was a Prime Mover or First Cause was likely to convince any progressive thinker in the twentieth century about the reality of God. With the certainties of the past upended, Drake explained, “The question has become, not, can we believe in this cut-and-dried conception of medieval and modern orthodoxy, but rather, is there *any* conception of God that we can accept? In other words, the God-idea has become fluid again, the God of the future is in the making.”³³

“When I was a child”: Accounts of Losing Faith

These prognostications from public intellectuals mirrored the accounts of religious leaders themselves. The writing of clergy or other religious professionals that expressed their doubts about the faith of the past were ubiquitous in American religious writings. While some

³¹Edwin Ewart Aubrey, *Present Theological Tendencies* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1936), 8.

³² Durant Drake, “An Empirical View of the Trinity,” *The Monist* 28, no. 1 (1918): 135–41.

³³Durant Drake, “Seekers After God,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 12, no. 1 (1919): 68.

simply wrote about the problem abstractly, others were couched in autobiographical terms, giving rise to a new literary form that many of them used to convey their changing religious views. Much as eighteenth- and nineteenth-century evangelical Christians followed certain themes and patterns in describing the experience of conversion (they were overcome by the conviction of sin, overwhelmed finally when their own will had been exhausted and they gave in to God), religious liberals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century described their own turn away from traditional theism toward liberal notions of religion that considered God merely metaphorical, or to more skeptical positions that dispensed with God altogether. These accounts found their way into denominational periodicals, sermons, edited collections, theology books and, of course, many self-aggrandizing memoirs.³⁴

Many of these narratives of the struggle to find faith amidst the assault of modernity came from the Protestant mainline. Ministry in the mainline was often a hospitable place for religious liberals, though there were more restrictions on their theological radicalism than in liberal Quakerism or Unitarianism. From the last quarter of the nineteenth century until World War I the mainline denominations had largely resisted efforts by more conservative religious factions within their polity to seize control. In denominationally-run heresy trials like that of David Swing, a Presbyterian accused of having unorthodox views on the trinity, and Charles Briggs, a Presbyterian who taught historical criticism at Union Theological Seminary, denominations worked out the limits of which beliefs were acceptable. Ultimately, in all mainline denominations, belief in evolution and some use of historical criticism (as long as it did not

³⁴ For more on conversion narratives see: Catherine A Brekus, *Sarah Osborn's World: The Rise of Evangelical Christianity in Early America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 94-104; Lincoln A. Mullen, *The Chance of Salvation: A History of Conversion in America* (Harvard University Press, 2017).

directly challenge the historicity of Jesus or the resurrection) were permitted. The tolerance of these ministers' congregations was often another matter, however, from what the denominations themselves permitted. Although numerous exceptions occurred, in general, laity tended to be more traditional in their religious views than their ministers. Those clergy not beholden to congregations because they worked in seminaries or as denominational bureaucrats were often less restricted in vocally discussing their liberal theological views than those in pulpits who felt a need to please the people in the pews.

Charles R. Brown, a congregationalist minister, scholar and dean of Yale Divinity School, offered a typical account in *Christianity and Modern Thought*, a 1924 book intended to popularize liberal religious thought. Writing about how he had discarded the traditional Christianity of his youth as he grew older, he invoked the words of the Apostle Paul: "When I was a child I thought as a child. We all did... I thought of God as a tall, elderly gentleman, with long white hair and beard, something like my grandfather, who was a very handsome old man. I thought of Him as standing among the clouds, watching me, especially when I was doing something wrong."³⁵ Brown, like many others, used the metaphor of coming to manhood to describe his mature religious beliefs. After his education, Brown rejected belief in an anthropomorphized Deity, writing, "I learned to think of God as resident, immanent in all these mighty processes, heat, light, gravitation, electricity, the movement of the planets, the growth of plant life, the growth of animal life, the growth of human life... God is everywhere."³⁶

Brown's remarks were less radical than those of his counterpart at the more theologically liberal Harvard Divinity School, Dean Willard Sperry. In his writing about his religious doubts,

³⁵ Charles R. Brown, "Keeping the Faith." In *Christianity and Modern Thought*, ed. Ralph H. Gabriel (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1924), 6.

³⁶Brown, "Keeping the Faith," 7.

Sperry quoted a 1912 sermon by Congregationalist minister Charles E. Jefferson at the National Council of Congregationalist Churches that expressed the ennui of the times. It was not possible to simply trust that God existed anymore, Jefferson had told the ministers in attendance:

The most difficult article of the creed is the first one, 'I believe in God.' Those who think most know this best. The universe which science has discovered is a vast machine. Its wheels turn inexorably and remorselessly. The winds are pitiless and the stars are cold. Not only is nature indifferent to our cries . . . she shrieks against the Christian creed. History shrieks even louder than nature . . . it is not easy to stand between the vast machine of nature, and the vast slaughter house of history and say with a voice that does not falter, 'I believe in God the Father Almighty.'³⁷

Sperry felt Jefferson's challenge deeply, and once confessed before a large audience of ministers that he often found it difficult to say that he believed in "God, the Father almighty."³⁸ The issue was not so severe that Sperry ever seriously contemplated leaving his position as dean and his role in overseeing the training of both ministers and academics, but it was serious enough that he began to search for new ways of believing in God.

Some Protestant mainline ministers trended toward various kinds of extreme Unitarian theology. Congregationalist minister Dwight Bradley writing in *The Christian Century* told readers that Jesus was "a partly historical but more largely mythical hero" who had come to represent the highest longing of humanity. Bradley compared Jesus to literary characters like Hamlet, Faust and the Greek heroes of Homer, and argued that the quest for a historical Jesus was misplaced. Jesus was just a symbol, he wrote, one that might be abandoned and replaced with a something more useful.³⁹ Not every reader of the magazine would have agreed with this

³⁷ Charles E. Jefferson quoted in Willard L. Sperry, *Those of the Way*, Second Edition (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1945), 52.

³⁸ Sperry, *Those of the Way*, 53.

³⁹ Dwight Bradley, "Do We Want a Historical Jesus?" *The Christian Century* XLV, no. 40 (September 27, 1928): 1163–65. Bradley would later express his support for the Humanist Manifesto. See: William F. Schulz, *Making the Manifesto: The Birth of Religious Humanism* (Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 2004), 78.

conception of Christ, but such views were not atypical or notable enough to merit any significant criticism from the magazine's readership either.

Popular fiction depicted ministers who lost their faith as a result of exposure to historical criticism. The protagonist of Harold Frederic's 1896 novel *The Damnation of Theron Ware*, is a young Methodist minister who encounters a worldly Catholic priest and skeptical town doctor, neither of whom believe in revealed religion. Reading a book borrowed from the doctor, *Recollections of My Youth*, the autobiographical account of Biblical scholar Ernest Renan's break with Catholicism, leads Ware to doubt his own convictions. Frederic describes Ware's deconversion as almost an awakening:

This he rather glanced through, at the outset, following with a certain inattention the introductory sketches and essays, which dealt with an unfamiliar, and, to his notion, somewhat preposterous Breton racial type. Then, little by little, it dawned upon him that there was a connected story in all this; and suddenly he came upon it, out in the open, as it were. It was the story of how a deeply devout young man, trained from his earliest boyhood for the sacred office, and desiring passionately nothing but to be worthy of it, came to a point where, at infinite cost of pain to himself and of anguish to those dearest to him, he had to declare that he could no longer believe at all in revealed religion.

Theron Ware read this all with an excited interest which no book had ever stirred in him before.⁴⁰

Freed from his religious scruples, Ware contemplates having an affair with an attractive Catholic woman, eventually has a breakdown, and is saved by a Methodist revivalist. But the experience of religious doubt ultimately causes him to leave the ministry. According to Frederic, historical criticism was both seductive and dangerous.

The titular character of Sinclair Lewis' 1927 farcical bestseller *Elmer Gantry* was a huckster turned Baptist minister, but his narrative foil was Frank Shallard. Shallard is as intelligent and morally upright as Gantry is stupid and disreputable, and as a result finds himself

⁴⁰Harold Frederic, *The Damnation of Theron Ware* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 131.

increasingly skeptical of Christian orthodoxy over the course of the novel. Early in the narrative, when Gantry and Shallard are studying at a rural midwestern Baptist seminary, Shallard goes to his German-trained Old Testament professor to confess he has some questions about how to reconcile seeming discrepancies in the Biblical text, only to find out his professor is a secret atheist whose faith has been killed off by training in historical criticism. The professor stays in his position because he is sure that he can find no other means of employment (even in the 1920s, academic jobs in the humanities were hard to find). Shallard's religious doubts continue to grow, and eventually he leaves the Baptist ministry for the Congregationalists. After much study and anger over the church's inadequate approach to social issues, he loses the ability to believe in God and ceases to pray to God from his pulpit. Historical criticism removes even Shallard's ability to find anything beautiful in the personality of Jesus as he once did; his studies of modern scholarship fail to convince him that the Bible accurately reveals the historical figure of Jesus. Shallard is expelled from the ministry, and after giving a speech against fundamentalism he is brutally beaten for his views by a fundamentalist mob and becomes partially blind.⁴¹ For this novel Lewis had done serious research on religion, including meeting regularly with a group of Protestant ministers and a Rabbi. Some liberal religious groups suggested that the book offered an accurate reflection of the current state of religion, "He gives us the thing that *is*!" exclaimed a laudatory review in the Unitarian *Christian Register*.⁴²

Charles Clayton Morrison, the editor and owner of *The Christian Century*, which served as the mouthpiece of mainline Protestantism after he bought the paper in 1908, made clear in his

⁴¹Sinclair Lewis. *Elmer Gantry* (New York: New American Library, 1980), 119-123, 354-380; Douglas Walrath, *Displacing the Divine: The Minister in the Mirror of American Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 213-215.

⁴²Albert C. Dieffenbach "Lewis' 'Elmer Gantry.'" *The Christian Register* 106, no. 13 (March 31, 1927): 255.

writing that ministers were not expected to believe in a supernatural miracle-working God or the literal bodily resurrection of Christ. As he put it in his paper, “Who is the real heretic? Not he who questions the physical resurrection of Christ and has difficulty with some other New Testament miracles, but he who denies the power of God to work some great miracle of transformation in our time, and even hinders God. When some prophetic man says he is not quite sure whether Christ came forth from the tomb with his old body or with a glorified spiritual body or in spiritual presence only, but is sure he has risen it need not greatly disturb us, for the great thing is he has risen.”⁴³ The Risen Christ was proven not through confidence in a bodily resurrection in the last days, but by following the social gospel, campaigning against war, bettering the living conditions of the poor and improving the world.

Clergy from more theologically conservative Christian traditions were susceptible to the same kinds of doubts as their mainline religious counterparts, though obviously there would have been considerable consequences for them to admit that they had ultimately rejected belief in a traditional understanding of God. William Sullivan was a young Roman Catholic priest and professor of theology at St. Thomas College in Washington, D.C. during the first decade of the twentieth century when a colleague who taught Scripture came to him seeking consolation. Sullivan’s fellow priest admitted that his reading of recent Biblical scholarship caused him to doubt his faith; he no longer felt the deity of Jesus could be proven and questioned the validity of the resurrection. To Sullivan this was not a mysterious condition, as he noted that “he was one of the many students upon whom the conclusions of the critical study of the Bible fell like a stroke of lightning.” Sullivan expressed sympathy and urged his troubled colleague to have patience.

⁴³ “Who Are the Heretics?” *The Christian Century* XLIII, no. 16 (April 22, 1926): 502–3.

Yet while his friend could hide his doubts and stay in the church, those same issues would drive Sullivan from the church and into the Unitarian fold.⁴⁴

Historian Christopher Cameron makes the point that religious liberalism, freethought, agnosticism and atheism were more common among African Americans during the early twentieth century than most scholars have recognized. For many leading figures in the Harlem Renaissance, the factors that led them to reject traditional Christianity were similar to those that had convinced many white mainliners. Alain Locke was raised an Episcopalian but his mother was also a supporter of Felix Adler and the Ethical Culture Society. As a student at Harvard, Locke explained to his mother that his convictions had become unitarian, and he ultimately joined the university's Ethical Society to carry on the principles of Ethical Culture. In 1918 Locke would join the Baha'i faith, a popular option for religious liberals. He had initially encountered the group at an event hosted by the Ethical Culture Society. Growing up in Jamaica, the poet and author Claude McKay was exposed to his brother's library of books on freethought. As a teenager McKay read Matthew Arnold's *Literature and Dogma*, the evolutionary writing of Thomas Huxley, and John William Draper's *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science*.⁴⁵ McKay would convert to Roman Catholicism at the end of his life, after many years as a religious skeptic and a Marxist.

Langston Hughes memorably captured the spirit of growing skepticism in his 1932 poem "Goodbye Christ," which lamented that belief in Christ and the Bible were outdated and

⁴⁴ William L. Sullivan, *Under Orders* (New York: Richard R. Smith, 1944), 108-109.

This account was written by Sullivan to justify his choice to leave the Roman Catholic Church, so he may have had special reason to emphasize the extent to which that priests were racked with doubt.

⁴⁵ Leonard Harris and Charles Molesworth, *Alain L. Locke: The Biography of a Philosopher* (Chicago, IL: University Of Chicago Press, 2008), 7; Wayne F. Cooper, *Claude McKay, Rebel Sojourner in the Harlem Renaissance: A Biography* (Louisiana State University Press, 1996), 14-15; Christopher Cameron, *Black Freethinkers: A History of African American Secularism* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2019), 47-49, 63-64.

expressed hope that Marxism and social progress could replace traditional Christianity. The poem was widely printed and became highly controversial. African Methodist Episcopal Church bishop Reverdy Ransom, a prominent Social Gospel leader, wrote a poetic rejoinder, declaring “Goodbye to Hughes. All hail to Christ!”⁴⁶

African-American ministers sometimes took very theological radical positions. Adam Clayton Powell Jr., the congressional leader and minister of Abyssinian Baptist Church, declared in his autobiography: “We do not believe in the Bible as the word of God. It is too filled with contradictions. We believe in the Thomas Jefferson Bible.” Scripture had to be read selectively in light of modern knowledge. Powell did not believe in an afterlife, and defined God as synonymous with “all the beauty and truth and goodness in the world!”⁴⁷ Abyssinian Baptist was one of the most influential centers of African-American religious life in the United States, so Powell’s views were hardly obscure.

While accounts of childhood faith and liberal religious rebirth were common for other groups, they were virtually required in Unitarianism. Dilworth Lupton, a Unitarian minister in Cleveland who would become pivotal in the early expansion of Alcoholics Anonymous, was typical in how he explicitly framed his acceptance of an impersonal God as a process of growing up. He jested about his early thoughts of God as simply being a person who lived in the sky:

⁴⁶ Cameron, *Black Freethinkers: A History of African American Secularism*, 66–67; Reverdy Ransom quoted in Wallace D. Best, *Langston’s Salvation: American Religion and the Bard of Harlem* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 125.

⁴⁷ Adam Clayton Powell Jr, *Adam by Adam: The Autobiography of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr* (New York: Kensington Books, 1974), 39–45; Gary Dorrien, *Breaking White Supremacy: Martin Luther King and the Black Social Gospel* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 184–186. Powell wrote those lines in the 1970s, but had been minister of Abyssinian Baptist since 1937. It seems likely his congregation was well aware of his theological views.

“When I was a child, my mother found me climbing a step-ladder which I had placed in the middle of our garden. ‘What are you trying to do?’ she asked, somewhat astonished. I replied, with the utmost sincerity, ‘I’m going to see God.’”⁴⁸

Lupton claimed that belief in God as simply a “magnified man” was common to the childhood phase of all great civilizations; modern society should outgrow that belief, he argued, just as he had. He fumed that “immature anthropomorphisms” still persisted among college students in American universities and in the pews. Some students reported thinking of God as a man with a body, though Lupton himself believed that God might still be described as having a personality, and symbolically as having an individual existence.⁴⁹

Another Unitarian minister, Franklin Ham, offered fewer details about his faith journey but wrote to the denominational periodical to explain that he had been a believer as a young child but had embraced materialist philosophy and atheism as a young man in Tennessee during the last decade of the nineteenth century. He felt driven to that position by the “inexorable logic of science.” Ham, however, was personally unfulfilled as an atheist, and began to attend a Unitarian church where he felt for the first time that “one could use one’s reason and still be religious.” Ham gradually grew to believe in God, albeit a different God from the God of his childhood, and rose to become a lay leader and later the minister of his Chattanooga congregation.⁵⁰

Charles Francis Potter became a leader in the Humanist movement (his leadership in that movement is described in chapter 5) after a convoluted religious journey that included time in the ministry in Baptist, Unitarian, and Universalist churches. In a veiled autobiographical

⁴⁸Dilworth Lupton, “Personal, Impersonal or Nebulous?” *The Christian Register* 106, no. 32 (August 11, 1927): 640–41.

⁴⁹Lupton, “Personal, Impersonal or Nebulous?,” 640–41.

⁵⁰ Marion Franklin Ham, “Concluding a Discussion.” *The Christian Register* 108, no. 3 (January 17, 1929): 42.

sermon, Potter elucidated how the discovery of textual criticism was pivotal to his leaving the fundamentalist Baptist faith of his early career. As he explained, “a young man who has been brought up on that doctrine [of inerrancy] and then begins to study the manuscripts gets somewhat startled when he finds out that all the copies which we have now of the Holy Scriptures, whether the American Standard Version or the King James, go back to other versions and back and back and back.” These ancient Biblical manuscripts were not uniform, and undermined the notion that there was a single stable Biblical text. The problem inherent in this variety, Potter admitted, had confronted religious intellectuals all the way back to Erasmus, and it still had the power to undermine traditional notions of faith. As Potter put it, any man who “comes to find there are 100,000 variations in manuscripts” could not hold to the idea that that Bible was without error or was a revealed text for very long; it stripped away the idea that there was any core text to which one could be faithful.⁵¹

Retired Unitarian minister Joseph Henry Crooker also saw religion in an autobiographical progression, writing in *The Christian Register* that “as a matter of fact our thought of God grows from youth to old age, being an ever-expanding concept. But when the child outgrows his childish concept, he [sic] does not drop the word ‘God’; he makes it embrace the discoveries of his growing life. So it should be with the race: Enlarge the meaning of the word to embrace all the discoveries of science, all the aspirations of philanthropy, all the insights of the soul. *But keep the word!*”⁵²

In his 1923 book *Because Men are Not Stones*, theistic Unitarian minister Jabez T. Sunderland explained that the idea of God was evolving in the modern world. Higher ideas of

⁵¹Charles Francis Potter, “A Sermon That Was Never Preached.” *The Christian Register* 104, no. 39 (September 24, 1925): 935.

⁵²Joseph Henry Crooker. “A Religion Without God.” *The Christian Register* 108, no. 5 (January 31, 1929): 89–90.

God involved a deity that gave the world a sense of meaning and purpose, provided a pantheistic connection between all living things, and perhaps offered some hope of personal immortality after death, but Sunderland rejected the idea that God intervened in nature. He contended that many people who were only aware of older notions of God, as a personal being or a miracle worker, had been taught this conception of the divine in childhood and, conflating that entity with “God,” they would claim to reject theism. Sunderland believed that people needed to reject that “childish” notion of God and accept his more mature conception.⁵³

Sunderland recounted a story about how he had saved an elderly congregant from atheism. Her ideas of God were wrong, he claimed. “The God of her childish conceptions was a venerable old man up in the sky.... And so she said to me with some hesitation, but very sincerely, ‘I think I am an atheist.’” Sunderland worked to assuage her doubts and replace them with what he felt were mature notions of God, asking; “Do you have no sense of a Life higher than your own, larger, more universal, of which the life of each individual tree and plant and animal, and your own life, seems but an infinitesimal part—as if it were a ripple, a drop, a spark?” She answered him in the affirmative, saying that she did believe that all life was connected and important. She had answered as expected, and the Unitarian minister sprang his rhetorical trap: “I said to her, ‘Suppose we call that Life, God; for God is just religion’s name for it.’ She was silent. Then, with new light in her face she inquired, ‘Can that be God?’ and added thoughtfully, ‘If that is God, then I believe in nothing as much as I believe in God.’ And from that day the world was full of God to her.”⁵⁴

Sometimes these accounts appeared from the Unitarian laity themselves, who were on average much more theologically liberal than their mainline counterparts. Unitarians also tended

⁵³ Jabez T. Sunderland, *Because Men Are Not Stones* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1929), 21.

⁵⁴ Sunderland, *Because Men Are Not Stones*, 36-37.

to attract converts from other denominations specifically because of the latitude of belief that the denomination allowed. One resident of a small Missouri town wrote into the Unitarian magazine *The Christian Register* to describe how his constant reading in the library as an adolescent caused him to abandon his Catholic upbringing and all forms of orthodox Christian theology. He felt “driven hard towards atheism,” he wrote, but eventually settled on Unitarianism because it allowed him to believe that life had meaning without the trappings of traditional Christianity.⁵⁵

Quakers were slightly less prone to write accounts of their conversions from traditional faith to new ideas of God. There were fewer theologically liberal Quakers than there were Unitarians, and those Friends with the most liberal theology tended to come from “unprogrammed” traditions, which rejected paid or specially educated ministry. As a result, they tended to publish fewer accounts of religious autobiography because they were engaged in other professional activities. Nevertheless, some of the most visible Quaker religious leaders did write accounts that closely mirrored other examples of liberal religious conversion narratives. In his middle age, as a professor of philosophy at Haverford College, Rufus Jones would become the most prominent voice in liberal Quakerism, articulating a widely embraced vision of faith that relied on religious experience and mysticism rather than fideism or a belief in a supernatural God. Born in the midst of the Civil War in rural Maine, Jones followed the common motif of describing belief in an anthropomorphic deity as a relic of his childhood, something he eventually replaced with a more mature idea of religion. In his memoirs (three volumes published over the course of his life), Jones explained that as a child he had imagined that God was close by, and members of his family would frequently bow their heads in prayer and talk to the deity as if God was physically present in the room. Jones’s greatest religious mentor in

⁵⁵ T.S. Long, “Welcome to This Friend!” *The Christian Register* 104, no. 51 (December 17, 1925): 1229.

childhood, his great-aunt Peace, felt she knew God just as she knew the members of her own family. At night, as he lay in the dark trying to sleep, Jones would feel that God was present in the room with him. God, Jones explained, “was just as real a being to me all through my early boyhood as was any one of the persons in our nearest neighbor’s house.”⁵⁶ This reflexive belief in God did not survive his adolescence; as an adult he found that kind of pious and naive faith praiseworthy but impossible to maintain.

As he grew up, Jones found himself doubtful of all claims of special or divine insights that contradicted natural law. In his memoir, he explained this skepticism in reference to a tale about his early childhood. According to his account, the father of one of his childhood friends was an autodidactic inventor who tried to construct a perpetual motion machine. His friend repeatedly assured him that the machine was just a few weeks from perfection, when it would be presented to the world. His father, the friend declared, would be the toast of the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exposition. Jones snuck into the inventor’s workshop with other friends to see the device, and he watched as a small steel ball was lifted up by springs and moved on a track for a few minutes before promptly stopping dead. The machine was a failure. Jones claimed that the experience taught him to trust things “only as far as they can be tested and verified.” It was a lesson that he applied as an adult studying religious experiences, such as

⁵⁶ Rufus M. Jones, *Finding the Trail of Life* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1926), 21-22, 38, 102-103. There are a number of biographies of Rufus Jones, almost all of them written as hagiography. Despite their limitations they do at least provide the outline of Jones’s life and provide some explanation his religious views. See: David Hinshaw, *Rufus Jones, Master Quaker* (New York: G.P. Putnam and Sons, 1951); Elizabeth Gray Vining, *Friend for Life: The Biography of Rufus M. Jones* (Philadelphia, PA: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1958); Claus Bernet, *Rufus Jones (1863-1948): Life and Bibliography of an American Scholar, Writer and Social Activist* (Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Peter Lang, 2009).

dreams and visions, “when they launched off into matters which conflict with what we know to be nature’s established order, I think of that old perpetual motion machine and grow cautious.”⁵⁷

What was left of Jones’s religious faith was kept alive by his professors when he was a student in the 1880s at Quaker-run Haverford College. He later wrote glowingly of his science professor Thomas J. Battey, who explained geology, evolution and the fossil record to his classes. Jones credited Battey with leading him away from his “childish conception” of God, the idea of a mechanical designer who had tweaked the universe, to an idea of God as creative energy.⁵⁸ For Jones, Battey steered him around the obstacles that left the faith of many of his generation in ruins. Jones spoke with equal force about how his philosophy professor, Pliny Chase, assigned his classes Henry Drummond’s *Natural Law in the Spiritual World*. Drummond, a teacher of natural science, tried to prove that evolution and biology fit into a contemporary understanding of Christianity. Jones found that Drummond’s work offered another way out of the inexorable slide into unbelief; although the book was “imperfect,” Jones remembered, it “came like water to a drowning man.”⁵⁹

Jones’s college training made him sympathetic to ideas of theological modernism. He thought that evolution was true, that the Bible was a historical product of an ancient people, and

⁵⁷ Jones, *Finding the Trail of Life*, 66-68. The details of Jones’s account of the perpetual motion machine cannot be verified. There are however numerous local stories and confirmed accounts of northeastern eccentric inventors trying to invent such devices in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. See: John Gould. *Farmer Takes a Wife* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1946), 90-92; Wendy Bellion. *Citizen Spectator: Art, Illusion, and Visual Perception in Early National America* (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press Books, 2011), 23-25.

⁵⁸ Jones. *Finding the Trail of Life*, 138-139.

⁵⁹ Rufus M. Jones, *The Trail of Life in College* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1929), 64-65. Jones was savagely critical about the fact that some his other professors, though sure that science and religion could coexist, often awkwardly resorted to old, outdated and unbelievable apologetics to make religion seem plausible to their students. Haverford professors still taught theologian William Paley’s *Evidences of Christianity*, which posited that the design of the natural world proved the existence of God. Such arguments had been developed at the beginning of the nineteenth century and after the advent of evolution seemed improbable. Haverford’s faculty was well aware of Paley’s deficiencies but they often used him due to the lack of a widely respected alternative. See: Jones, *The Trail of Life in College*, 43-44.

that Christianity needed to be seriously reconceptualized to function in the modern world. Jones might have become merely one of a large number of liberal Protestant modernizers who sought to preserve faith in the modern era. Instead, the fact that he was connected to one small denomination, Quakerism, meant that he could engage in a much more extensive reimagining of religion.

A woman writing to Jones to praise his books summed up the issues Quakers and other Christians faced succinctly: “It was so easy for our parents and grandparents—as they believed the Bible to be the literal Word of God—but how much more difficult is it for us in this age! I don't believe we are getting it from the sources which should give it to us. If we are, I haven't found it.”⁶⁰ The admirer seized on Jones’ work like a life preserver in a turbulent sea. It seemed to offer some hope of retaining a faith like that of the past, a belief in *something*.

Jones’ brother-in-law Henry Cadbury had a very similar trajectory. Cadbury, who managed to have a career in both humanitarian work as chair of the American Friends Service Committee, and in higher criticism of the Bible as Hollis Professor of Divinity at Harvard, had been raised in a devout Quaker environment. His family name indicated a distinguished pedigree in the faith and he was a distant cousin of the English Quaker chocolate manufacturing family. As a child, Cadbury had been drilled in Bible verses by his mother. His family instilled in him the idea that only through faith and God’s grace could salvation be attained. By the time he was a young man, Cadbury began to question his parents’ teachings, and he found his views gradually shifting. He attributed the change in part to his consciousness of higher criticism, to which he was exposed at Haverford College. Reflecting on the matter years later, he declared that he had no decisive break with his childhood religion, nor a moment when he clearly lost faith, but by the end of his

⁶⁰ Louise Homer to Rufus Jones, June 4, 1933. Rufus M. Jones Papers, Haverford College, Box 34.

adolescence and young adulthood he understood God and the Bible far differently than his parents had.⁶¹ Cadbury was often reluctant to give public expression to his skeptical religious views, but he provided his graduate students with hints of them. One later recalled how in class Cadbury had explained that he could only honestly join in saying the Apostles Creed for the line that Jesus was “crucified under Pontius Pilate and buried,” meaning that he felt ethically obliged to omit the lines about Jesus descending to hell, being resurrected and ascending to heaven to sit at the right hand of God.⁴⁸

The ideas of Quaker leaders spoke to the people in the pews. Writing in the late 1920s, New York Quaker Mabel Ashe Beling described how, growing up in the Congregationalist church, she had always pictured God as being like her “desiccated Congregationalist minister,” as “no Father, but a Great Parson.” She regarded this as “childish thinking” and eventually such beliefs made it “impossible” for her to believe in God at all. She attributed her diminishing belief to knowledge of science, saying, “When I saw the Universe through a telescope, and gasped at my glimpse at a fringe of the vastness of it, when a microscope showed me the infinite complexity in the very dust of it, my Little God moved out. He was evicted, He could never have made it. He could never run it, He couldn’t even run me!”⁶² Her traditional beliefs shattered, Beling eventually gravitated back to religion because of her conviction in a creative power present in the universe, that there was meaning. Sure that such a force could not be purely mechanistic, she became a Quaker, influenced heavily by Rufus Jones. Yet her new understanding of God was not

⁶¹Margaret Hope Bacon, *Let This Life Speak: The Legacy of Henry Joel Cadbury* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987) 7-8. For a useful overview of how Cadbury’s religious skepticism influenced his Biblical scholarship see: T. Vail Palmer, *A Long Road: How Quakers Made Sense of God and the Bible* (Newberg, OR: Barclay Press, 2017), 191-201.

⁶² Mabel Ashe Beling, “Is God a Quaker?” *Friends’ Intelligencer* 84, no. 46 (November 12, 1927): 911–912.

the same as her old one. God was a distant spiritual power, and she saw “churches as human efforts to express, or make contact with, that spiritual Power.” God had become a mysterious and remote creator that all faiths imperfectly understood. For Beling, Quakerism expressed this perspective most adequately of all existing religions.⁶³

Reflecting on his years at Iowa Agricultural College in the first decade of the twentieth century, Milburn Lincoln Wilson, who would later become Assistant Secretary of Agriculture during Franklin Roosevelt’s administration, explained how these developments had challenged his own faith. Wilson’s mother was a Quaker, but he had grown up in the Disciples of Christ, which held to a strict and literalist understanding of the Bible. His first real exposure to Darwinian evolution was in a required zoology class. A particularly engaging lecturer made the implications of the course hard for Wilson to avoid: “I soon realized that the idea of the benevolent and kindly Quaker God of my mother was incompatible with the theory of survival of the fittest. The idea of a rather stern and exacting Scotch Presbyterian God of my grandfather... was also in trouble.” His notions of God shaken, Wilburn went to his professor for guidance, asking if he believed that God had created the universe. According to Wilson’s recollections, the professor gave a qualified answer, telling him that “[it] depends on what you mean by God. Is God a person or a force?” At the time, Wilson dismissed the answer as sophistry, and wondered if all the lessons he had been taught were mere “fairy tales.”⁶⁴

Wilson endured a long dark night of the soul, questioning the very foundations of his faith. Ultimately he found solace from two sources. A college English class introduced him to the journal of eighteenth-century Quaker abolitionist John Woolman, a popular religious classic.

⁶³ Beling, “Is God a Quaker?,” 911-912.

⁶⁴ M.L. Wilson, “M. L. Wilson,” in *American Spiritual Autobiographies*, ed. Louis Finkelstein, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1948), 10.

Woolman's love for others and close connection to the divine greatly moved Wilson, who valued his own Quaker heritage, but it did not entirely assuage his doubts about the existence of God. A friend recommended he read William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, and he found himself "almost... a convert to the religion of William James." James's ideas about mysticism provided a way for Wilson to reconcile his childhood religious faith with the findings of science, and he began to read Woolman's *Journal* through the lens of James's work, seeing him as a religious genius and a mystic. Thanks to this Jamesian understanding of Woolman, Wilson no longer felt that he had to believe in an anthropomorphic God to accept religion. For the first time, Wilson wrote, because of his insight into John Woolman, he could relate to the religion of his Quaker mother and to what she meant when she spoke about the nearness of God. Wilson remained a Christian into mature adulthood, observing that many of his peers were unable to do the same. They were indifferent, or admired religion but felt that scientific advances had made all religion implausible. He credited his education for exposing him to Woolman, James, and enough philosophy for him to find grounds to retain some sort of religiosity. We may suspect that Wilson was also influenced by Jones and his followers, who used this potent combination of thinkers to form part of the main pillars of liberal Quaker thought (as discussed in chapter 2).⁶⁵

American Jews were by no means isolated from the trends about belief that affected other denominations. The future founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, Jewish Theological Seminary professor Mordecai Kaplan, came to embrace his liberal theological convictions only after becoming increasingly alienated from the traditionalist upbringing of his youth. Initially he would conceal his most controversial views so that as a Conservative Rabbi he could still be a

⁶⁵ M.L. Wilson, "M. L. Wilson," 12-14, 21.

minister to the Orthodox. Kaplan had been born in Lithuania in 1881. The eldest boy of his family, his mother had marked him for Rabbinic greatness. Kaplan's father, Israel Kaplan, a rabbi and graduate of a prestigious yeshiva in Volozhin, was a participant in the Muser movement among Lithuanian Jews, which blended traditional Talmudic studies with a devotion to ethical conduct. Unable to find reliable work in Lithuania, Israel immigrated to New York City as part of a group of rabbis intended to make up Jacob Joseph's rabbinical court. Joseph had been brought to New York by a group of Orthodox Jewish leaders who hoped that he would be able to serve as the central religious authority for most Jews in the United States, an American version of the chief rabbi of the United Kingdom. Allegations of corruption and bitter internal politics seriously hindered Joseph's effectiveness, and Israel Kaplan, like many in his orbit, sought work outside of the rabbinic court. He eventually found employment providing oversight of kosher slaughterhouses.⁶⁶

Mordecai Kaplan arrived in New York at the age of eight, and was trained from his youth to follow his father's path. He was educated at a Yiddish-speaking yeshiva in New York, where most of his school day focused on study of the Talmud and Torah; math, science, history and the subjects that would be taught in public schools were relegated to short periods in the afternoon. Textual studies alongside his father supplemented his classwork. Kaplan and his family were observant and attentive to halakha, and in most respects, he had a model Orthodox Jewish upbringing. He strictly observed the sabbath, did not eat anything prepared in a non-Kosher kitchen, and said his required daily prayers. Kaplan's meticulous biographer Mel Scult reports that Kaplan was even more scrupulous than was required; at one point as a teenager he read in

⁶⁶Mel Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century : A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1993), 19-31.

Shulkan Arukh that a man should never walk between two women, and afterwards when out with his mother and sister he diligently repositioned himself to abide by this decree.⁶⁷

Even as an adolescent Kaplan developed an awareness that historical criticism challenged traditional assumptions about the reliability of scripture. Arnold Ehrlich, a Biblical scholar who had a tense relationship with the rest of the New York Jewish community, was sometimes a guest in the Kaplan family home. Ehrlich rejected the notion that Moses had written the Torah, a major departure from the teachings Kaplan would have learned in school.⁶⁸ By the time he was a student at Jewish Theological Seminary, Kaplan was citing Ehrlich in some of his papers. He became convinced such knowledge made orthodoxy implausible; as he later put it, “The so-called ‘higher criticism’ of the Bible abounds in wild guesses and fanciful reconstructions of text and history, but it has definitely displaced the traditional belief that the Pentateuch, which was the authoritative text of Jewish life, was dictated in its present form by God to Moses.”⁶⁹

As head of the Jewish Theological Seminary’s Teacher’s Institute, Kaplan thought that children given traditional Jewish educations were more likely to be thrown into grave religious uncertainty. Teachers who had come to doubt the historicity of the Hebrew scriptures or the existence of a supernatural or personal God were pressured by parents to teach strictly from the Jewish tradition, and Kaplan felt that they often did so half-heartedly. “At the age of seven or eight, children begin to question the veracity of stories about miracles,” Kaplan observed. “With no alternative to the religion of theophany and miracle, he grows up with a prejudice against all religion.”⁷⁰ Kaplan told his rabbinical students that traditional views of God were childish, a

⁶⁷ Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century*, 31-32.

⁶⁸ Mel Scult, *The Radical American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014), 10.

⁶⁹ Mordecai M. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life* (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 2010), 44.

⁷⁰ Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, 499-500.

relic of a primitive time and people. Writing in his diary about his teaching he observed, “This morning I explained to the class the typical fallacy of the child mind and of the minds of the ancients—who with a few exceptions racially speaking were children. . . . [this] gave rise to the anthropomorphic conception of God and to the literalistic conception of the Messiah.”⁷¹ The desire to keep to tradition, to understand religious texts and stories as literally true, Kaplan felt, threatened to drive people away from religion. Much of Kaplan’s career as a rabbi and as a professor at Jewish Theological Seminary (which is described in chapter 4) would be devoted to trying to reinterpret these stories as folklore, valuable because of their connection to the Jewish people but not containing any special knowledge about God.

Kaplan’s followers and the other future Conservative Rabbis and Jewish educators that he trained at JTS had similar trajectories to that of their mentor, although Kaplan helped most of them through the process of redefining their faith. Mortimer J. Cohen, who studied under Kaplan at the Teacher’s Institute, wrote that his background was typical: “Having come from the usual Jewish home of Orthodox outlook, I held the accepted view of the Bible, as other Jewish youths in a similar environment. I was sorely perplexed and often confused about the Holy Scriptures.” Cohen credited JTS and Kaplan for helping him sustain his faith as he moved away from a view of the Hebrew Bible as a supernatural record to an understanding of it as a historical text. This new understanding required reconceptualizing how he viewed God, and Cohen argued that Kaplan’s teaching “opens up the Bible as a vast world of Jewish experience in which Jewish men and women, and mankind as a whole, were discovered as searching for the meaning of existence in terms of God; but more than merely in the word ‘God,’ rather in the spiritual and moral values

⁷¹Mordecai M. Kaplan, *Communings of the Spirit: The Journals of Mordecai M. Kaplan Volume I 1913-1934*, ed. Mel Scult (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2001), 264.

that the God of the Bible represented.”⁷² With this new kind of metaphorical God, a God that was not an entity so much as a human expression of the values of moral law, Cohen felt able to eventually become a leader in the Reconstructionist movement.

Ira Eisenstein, Kaplan’s student, protege and eventual son-in-law, had a similar narrative. Eisenstein grew up in a moderately devout family in Harlem, and he never questioned the literal truth of the revelation of the Torah on Sinai or other aspects of his religious upbringing until late in his high school years. Then, as he later claimed, his “theological troubles began.” From the time of his bar mitzvah Eisenstein had been groomed to be a Rabbi; he and his parents and grandparents, as well as his Hebrew teacher, embraced the idea that he was going to have a special religious vocation. When his elder brother Myron began to express religious doubt, Eisenstein’s first reaction was anger rather than agreement, but he slowly moved to his brother’s views. He recalled how attending the sermons of two rabbis led him to gradually reject the fundamentalist thought of his childhood. Hearing Rabbi Stephen Wise give his Sunday morning address in Carnegie Hall, for example, Eisenstein had initially been skeptical. The hatless, English-speaking Wise seemed far too assimilated and “goyish” to be an authentic religious leader, Eisenstein thought. Wise’s sermon drew on the documentary hypothesis, the idea that the first five Biblical books that composed the Torah had different authors, a concept that horrified the young man. As Eisenstein later recorded, “I got very emotional about it, as would a young believer tottering on the edge of heresy himself.” Eisenstein found a sermon by Mordecai Kaplan, whom he described as a “stern and forbidding man with a black goatee,” even more

⁷²Mortimer J. Cohen, “Mordecai M. Kaplan as Teacher,” in *Mordecai M. Kaplan: An Evaluation*, ed. Ira Eisenstein and Eugene Kohn (New York: Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation, 1952), 5-7.

shocking when Kaplan spoke on how many of the sacrificial laws in the Hebrew scriptures had pagan origins.⁷³

Eisenstein's faith was broken, and for part of his adolescence he rested his entire Jewish identity upon his devotion to Zionism and the belief that Jews could be a nation like any other. Yet Eisenstein found this spiritually unsatisfying, and he was fascinated by religion; though he was still in high school, he found himself considering the idea of becoming a rabbi. Consumed with religious doubt but feeling shame about his questioning, he could not talk to his own rabbi or anyone else. Instead he called a church he had once visited in Manhattan, desperately hoping for some guidance, and found himself on the phone with a Unitarian minister. The minister agreed to meet the teenager in person. Years later Eisenstein would not remember the man's name, but he credited him in his autobiography as one of the influences that led him to enter rabbinical school. The minister that Eisenstein spoke to was likely Charles Francis Potter, then the minister of West Side Unitarian Church. In a time with pervasive anti-Semitism, Eisenstein was pleasantly surprised to find a clergyman with no qualms about recommending the rabbinate as a worthy calling. As Eisenstein recalled the conversation, the minister listened seriously to his teenage religious angst, and then offered calm advice. "He said that I had a long way to go and that I might resolve some of my religious doubts; that I ought to study philosophy in college; that there was room in the pulpit for men with a vision of a better world whose voices could influence the course of society; that there were many people who need ministers and rabbis and would appreciate having one who had gone through some of the spiritual agonies I was experiencing."⁷⁴

⁷³Ira Eisenstein, *Reconstructing Judaism: An Autobiography* (Wyncote, PA: The Reconstructionist Press, 1986), 22-24.

⁷⁴ Ira Eisenstein, *Reconstructing Judaism: An Autobiography* (Wyncote, PA: The Reconstructionist Press, 1986), 26-27. My belief that the Unitarian minister was Charles Francis Potter is based on several details in Eisenstein's account. Eisenstein mentioned that the church he visited was located at 110th Street, which would have been Westside Unitarian Church, where Potter was minister from 1920 until 1925.

Eisenstein would seek more counsel with his friend Milton Steinberg, then a philosophically-minded undergraduate in the process of considering attending Jewish Theological Seminary.

Steinberg explained that he had undergone the same crisis of faith but that he was also considering becoming a rabbi. Both men would eventually attend JTS, and years later would be colleagues in the rabbinate.

What do you mean by God? Attempts to Redefine the Object of Religion

By the 1920s in theological circles, the key defense against the acids of modernity was to redefine what the term “God” meant, making it possible to be a theist without believing in a personal or supernatural deity. The most prestigious institutions of American academic theology were not engaged in a project of apologetics, aimed at proving God’s existence. Instead, they began to focus on creating a new notion of a God that could plausibly anchor their belief. As Harvard Philosophy professor Alfred North Whitehead, the father of Process theology and thought, famously observed, “To-day there is but one religious dogma in debate: What do you mean by ‘God’?”⁷⁵

New notions of God positioned the deity as either immanent, understanding “God” to be a description of an all-encompassing pantheism, or as very distant and remote, having essentially no intercourse with humanity or the universe. “God” could be a word that meant the universe had a purpose, but “God” did not imply a being that spoke, walked, or resurrected the dead, or even a being that could be described as having the attributes of personhood. These new ideas of God served a vital function; it meant that liberal religious clergy and laity could avoid being agnostics

Eisenstein does not precisely date the story, but mentions Steinberg was in his third year of college and was strongly considering applying to JTS, as Steinberg applied in September 1923 these events probably occurred slightly before that time. See: Simon Noveck, *Milton Steinberg: Portrait of a Rabbi* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, Inc., 1978), 23.

⁷⁵ Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1926), 67.

or atheists by simply labeling themselves as theists and remain within their religious communities.

Redefinition meant that a mainline Protestant minister skeptical about the supernatural aspects of the Bible could recite the Apostles' Creed to a congregation in better conscience, confident that at least they were using metaphorical language to describe something that was ultimately beyond human comprehension. A number of liberal religious thinkers used almost identical terms to compare the changes that religion was undergoing due to the developments in science and biblical criticism to those that it had undergone centuries before after the discoveries of Copernicus and Galileo.⁷⁶ Just as religion had been forced to adapt to the idea that the earth was not the center of the universe, it would now have to adapt to a way of imagining faith that discarded older notions of judgment or of a loving God.

Because liberal religion was prone to redefining God, however, it could be a blurry spectrum of beliefs between God-optional religion and more conventional and temperate kinds of religious modernism. Harry Emerson Fosdick, the Baptist minister at Riverside Church in Manhattan, provides a useful example. Fosdick became one of the most popular and visible ministers in the country, and although he was an outspoken supporter of modernism, pinning him down theologically could be quite hard. Fosdick is usually portrayed as fairly moderate among religious liberals. In theologian Kenneth Cauthen's typology of liberal theology, he lists Fosdick as an "evangelical liberal," as opposed to the less clearly theistic group of "modernistic liberals," yet it is worth keeping in mind just how far Fosdick's idea of God was from that of the laity or ministers of an earlier generation. Fosdick disliked debating the nature of God. When he did, he simply declared that God was incomprehensible, and that God was "symbolized" in

⁷⁶Henry Nelson Wieman, *The Wrestle of Religion with Truth* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1928), 41-42; Edwin A. Burt. *Types of Religious Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1939), 368.

personal terms. This almost apophatic insistence on God as indescribable might make Fosdick possess belief in a distant God, but he paired it with a vigorous insistence that he believed in a personal deity. He blasted humanists for not accepting his own Christ-like God and for crediting naturalism too readily.⁷⁷ Fosdick had no qualms about admitting that he was an innovator. He had been a fierce critic of militarism, unrestrained capitalism, and above all, fundamentalism. In his farewell sermon to First Presbyterian Church in New York, he made his resolve clear, declaring, “They call me a heretic. I am proud of it. I wouldn’t live in a generation like this and be anything but a heretic.”⁷⁸

Some religious thinkers were far more explicit about their rejection of older notions of the divine. For Whitehead, it was still useful to employ the term “God,” but he regarded Christianity as in need of reformation and explained his own definition in terms of a complicated metaphysics. To greatly simplify his work, starting in the 1920s, he described God as eternal but also changeable and in constant flux. Commentators, even friendly ones, were quick to point out that Whitehead’s own definition of God bore very little resemblance to the deity to whom the term had heretofore been applied.⁷⁹ As it developed, Whiteheadian process theology did not depend on the truth of historical Christian revelation, and offered its followers, who were mostly graduates of elite seminaries or in academia, a way of being religious, and particularly of being Christian, when they could not accept the teachings of conventional theism.

⁷⁷ Kenneth Cauthen, *The Impact of American Religious Liberalism* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), 69-73; Matthew Bowman, *The Urban Pulpit: New York City and the Fate of Liberal Evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1-9.

⁷⁸ “Fosdick Bids Congregation Farewell.” *The Christian Century* XLII, no. 10 (March 12, 1925): 356, 361.

⁷⁹ Albert C. Dieffenbach, “On Redefining God.” *The Christian Register* 107, no. 89 (May 10, 1928): 388–89. This article shows Dieffenbach, Ernest Caldecott and Julian Huxley to all have this understanding of Whitehead’s work.

Liberal theists who tried to redefine God found themselves attacked from both sides. Both more traditional theists and humanist or atheist liberals wondered if such a deity, which was distinctly not a conscious entity, could really fill the place in worshipers' lives of a personal God. One Unitarian humanist minister, writing to praise Henry Nelson Wieman for dispensing with the God of "Jesus and of the church," felt that Wieman's new notion of God hardly seemed worthy of worship. He asked, "Who would pray to such a God? The old worshipers at the family altar? Not likely! The man in trouble? Still less likely. He would go to his doctor or lawyer or banker. . . . Such a God might be personal for the mystic or the poet, but hardly for anyone else."⁸⁰

Writing shortly after the turn of the century when he was at Harvard, the philosopher George Santayana, a former student of William James, emphasized the poetic value of religious expression while questioning its literal truth. He admitted educated people would need a new "God," different from the one that they had before. As he put it, "The God to whom depth in philosophy brings back men's minds is far from being the same whom a little philosophy estranges them. It would pitiful indeed if mature reflection bred no better conceptions than those which have drifted down the muddy streams of time, where tradition and passion have jumbled everything together."⁸¹

Religious conservatives were keenly aware that their foes' understanding of God differed considerably from their own. Westminster Seminary Professor J. Gresham Machen, a tenacious defender of Calvinist theology and the founder of the Presbyterian Orthodox Church, maintained that religious liberals held to an "atheistic or agnostic Christianity," which really was "no Christianity at all." Being Christian required belief in a personal God, which, he argued, was

⁸⁰ Edwin T. Buehrer, "Wieman's 'God the Process,'" *The Christian Register* 108, no. 31 (August 1, 1929): 642.

⁸¹ George Santayana, *The Life of Reason or the Phases of Human Progress: Reason in Religion* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905), 4.

something his adversaries simply did not possess.⁸² Machen pointed out that many liberal Christians had stopped thinking of God as a person, separated by a great gulf from themselves. Instead they used the word “God” to describe a “mighty world process.” God was instead present in the world, in nature, science and even in the hearts and feelings of human beings. Machen coldly denounced this as heretical, a form of pantheism.⁸³ He did not waste words, even arguing against those religious liberals who renounced the use of the word “God” altogether and gave up on theism; they were too few and too extreme for him to bother reproving.

Shailer Mathews, the Dean of the University of Chicago Divinity School and author of *The Faith of Modernism*, was candid that ideas about God were in flux in contemporary society. “Our theological inheritance is not false, but for many persons outgrown,” Mathews wrote. “Must they be forbidden faith in God except at the cost of their intelligence?” He argued that it was permissible to appropriate older religious language, writing, “we may still use the language of our fathers, but we read into their patterns a meaning which transcends the figures which custom bids us use.”⁸⁴ Ultimately, he declared, “God” could survive as a word that described the purposeful nature of the universe; science confirmed God’s existence and the utility of the term because the universe was amenable to being interpreted by human reason. Mathews became less inclined to theism over time, and by the 1930s he was clear that any personal language to describe God was purely symbolic. He saw this as easily compatible with his Christianity because of his respect for the example of the historical figure of Jesus. Mathews argued that what made someone Christian or “non-Christian” was not adherence to specific ideas or beliefs,

⁸² J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity & Liberalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1923), 50.

⁸³ Machen, *Christianity & Liberalism*, 54-55.

⁸⁴ Shailer Matthews, *The Faith of Modernism* (New York: AMS Press, 1924), 108, 109.

but being a part of a tradition that was ever evolving. As a Christian he felt that he and the present generation had a right and a duty to reshape religion as needed.⁸⁵

Those men, like Mathews, who were in charge of the seminaries of mainline and liberal denominations, were acutely aware that modernity was corrosive to faith, and they constructed their professional training for clergy and religious professionals in part to deal with this problem. Places like the divinity schools at Harvard, Yale, and the University of Chicago, or independent seminaries like Hartford, Jewish Theological Seminary, and Union, usually did not resort to apologetics to prove the existence of a traditional God. Instead they taught young seminarians ways to reinterpret God and their faith to be able to enter the ministry without either compromising their intelligence or feeling themselves engaged in deceiving their congregants. It was expected that students either had shed their traditional religious faith by the time they arrived or would do so within their first year and leave with a new notion of religion. When he was a student at Jewish Theological Seminary, Milton Steinberg, later a Conservative Rabbi closely associated with the Reconstructionist movement, observed that almost every man in the seminary seemed riven by doubts and a crisis of faith. The few who were not he derided as “rabbinic oxen,” men of unthinking piety and a lack of intellectual heft. While most of Steinberg’s peers, coming from more traditionally devout homes than his, were shocked at the findings of historical criticism that undermined their faith in the miraculous events described in scripture, Steinberg found himself grappling with even more fundamental questions about the existence of God.⁸⁶ Seminary and the ministry were not citadels of the pious; rather, for both

⁸⁵ Cauthen, *The Impact of American Religious Liberalism*, 147-168; Mathews, *The Faith of Modernism*, 108-118.

⁸⁶ Arthur A. Cohen, introduction to *Anatomy of Faith*, by Milton Steinberg, ed. Arthur A. Cohen (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1960), 33; Milton Steinberg quoted in Jonathan Steinberg, “Milton Steinberg, American Rabbi: Thoughts on His Centenary.” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 95, no. 3 (2005): 584.

students and faculty they were a refuge for doubters, skeptics, and cynics who desperately wanted to believe.

In at least a few notable cases, religious doubt was actually what caused men to enter seminary. Future Unitarian theist minister James Luther Adams grew up as the son of a small-town premillennialist Baptist minister in rural Washington state. In college at the University of Minnesota, Adams initially alternated between attending the Baptist church of fundamentalist crusader William Bell Riley and the Unitarian church of humanist John Dietrich, probably the most sharply contrasting pair of religious views that could then be found in the United States. The experience caused him to doubt his faith and eventually led to him becoming the campus religious skeptic. His public speaking professor noted that Adams, a frequent and vocal critic of religion and of his childhood evangelical upbringing in particular, talked incessantly about religion and seemed destined to attend seminary and become a preacher. Adams took the idea to heart after graduation and went to Harvard Divinity School, reluctantly admitting to himself that “though I thought I was against religion, it *was* my major passion.”⁸⁷ Despite his youthful skepticism, Adams was not a particularly unusual student at Harvard Divinity, and he eventually gravitated towards what might be seen as the theologically moderate end of the denomination. He would affirm that he was a theist all his life.

None of this should be taken to mean that seminaries were bastions of non-belief, but there was a vast disjuncture between the “God” of the seminary, and of seminary- or university-trained religious professionals, and what people in the pews meant by the term. While studying for an M.A. in comparative religion at the University of Chicago in 1929, the future Unitarian minister and humanist leader Edwin Henry Wilson recalled enraging one of his professors, Edward

⁸⁷ James Luther Adams, *Not Without Dust and Heat* (Exploration Press: Chicago, IL, 1995), 61.

Scribner Ames, by mocking Ames's concept of God (which understood God as essentially the fulfillment of human aspirations). Wilson snarkily remarked in class that "If I have a god, I want a *real* god!" Ames waved his fist at Wilson and roared back at his student, "My God is a *real* God!"⁸⁸

There were even more radical proposals circulated with ideas on how to remake theology and religion. Harry Ward, a professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York, began to suggest by the mid-1920s that institutional religion had run its course, and that the main goal of Christianity should be to serve as a kind of handmaiden for a Communist revolution in the United States. While Ward claimed that he chose to live as if there was a God, his conception of God was largely synonymous with Marxist historical process. For a number of years Ward was very popular with the seminarians at Union, and he competed with the slightly less politically radical Reinhold Niebuhr for the loyalty of the students.⁸⁹ In a perhaps even more extreme proposal, British biologist Julian Huxley, brother of the writer Aldous and grandson of Darwin's champion Thomas, in his 1928 *Religion without Revelation* extolled the idea of dispensing with the concept of God altogether. Religion would persist as a sense of the sacred or holiness, but the idea of a supernatural being was outdated. Huxley agreed that it was possible to redefine God in such a way that it might be intellectually permissible to use the term, but worried that in practice would lead to religious professionals trying to mislead their congregants about what they actually believed. Theologians, Huxley wrote, might "half accept the impersonal God for themselves, but

⁸⁸ Edwin H. Wilson, *The Genesis of a Humanist Manifesto* (Amherst, NY: Humanist Press, 1995), 89.

⁸⁹ David Nelson Duke, *In the Trenches with Jesus and Marx: Harry F. Ward and the Struggle for Social Justice* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama, 2003), 131-136.

then pander to their intellectually weaker brethren by using it in the personal sense to the public.”⁹⁰

God-optional on the Margins

It would be a mistake to think that mainline Protestantism and Judaism embraced liberal religion wholesale and then went on to become God-optional faiths. Quakers, Unitarians, and Reconstructionist Jews were unique in publicly allowing members to hold a broad latitude of religious views, while other religious groups were ultimately not so permissive. It might be acceptable for a theologian in a seminary to teach these complicated views of God (or “God”) to graduate students, but it was another for a minister to preach them to a congregation, and it would be even more extreme for a denomination to suggest that they were tolerated or encouraged.

Once they left seminary, Protestant and Jewish clergy could find themselves increasingly isolated from the kinds of intellectual communities that had cultivated and nurtured their radical theological views. The need for employment could turn them into pious frauds because professional demands required them to extoll a more traditional notion of God and scripture than they actually believed in order to make their congregations happy. Historian Elesha J. Coffman, in writing about *The Christian Century*, notes how the periodical served as lifeline for theologically liberal Protestant clergy who found themselves missing the academic rigor of their graduate education, the sense of solidarity that they got from being among others in Christian intelligentsia. As she explains, “For thousands of ministers who eagerly awaited each weekly issue, the *Century* functioned ... as a candle in the window, recalling the comforts of their

⁹⁰ Julian Huxley, *Religion Without Revelation* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1928); Albert C. Dieffenbach, “On Redefining God,” *The Christian Register* 107, no. 89 (May 10, 1928): 388. Thomas Huxley also made a notable contribution to liberal religion by introducing the term agnosticism.

intellectual and spiritual home at seminary.”⁹¹ The desire to keep a job, be accepted and avoid conflict often caused ministers to be reluctant to share their most extreme theological convictions. While Unitarians, Quakers and Reconstructionist Jews were probably more likely to have God-optional theology in the first place, the more important distinction from mainline Protestant denominations was that their congregations were far more likely to support these kinds of theological views, and there was very rarely any professional sanction for holding these views.⁹²

The decline of the Protestant mainline, particularly after its demographic peak, made the far left of liberal theology less common in those circles. In seminaries and the liberal pulpits were radical theologies that reconceptualized God, and as these took root, intellectual opposition appeared. The rise of neo-orthodoxy in the 1930s was a significant challenge to liberal religion. Religious liberals were aware that in continental Europe, Emil Brunner and Karl Barth were developing Crisis theology, which was different from their own views or those of evangelicals, but these new developments were little understood in the United States. Works by Barth did begin to appear in translation and Brunner lectured in the United States, but in the interwar period, Americans were simply not exposed sufficiently to these ideas for them to seem like viable intellectual paths even for graduates trained at elite seminaries (They would become far more known after the Second World War.) Instead, the most significant thinker opposed to religious liberalism was Reinhold Niebuhr, who by the mid-1930s had begun to drift away from the Socialist vision of Harry Ward. Very little of what Niebuhr said provided a direct challenge

⁹¹ Elesha J. Coffman, *The Christian Century and the Rise of the Protestant Mainline* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 10.

⁹² In the case of Unitarians and Reconstructionists their theological leftward skew was one of their main appeals, the Quaker meetings that most fostered these views did not have paid ministers, so there were no livelihoods at stake with anyone’s theological stances.

to liberal ideas about God. In fact, in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, his seminal 1932 book, Niebuhr's language was less religiously infused than that of the liberals he was condemning. He spent a significant portion of the book suggesting that Jesus' ideas were unrealizable in contemporary society because he had assumed a pacifist ethic that was incompatible with the demands of modern politics. Yet Niebuhr's criticism was taken as a general rebuke of liberal theology, and it was an effective one. The U.S. entrance into the Second World War and the drive toward militarization at the onset of the Cold War worked to undermine the viewpoint of theologically liberal clergy and seminary faculty in the mainline, a group that had been heavily pacifist and anti-interventionist prior to those conflicts. It simultaneously strengthened the position of neo-orthodox Christian realists who were willing for the state to use force.

At the same time, the rise of evangelicalism challenged the assumptions of liberal mainliners, and put them even more on the defense. Mainline involvement in liberal political causes that included opposing the Vietnam War and supporting Civil Rights alienated the political left clergy from a more moderate and even politically conservative laity. Another factor that greatly contributed to the decline of God-optional theology within the Protestant mainline is that many of the people who were inclined in that direction simply disaffiliated with organized religion entirely. Writing about the unraveling of the Protestant establishment in the post-World War II era, scholar Matthew Hedstrom makes the persuasive argument that the values of the liberal edge of the mainline, such as tolerance and inclusion for other religious views and a preference for personal spirituality over institutional forms, became accepted parts of the broader secular culture, and many former mainliners saw little reason to be religious anymore. As Hedstrom recounts, "liberal elites were the victims of their own success, as their drive for a universal spiritual language and true pluralism... made their grasp on power, centralized and

hierarchical as it was, increasingly untenable.”⁹³ The result was a decline of the liberal end of the mainline.

This did not mean that God-optional views died out. Some in the mainline still held them. One can chart a constant stream of figures in mainline denominations who were liberal, but radical theological ideas like the conviction that God should not be conceived in traditional terms thrived most vigorously in the denominational groups that had constituencies farthest to the left. In Quakerism, Unitarianism, and among the group that would become Reconstructionist, these views thrived. It was in these communities that these radical ideas would receive their first kind of official institutional sanction. Explicitly naturalistic ideas of God became commonplace among the leaders of these groups, and they all eventually developed publicly visible identity groups of non-theists. It thus might be useful to think about the most liberal denominations as the intellectual center of these ideas, and the mainline as serving as a kind of periphery.

What is clear is that even if it was only a small number of people, in relatively numerically small denominations, the groups that became God-optional were at the vanguard of a larger intellectual movement that stretched beyond their bounds. These extremely theologically liberal denominations may have nurtured and most strongly held these radical new views of God, but ministers from the Protestant establishment and mainstream Judaism were paying attention, and often sympathetic. The path of Quakers, Unitarians and Reconstructionist Jews did not emerge purely out of their own histories, and their impact was not confined to them either.

⁹³ Matthew S. Hedstrom, *The Rise of Liberal Religion: Book Culture and American Spirituality in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 10. This section also draws heavily on Hollinger, David A. *After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Protestant Liberalism in Modern American History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), x-xii, 3-14.

Chapter Two: Scientists and Mystics

Philosopher Jesse H. Holmes never published a book; his most famous publication was a single letter. Addressed only “To the Scientifically Minded,” it was reproduced in publications ranging from *The Atlantic*, *The Christian Century*, and *Unity* to the student newspaper of Harvard University, *The Harvard Crimson*. Over 20,000 copies were printed and mailed as part of a campaign conducted by Friends General Conference, the main denominational body of liberal Quakerism, to recruit converts to Quakerism.¹ For at least a few of the people it reached, its message resonated deeply. Larry Gara, who would become a historian, recalled that reading the letter was his first exposure to the Religious Society of Friends. As a self-described “religious seeker” Gara felt drawn by the message, and shortly after encountering it, at age 18, he became a Quaker. This was not a commitment he took lightly. Only a few years later Gara would spend three years in federal prison for trying to follow Quaker teachings on pacifism by refusing to register for the draft during the Second World War.²

What had Holmes written that had moved Gara so much? “To the Scientifically Minded” presented Quakerism as an option for religious skeptics who desperately wanted to believe. It emphasized that the ideas of the virgin birth, biblical inerrancy and miracles were not suited to a scientific age, and Quakerism was a thoroughly modern religion which did not contain these

¹ Albert J. Wahl, *Jesse Herman Holmes, 1864-1942: A Quaker's Affirmation for Man* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1979), 295-296.

² Larry Gara, review of *Review of Jesse Herman Holmes, 1864-1942: A Quaker's Affirmation for Man*, by Albert J. Wahl, *Quaker History* 69, no. 2 (1980): 125–26; “College Apologizes to Professor Labeled a Communist and Fired in 1962,” Associated Press, *The Guardian*, October 28, 2015, sec. US news, <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/oct/28/college-apologizes-professor-labeled-communist-fired-1962>. Gara was notably fired from his position as a history professor at Grove City College in 1962. He was accused of being sympathetic to Communism, but his antiwar stance (which was linked to his Quakerism) also seems to have played a major role in the college's actions. In 2015 Grove City College formally apologized for firing Gara.

outworn concepts. It went on to make clear that the “God” of Quakerism was not the same as that present in traditional theism.

The letter admitted that definitions of God varied widely, and the word “God” was one of “diverse and uncertain meanings,” but it eventually settled on advocating for one specific notion. For Quakers, Holmes argued, God “means a unifying influence which makes men long for a brotherly world; which tends to bind men together in unity.” God was a way to describe a sense of fellowship between people, and a commitment to progressively improve society, rather than a transcendent entity who intervened in the world and had an agenda. The letter pleaded agnosticism on the question of whether God was “a person as we are persons.”³ This left room in Quakerism for both the mystical liberals who described God in personal terms and the naturalistic liberals, who believed the word was just an elaborate linguistic descriptor of an existing natural order.

According to Holmes, Quakerism was creedless, so it made no demands for intellectual acceptance of outworn doctrines. It was instead a “society of friends whose members owe each other friendliness, and claim no authority over one another.” What bound Quakers together, according to the letter, was not following rules but sharing convictions. Most Friends, Holmes declared, accepted the Sermon on the Mount as “the highest ideals for a way of life.” The desire to help others, to foster goodwill, to assist the downtrodden, were enough of a bond that fellowship could be sustained without the need for clergy, a strict hierarchy or any agreement on theology.

³ Jesse H. Holmes, Roscoe Pound, J. Russell Smith, Thomas A. Jenkins, and Albert T. Mills, “To the Scientifically minded,” FGC Advancement Committee, 1928, Rufus M. Jones Papers, Box 27, Quaker Collection, Haverford College.

Appended to Holmes's letter was a list of signers made up of eminent academics who were either Quakers or had Quaker backgrounds, such as Roscoe Pound, the dean of Harvard Law School.⁴ Holmes was not a maverick; he was writing with powerful official backing.

Quakerism in Flux

For most of their history in the United States, Quakers had been an endogamous sect, easily distinguished from their neighbors by their use of plain speech “thee” and “thou,” and the distinctive outfits now remembered mostly from the Quaker Oats logo. They had imposed strict discipline among their membership, disowning almost half of the denomination for offenses ranging from dishonest business practices to marrying non-Quakers. In 1844, religious scholar Robert Baird classified Friends theologically as being among the “evangelical churches of America,” alongside most Protestants that subscribed to trinitarian Christian orthodoxy.⁵ Despite the modern reputation of Quakers as socially and theologically progressive, their nineteenth-century ancestors were more akin to Hutterites than hippies.

By the start of the twentieth century, Quakers had abandoned many of their long-standing practices and their community was trying to adapt to modern American culture. They stopped using plain speech or wearing Quaker garb. Endogamy ceased to be required, so they freely intermarried with non-Quakers. They discarded the practice of having messages spoken during worship delivered in a singsong-like chant, which formerly had been used by Quakers to distinguish the divinely inspired ministry from an individual's own words. A modern Quakerism was being born, but what shape it would take was heavily contested.

⁴ Other signers on “To the Scientifically Minded” were Joseph Russell Smith, professor of economic geography at Columbia University, Thomas Atkinson Jenkins, professor of the History of the French Language at the University of Chicago, and Albert Taylor Mills, professor of history and politics at James Milikin University.

⁵ Robert Baird, *Religion in America* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1844), xii.

To outsiders, Quakers had a bewildering array of divisions for a religious group with barely 100,000 people. In the early nineteenth century, Quakerism had divided into two separate and mutually hostile factions, the Hicksites and the Orthodox, and then a few decades later it split again when the Orthodox divided between Gurneyites and Wilburites. Writing in 1929 with the benefit of an outsider's detachment, Albert Dieffenbach, the editor of the Unitarian denominational paper, *The Christian Register*, cut straight to what was now the core issue of these distinctions by observing that it was clear that "among the Quakers there are two doctrinal schools... and these two are definitely evangelical and Unitarian."⁶ In 1900 the Hicksites created the Friends General Conference (FGC), which evolved to become its own Quaker denomination, one embraced by the most theologically liberal Quakers. The bulk of FGC's membership lay on the East Coast, though it also tended to attract members in major cities and college towns. These were "unprogrammed" Friends, who held silent meetings for worship, having ministry only when members felt moved to speak. The Gurneyites created the Five Years Meeting (FYM), which came to resemble a mainline Protestant denomination. It evolved to have paid pastors, and, like much of the mainline, it was under pressure from the left and the right, torn between theological liberals (albeit of a milder sort than those in FGC) and evangelicals. Headquartered in Richmond, Indiana, the home of Earlham College, the FYM was dominated by Midwesterners. In 1947, only five years after the creation of the National Association of Evangelicals, the most theologically conservative elements of FYM would schism and create the Evangelical Friends Alliance (EFA), located primarily in the western United States, their practices resembling those of other white evangelicals.⁷ The difference between these branches

⁶ Albert C. Dieffenbach, "Quakers and Ourselves," *The Christian Register* 108, no. 30 (July 25, 1929): 629.

⁷ Elbert Russell, "The Genius of the Quakers," *The Christian Century* XL, no. 43 (October 25, 1923): 1363–66.

of the Religious Society of Friends was stark theologically and liturgically, comparable to the divisions separating the Roman Catholic Church and the Episcopal Church.

This chapter examines how a liberal faction of the Religious Society of Friends altered their religious beliefs, particularly their beliefs about God, in order to survive the acids of modernity in the early twentieth century and to present Quakerism as a modern, scientifically plausible faith. When I employ the term “liberal Quaker,” or use the term “Quaker” without other qualifiers, I am specifically referring to Friends affiliated with FGC, Friends not affiliated with any formal Quaker organization who sympathized with FGC (a common occurrence for small Quaker meetings, especially in towns with major universities), and a small group of leading Friends in FYM who hoped to move that organization in a theologically liberal direction. To discuss Quakerism as a God-optional religion, comparable to Unitarianism and Reconstructionist Judaism, is to talk only about this subset of liberal Quakerism, numbering perhaps around 15,000 people. The majority of the Religious Society of Friends, both in the United States and worldwide, increasingly became evangelical. This chapter focuses on three liberal Quaker leaders who presented different visions for the denomination: Jesse H. Holmes, Jane P. Rushmore and Rufus M. Jones.

Jesse H. Holmes was a polarizing figure and represented the leftward theological perspective within liberal Quakerism. He embraced a naturalistic liberalism, one that viewed traditional theism as erroneous and outdated, and he sought to redefine “God” so that religious language and institutions might persist. Though he shared many positions in common with the Unitarian humanists, Holmes differed slightly with them in believing the term “God” was still useful. As an institutional leader within FGC, Holmes was in an advantageous position to advance this vision of Quakerism.

Jane Rushmore often worked behind the scenes as a denominational administrator for Philadelphia Yearly Meeting (Hicksite) and FGC. Though Rushmore subscribed to a liberal unitarian understanding of God that was typical of unprogrammed Quakers of the period, she placed particular emphasis on the idea that Quakers were creedless and had no litmus test of belief for membership. Rushmore helped to make theology a personal matter, the concern of individuals rather than the entire religious community; what someone might believe about God was ancillary to whether or not they were a Quaker. Within a generation this meant that Quakers might be Christians, Jews, Buddhists, theists or non-theists. Though Rushmore herself was a liberal theist, she was pivotal in lending support to the idea that Quakerism could accommodate people with more radical theological views.

Rufus Jones conceived of Quakerism as a mystical religion. Heavily drawing on the work of religion scholar William James and philosopher Josiah Royce, Jones conceived of a type of mystical liberalism centered on the idea that through religious experiences, individuals could have an unmediated experience of the divine. Jones's conceptions of mysticism and of God were vague enough to permit him to be perceived in various ways; he was a widely-accepted leader within Quakerism because his ideas could be used by all but the most theologically conservative Quakers. Jones tried to be all things to all people. He was officially a member of the Five Years Meeting, the theologically moderate branch of Quakerism, whom he hoped to keep in dialogue with the religious liberals in FGC. Jones's ideas were selectively taken up by the liberals and God-optional parts of Quakerism, and he ultimately found that he could not keep increasingly evangelical Quakers within the broad tent he hoped to construct.

One of the arguments of this chapter is that Quakerism was particularly well-suited to the project of theological liberalization undertaken by these three religious reformers because it

differed from other religious groups in that the sense of identification and commitment that members had to being a “Quaker” was so strong. For generations Quakers had termed themselves a “peculiar people,” describing themselves as outsiders both to Protestantism and to the nation, and they had developed such a firm community that they could survive even radical changes to their beliefs. Each of these reformers was aware of the importance of Quaker identity, and took care to justify their innovations by citing Quaker history and traditions, presenting their perspective as the logical telos of Quakerism.

The presence of such a diversity of perspectives on theism within Quakerism made theology become increasingly personal, and policing theological orthodoxy became far less relevant to future generations. Holmes may have been the only one of these leaders that did not believe in some kind of personal God, but all three figures championed the idea that Quakerism should permit a broad range of theologies. Although there were still arguments about the place of theism within liberal Quakerism, compared to other divisions within the Quaker movement, these disputes were never heated enough to fuel schisms by themselves. Among liberal Quakerism there was little heresy-hunting of non-traditional views of God.

The Radical Edge of Liberal Quakerism

Holmes, the author of “To the Scientifically Minded,” had what was perhaps the most common career for a liberal Quaker leader in the first half of the twentieth century: an academic at a Quaker college. Because unprogrammed Quakers rejected the concept of paid pastoral ministry, the people who had graduate training in religion and philosophy, and the time necessary to devote to writing and public speaking, tended to be academics rather than clergy. Born in the Midwest in 1864, Holmes completed a PhD at Johns Hopkins in 1890 and started his career teaching high schoolers at Sidwell Friends School in Washington, D.C. In his early career in

Quaker secondary schools Holmes taught the natural sciences, particularly physics and chemistry, in addition to religion and philosophy.⁸ Holmes's work in the natural sciences left him with a much more positive view towards scientific discovery and developments than many of his contemporaries. Rufus Jones tended to think of scientific discoveries as obstacles that religion had to overcome, but for Holmes they were as vital as any spiritual discovery. Philosophically, as Quaker historian Douglas Gwyn notes, Holmes veered between an embrace of empiricism and the pragmatism of William James, but he was always a thoroughgoing rationalist with little place for the mystical.⁹ After a decade of teaching science and religion, in 1900 Holmes took up a position as professor of philosophy at Swarthmore College, which was affiliated with the Hicksite branch (and later the FGC) branch of Quakerism, and he would be there the rest of his career.¹⁰

The Hicksite Quakerism of Holmes' early years ranked among the most theologically liberal denominational groups in the United States. The paradigmatic Hicksite leader of the mid-nineteenth century had been abolitionist and women's rights advocate Lucretia Mott. Mott associated with Free Religionists and her own theology drew inspiration from beyond Quakerism, particularly incorporating the thinking of controversial Unitarian ministers Theodore Parker and Joseph Blanco White, a former Spanish Catholic priest turned Anglican minister and eventual Unitarian critic of institutional religion. Mott proudly called herself a heretic, priding herself on pushing boundaries, and counseled Quakers to see the correctness of theological belief as secondary to service to others, reminding them of the teaching of William Penn that "men are

⁸William W. Price, "Jesse H. Holmes," in *Quaker Torch Bearers* (Philadelphia, PA: Friends General Conference, 1943), 7–20.

⁹ Douglas Gwyn, *A Gathering of Spirits: The Friends General Conferences 1896-1950* (Philadelphia, PA: Friends General Conference, 2018), 86-87.

¹⁰ "Dr. Jesse Holmes, Quaker Liberal, 78." *The New York Times*, May 29, 1942.

to be judged by their likeness to Christ, rather than by their notions of Christ.”¹¹ While Mott did have traditionalist critics, Hicksites and their FGC successors generally had a greater tolerance for non-traditional views of religion than did other Quakers. This meant that Holmes was a radical among religious radicals.

Holmes’ style was known to be peculiar; sporting a bushy van-dyke beard and wearing a distinctive German cape, he cut a curious figure whenever he walked across Swarthmore’s campus. Nor did the eccentricity of Holmes’s personal mannerisms stop with his appearance. He would sometimes fly into a sudden rage, shouting but only using family-friendly expletives such as "turf and thunder." In middle age, Holmes bought a coffin at what he considered a bargain price and had it shipped to his house, apparently with the idea that he would save money on his end-of-life burial expenses. When the coffin failed to fit through the front door of his house, Holmes had it stored in the basement of Swarthmore’s Quaker Meetinghouse until it was eventually thrown away, unused, several decades later. (Holmes was ultimately cremated when he died.)¹² Despite these quirks, or perhaps because of them, Holmes was greatly valued and often beloved in Hicksite circles. Holmes’s family, friends and even a number of students knew him by his affectionate nickname, “Ducky,” and he often signed letters to his intimates with a cartoon duck.¹³ To some Philadelphia Quakers, a group that had been heavily Republican since before the Civil War, the most eccentric thing about Holmes was his politics. He graduated from

¹¹Carol Faulkner, *Lucretia Mott’s Heresy: Abolition and Women’s Rights in Nineteenth-Century America*, Philadelphia, (PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 2, 201-203, 121-123; Dan McKanan, *Identifying the Image of God: Radical Christians and Nonviolent Power in the Antebellum United States*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 51-53; Lucretia Mott quoted in McKanan, *Identifying the Image of God*, 53.

¹² Wahl, 64, 154.

¹³ The name may have caught on because of the "duck" trousers he wore when he assisted in coaching lacrosse, though some of his students claimed it had some origins in his quirky habits. It is also possible it was simply a pet name from his wife that ended up seeing wider use. See: Price, 11.

the Progressive party to become an outspoken socialist, even running for governor of Pennsylvania on the Socialist party ticket in 1934.¹⁴ Holmes was a staunch supporter of civil rights and a participant in the AFSC-sponsored Institute of Race Relations hosted at Swarthmore College.¹⁵ Historian of Quakerism Edward Bronner perhaps best summed up Holmes' relationship with the rest of Quakerism when he commented that he "had an enormous following among his admirers, [but] there must have been Quakers who shook their heads in a perplexed manner as they observed his career."¹⁶

That career was one filled with religious leadership and service. Holmes had been active in the Chautauqua movement, assemblies that offered educational and cultural programs for families, and from that experience he was instrumental in helping to organize the recurring Quaker assemblies that became the Friends General Conferences, and the namesake for the denominational organization they created, FGC. As Douglas Gwyn documents in his history of the early years of FGC's conferences, Holmes held several key leadership positions in the organization from its founding in 1896 and was a regular speaker at these gatherings. Over the

¹⁴ Price, 18; "Socialists Name Prof. Holmes," *The New York Times*, February 20, 1934, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=9A07E7DB1F3DE23ABC4851DFB466838F629EDE>.

¹⁵ Allan W. Austin, *Quaker Brotherhood: Interracial Activism and the American Friends Service Committee, 1917-1950* (University of Illinois Press, 2012), 97.

¹⁶ Edwin B. Bronner, review of *Jesse Herman Holmes, 1864-1942: A Quaker's Affirmation for Man*, by Albert J. Wahl, *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 47, no. 3 (1980): 267-68. Holmes's religious ties were not exclusively with his fellow Quakers, but included other theological liberals. In 1921 Holmes became one of the twelve founding members of the Unity Fellowship, a group dedicated to "democracy" and "humanistic religion" led by radical minister and outspoken pacifist John Haynes Holmes, a former Unitarian (who eventually returned to the Unitarian ministry at the end of his life). The vast majority of the other members were radical Unitarian ministers such as Edmund H. Reeman, the author of the provocatively titled *Do We Need a New Idea of God?* (the answer given was that yes, we do), although it also included Universalist professor Clarence R. Skinner and Ethical Culture society leader Anna Garlin Spencer. The fellowship also doubled as the editorial board of John Haynes Holmes' paper *Unity*. Holmes was also president of the National Federation of Religious Liberals, and undertook a variety of efforts to bring together different theologically liberal groups. See: John Haynes Holmes, "A New and Greater Unity," *Unity* LXXXVIII, no. 8 (November 3, 1921): 115-18.

course of more than four decades, at each conference, he regularly spoke before an audience of thousands of his fellow Friends urging them to live out their religion by embracing social service, caring for the poor and working towards racial justice. Holmes advised Quakers to ally with non-Christians in these causes. Above all, Holmes urged the need for a rational and scientific religion.¹⁷

Holmes also used the denominational magazine, *The Friends Intelligencer*, as a platform to convey his views to the rest of the FGC Quaker world. Though not as famous as Jones, who was one of only a few Quaker leaders known among both FYM and FGC Quakers and to the wider Christian community, Holmes was still able to exert considerable influence within his denomination. In 1924 Holmes wrote a series of articles on Christian theology that contemporary Quaker author Chuck Fager has persuasively argued laid the groundwork for how FGC Quakers would come to think about theology.¹⁸ In those articles Holmes blasted evangelical theology, particularly the idea of an inerrant Bible, and he rejected much of the traditional beliefs of Christianity as an accretion, to be discarded to preserve true religion. The beliefs that Holmes found to be authentic to early Christianity, and hence worthy of maintaining, were that there was a “benevolent deity” whose “character is revealed in the life of Jesus.”¹⁹ With a few strokes Holmes had reduced Christianity to a sense of the social gospel commitment to the Brotherhood of Man and a distant unitarian God.

¹⁷ Gwyn, *A Gathering of Spirits: The Friends General Conferences*, 86-87, 94, 108, 115-116, 118, 134. It did cause confusion that both what eventually became yearly assemblies and the denominational organization that sprang from these were called “Friends General Conference” so in 1978 the assemblies were renamed “The Gathering”, here if I refer to the “Friends General Conferences” as a plural I mean the assemblies.

¹⁸ Chuck Fager, “Liberal Friends (Re)Discover Fox,” *Quaker History* 93, no. 1 (2004): 40–52.

¹⁹ Holmes quoted in Fager, “Liberal Friends (Re)Discover Fox,” 40–52.

But Holmes' religious convictions were naturalistic, and he did not stop there. Instead, he believed that these core religious values could be redefined even further for modern Quakers. A few years later Holmes was maintaining that Christianity and Quakerism meant only following the teachings of Christ. The ethical teaching of the Sermon of the Mount and the creation of the Kingdom of God was all that was required, and he did not mention God being revealed in Jesus. Traditional Christianity, he argued, was a flawed creation, designed to excuse so-called Christians' love of greed and imperialism. As Holmes explained, "What Christendom has substituted for the teachings of Jesus is merely another mythology to add to the multitude of mythologies that the world has produced."²⁰

Holmes' most dramatic statement of belief was "To the Scientifically Minded" for FGC's Central Committee, as part of advancement efforts that were essentially Quaker attempts at evangelization. The original draft of Holmes's letter, which was never sent out by the Central Committee, was full of fire and rage, an invective against the problems of traditional organized religion and theism. He did not mince words with his denunciations, declaring "the Church is essentially a medieval institution which has carried over into the scientific age, and is therefore an anachronism and unfitted to its time."²¹ Holmes made clear that traditional organized faiths no longer had much to offer the well-educated and intellectually curious.

In the early drafts, Holmes's letter stated explicitly that Quakers rejected traditional theism and anthropomorphic notions of God. He saw the Quaker doctrine of the inner light as addressing an innate quality of human beings, rather than being a facet of divinity present in each person that came from a transcendent, personal being. God was either immanent in each

²⁰ Jesse H. Holmes, "Is Christianity Christian?" *Friends' Intelligencer* 85, no. 2 (January 14, 1928): 25–27.

²¹ Jesse H. Holmes, "Draft of Letter to The Scientifically Minded," 1927. FGC RG 4/025, Box 3, Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College, 1.

individual or purely a description of human qualities. As Holmes put it in the draft: “To us God is not a historical character like Caesar or Alexander, concerning whom we must read about in books, sacred or otherwise. God is rather the name of certain common experiences of mankind, by which they are bound together into unity. We find that element present in the lives of men in all ages and among all races, and we find it everywhere among our fellows today. The longing for truth and for right is based upon it. Men in all ages have given their lives rather than disobey this inner voice,- this inner light”.²²

Holmes realized that this definition of God was unconventional and he defended its validity; pointedly he raised the issue of “why should we call this GOD? Names are not of vital importance... this human experience is whatever age has called that name.” Holmes argued that notions of a personal deity were unnecessary additions to belief in God, a creation of corrupt “priesthoods and institutions” that had “intruded” upon the undefiled relationship between man and his “nobler self”, which was the same thing as God.²³ The Central Committee of Friends General Conference was highly receptive of Holmes’ message about how religion and belief in God needed to be adapted to modern life, although they also realized that his bold tone might cause controversy. They opted to form a committee to edit and soften the letter, hoping that their edits would make it seem less of an attack on the idea of a personal God. They admitted that the extreme liberalism of Holmes’s views meant that the letter could not be released by Friends General Conference as a formal statement of the beliefs of the entire Religious Society of Friends, but they nevertheless decided to give the letter “whatever publicity could be secured for it.”²⁴

²² Holmes, “Draft of Letter to The Scientifically Minded,” 3.

²³Holmes, “Draft of Letter to The Scientifically Minded,” 3.

²⁴ Josephine H. Tilton, “Minutes of the Second Session of the Central Committee of Friends General Conference,” September 17, 1927, FGC RG 4/025, Box 3, Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore

A slightly later draft version of the letter that was circulated, and eventually obtained and publicized by the Harvard University's student paper, which contained a section in which Holmes expressed a desire to create a successor to the Bible, a theological text for the modern era. Holmes suggested that the writings of Abraham Lincoln and Ralph Waldo Emerson, along with the poetry of James Russell Lowell and John Greenleaf Whittier, could perhaps be included in this new canon. Holmes was hardly the only religious liberal who fantasized about creating a new Bible; some of Rufus Jones' friends had discussed the same issue with him and even suggested including Jones' writing in such a religious text, but Jones cared far more about how his reputation was received by evangelicals and the Protestant mainline, and was therefore much more wary of making such discussions public.²⁵ Later drafts of the letter removed this section, lest it elicit too much controversy.

A year after the publication of the letter Holmes was a speaker at a major conference, led by Henry Cadbury and supported by the FGC, convened to discuss how Quakers might better conduct outreach in the modern era. Cadbury's own theological views were complex, though like his brother-in-law Jones he was part of FYM. The way he later described himself to his students at Harvard Divinity School sounded closer to Holmes; he was, he claimed, "no ardent theist or atheist" and his faith depended more on service than belief in a supernatural God.²⁶ One of the key questions Cadbury hoped the conference would grapple with was whether Quakerism was

College. It's unclear from the minutes what suggestions the Central Committee made regarding Holmes' letter, though it can be surmised based on the final version of the document that their central worry was how critical Holmes sounded about traditional theism and religious groups.

²⁵ "Dean Pound Aids in Modern Bible Move," *The Harvard Crimson*, January 27, 1930, <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/1930/1/27/dean-pound-aids-in-modern-bible/>; Rupert H Stanley, "Letter to Rufus M. Jones from New York City," January 25, 1930, Rufus M. Jones Papers, Box 29, Quaker Collection, Haverford College.

²⁶ Henry J. Cadbury, "My Personal Religion," Universalist Friends (Website), 1936, <http://universalistfriends.org/UF035.html>.

most likely to prosper by emphasizing continuity with the Protestant mainline or by highlighting its distinctive sectarian character. Holmes persuasively argued that what was truly important was the Quaker message that spoke to people not in churches, people who saw science as leading them to skepticism and who wanted a religion that they could believe in wholeheartedly. In the years to come FGC would work with FYM and the American Friends Service Committee at various efforts at denominational expansion. Initially, as the Great Depression deepened, these efforts included overtures to labor groups and social action organizations, but by the mid-1930s they expanded to target religious seekers.²⁷

It would be an exaggeration to suggest that Holmes achieved exactly what he wanted. Quakers never devoted as much attention to reaching religious skeptics as Holmes might have liked, but outreach was made to these groups. While outright atheism was uncommon and controversial, it was made clear to newcomers that having non-traditional theology and notions about God was no barrier to participating in most liberal Quaker meetings.

Holmes had made naturalistic theology a valid option for Quakers, but it took more than him alone to ensure that it could not be labeled as heretical. It took Jane Rushmore, a leader in FGC who exerted considerable power behind the scenes, to slowly erase the notion that there were any boundaries in Quakerism, as she contended that any kind of theology was simply a matter of personal choice, incidental to religious belonging. In such a world, heresy could not exist.

The Denominational Bureaucrat

Like many influential women in American religious history Rushmore is regrettably little remembered by modern adherents to her faith, but toward the end of her life one prominent

²⁷ Roger Hansen, “‘The Blessed Community’: The Mutual Influences of Friends General Conference and the New Meetings Movement, 1915-1945,” *Quaker History* 97, no. 2 (2008): 41–50.

Quaker reflected that “not since Margaret Fell has any one woman Friend wielded greater influence in guiding the destinies of Friends than Jane P. Rushmore.”²⁸ The comparison to Margaret Fell, the seventeenth-century Friend often called the “mother of Quakerism” was not made lightly. Fell was perhaps the best-known leader of early Quakerism other than her husband, the founder of the movement, George Fox. Rushmore’s quiet and often little-publicized efforts as a denominational administrator, religious leader and writer allowed FGC-aligned Quakers, and liberal Quakerism more generally, to accept almost any version of liberal theology, be it evangelical liberalism, mystical liberalism or naturalistic liberalism. Because she focused on emphasizing Quakerism’s creedless nature she opened up many acceptable religious paths for Friends.

In her own theology Rushmore was a lifelong religious liberal. She conceived of a God as immanent in the world; her beliefs veered between unitarianism and pantheism, which she paired with a skepticism of anything she saw as supernaturalism. Born into a Hicksite Quaker family in 1864, the same year as her co-religionist Holmes, Rushmore questioned traditional piety from her early childhood onward. According to one family story, at the age of twelve she interrogated a minister in her Quaker Meeting about the resurrection, demanding to know how bodies could possibly rise and walk after death. After being told that such mysteries were beyond human understanding, she observed that the answers that she received were unsatisfying.²⁹

Rushmore started adult life from relatively modest beginnings. Financial constraints on her family meant that she completed only two years of college at Swarthmore. Despite not

²⁸ C. Marshall Taylor, review of *Under Quaker Appointment: The Life of Jane P. Rushmore*, by Emily Cooper Johnson, *Bulletin of Friends Historical Association* 43, no. 1 (1954): 46–47. Rushmore died in 1958 at age 94.

²⁹ Emily Cooper Johnson, *Under Quaker Appointment: The Life of Jane P. Rushmore* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania, 1953), 10.

finishing a degree, the institution would leave a lasting impression. Rushmore was exposed to many of the most liberal theological ideas in Hicksite Quakerism, and she later claimed to have been particularly influenced by a visit by the aged Lucretia Mott to the college. Rushmore's education allowed her to start a career as a teacher, and she eventually became a principal at several Quaker schools. Because of her experience in education, Rushmore was one of the key leaders in Hicksite attempts to standardize and professionalize the religious education in First Day schools, the Quaker equivalent of Sunday schools. Her administrative talents earned her praise, and she was eventually put in charge of the Friends Central Office, the centerpiece of the rapidly professionalizing bureaucracy of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. During her time as a teacher, Rushmore met Emma Barnes Wallace, initially hired as her assistant, who would be her lifelong companion. While it is impossible to know how the two defined the relationship, whether it was romantic, sexual or simply a very intimate homosocial friendship, the two women lived together for over four decades and their close companionship was noted by other Quakers.³⁰ The relationship did not appear to impact Rushmore's career, but it may have been one of the reasons she acted mostly behind the scenes through denominational organizations, rather than becoming an independent writer and speaker like Jones or Holmes.

Rushmore became the first person to preside as the clerk over the newly gender-integrated Philadelphia Yearly Meeting (Hicksite) when in 1924 it ended the longstanding practice of having separate men's and women's Meetings for Business. The fact that she was chosen as clerk over male candidates for the position indicates just how influential she was; the clerk of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting held arguably the most important and influential position

³⁰ Johnson, *Under Quaker Appointment*, 10, 24-48, 195-196; Marshall, 46-47. Rushmore was also employed by FGC's Religious Committee to work on creating First Day School materials. See: Gwyn, *Gathering of Spirits*, 172.

within Hicksite Quakerism. Because Quakers spurned paid clergy, the clerk served as the public face of Yearly Meeting and also as a spiritual exemplar.³¹

Rushmore used her position to promote the idea that Quakerism was a modern religion, open to a variety of views. In a pamphlet addressed to young adult Quakers in the mid-1920s Rushmore gave her own take on George Fox, explaining that the Religious Society of Friends was founded because no contemporary faith spoke to Fox's needs. The implication seemed to be that young people, like Fox, had to be willing to assume the lead in making religious changes. Rushmore never mentioned Jesus or God; instead she explained that Quakers had to "defend the rights of minorities and help those who cannot help themselves." The only theological idea she mentioned was that "Christianity and Quakerism believe in the supreme worth of every personality."³² In this view, Quaker religion was insistent on equality but it had almost no theological doctrine. Rushmore was not as bellicose as Holmes, and she avoided assaulting existing views of religion, but it was still a powerful statement coming from such a highly placed leader in FGC.

In 1936 Rushmore wrote a small volume, *Testimonies and Practices of the Society of Friends*, ostensibly with the goal of introducing the beliefs of Quakers to teachers and students in First Day school classes. The structure of the text bore a strong resemblance to a catechism, or a systematic theology. Rushmore, like many other theologically innovative women in American

³¹ Johnson, 107, 152. Rushmore also served on the Representative Committee of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting (Hicksite), which in terms of Quaker polity was probably as influential as her position as clerk of the Yearly Meeting. The Representative Committee could act on behalf of the Yearly Meeting most of the year, as long as that body was not in session, and it required only the participation of a few representatives to do so. This meant that many of the day-to-day business, charitable and financial concerns of the Yearly Meeting were really up to the Representative Committee. See: Johnson, *Under Quaker Appointment*, 159-161.

³² Jane P. Rushmore. "Dear Young Friends Pamphlet." Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of Friends, 1925? No exact date is on this document, but it must have been after Rushmore joined the Representative Committee of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Hicksite, because it lists her as connected with that committee.

religious history, probably understood that her lack of formal academic training and gender meant that she was more likely to be well received if her theological writing was seen as targeted at children, traditionally the domain of women. Nevertheless, the book was widely read by adults, and deserves to be considered one of the major Quaker theological texts of the twentieth century.

In her book, despite the fact that she was a leader in FGC, Rushmore acknowledged Rufus Jones' interpretation of Quakerism, starting the book with a quotation from his work and echoing his scholarship in observing that Quakerism was a mystical tradition. Like Holmes, however, the kind of Quakerism that Rushmore presented emphasized rationality, science and service more than Jones' writing did.³³ For Rushmore, one of the greatest virtues of Quakerism was that it had no formal creed, but instead permitted a diversity of viewpoints on theological issues. She started her explication of Quakerism with this point and made clear that individual experience and reason should never be stifled by dogmatism. "Unity of spirit, not unity of opinion, is the tie which holds us," she wrote. Rushmore explained, "We do not object to our members holding to varying theological views; we do object to the effort of any one group of thinkers to impose their opinions on another group whose reasoning and experience has led them to different conclusions." Quakers could make use of both their own insights and all "modern relevant historical scholarship," while other Protestants were yoked to the outmoded creeds of past centuries.³⁴

³³ Gwyn seems to imply that Rushmore's rationalism precluded an emphasis on the mystical. I do not think that rationalistic tendencies among FGC Quakers necessarily precluded them embracing Jones-style mysticism.

See: Gwyn, *A Gathering of Spirits: The Friends General Conferences*, 173-174.

³⁴ Jane P. Rushmore, *Testimonies and Practices of the Society of Friends* (Philadelphia, PA: Friends General Conference, 1945), 6-8, 11.

But while FGC Friends were welcome to consider many religious options, most of those Rushmore described seemed to veer sharply away from traditional Christianity. The book depicted the majority of FGC Quakers as rejecting the trinity, and a number as holding to an ultra-unitarian understanding of a distant God. Jesus's divinity was also in question, and a large group in FGC believed that Jesus of Nazareth was no more divine than any other human being, while others saw him as a human being in "metaphysical union with the eternal word." Divisions over issues of belief, Rushmore stated, were not heated or discussed often. Jesus's divinity, she claimed, was "so little considered, that our own young people frequently are still obligated to inquire, when the question comes home to them, what our belief on the subject is."³⁵ The overall effect of Rushmore's book was to convey that precise theology really did not matter much; being a Quaker was about service and nurturing a love of others.

Over a decade and a half later, in 1951, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting published a few of her essays that had appeared in Quaker periodicals as *The Quaker Way*. Only 46 pages long, the text was intended to be brief statements of the essentials of Quaker belief. Rushmore stressed the inner light present in each individual as the center of Quakerism, and argued that "with this central truth established, creeds and forms, prayers and sacrifices become meaningless." The only valid guide in religion was this kinship with God that all people felt. God for Rushmore was a "Great Infinite Spirit" rather than a personified deity, seemingly lacking many of the attributes of a personal being.³⁶ Rushmore's view permitted Quakers to hold almost any belief about God, as long as they felt the term "God" was applicable to describe their religious experience. She also made clear that while she personally valued the Bible and Jesus, Quakers as an

³⁵ Rushmore, *Testimonies and Practices of the Society of Friends*, 43-45, 27-28.

³⁶ Jane P. Rushmore, *The Quaker Way* (Philadelphia, PA: The Representative Committee of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1951), 5-9, 29.

organizational body had no fixed view on these things. Paraphrasing a quote from Quaker leader William Penn that had often been used by Lucretia Mott to dismiss all theology, Rushmore wrote that “[It is] not the acceptance of tenets that we cannot understand, but living as Jesus taught men to live will make Christians of us.”³⁷ Ethics, not belief, were key in religion.

Finally, Rushmore emphasized that Quaker beliefs were evolving, and that they could not “forever sail the same old channels.” For Rushmore there was absolute truth in the universe, but human beings’ ability to ascertain that truth was finite, though always constantly improving. This meant that any religious suggestion she offered was provisional, as the inner light could always bring new theological insights. Quakers should not fear that modern scientific discoveries and new cultural ideas would reform Quakerism. Without a doubt they would, she explained, commenting that “Our concern is not that they shall not change it, but they shall change it for the better.”³⁸ Quaker beliefs were permeable; the only tests that could be applied were whether theological beliefs benefited an individual and were acceptable to the Quaker community. When reviewing Rushmore’s book, William Winstar Comfort, President of Haverford College, noted how Rushmore opened the way for all kinds of theological views to flourish within Quakerism. As he summarized Rushmore’s views, “Some believe more than others, and there is room in our creedless society for a great variety of faiths based on experience.” Comfort noted that Rushmore’s writing defended the idea that liberal Quakers were, and should be, more unified in their practice than in their beliefs.³⁹

Because of Rushmore’s institutional influence within Philadelphia Quakerism, her religious ideas often became the acknowledged position of the denomination. This meant not

³⁷ Rushmore, *The Quaker Way*, 37.

³⁸ Rushmore, *The Quaker Way*, 41-41.

³⁹ William Winstar Comfort, review of *The Quaker Way*, by Jane P. Rushmore, *Bulletin of Friends Historical Association* 41, no. 1 (1952): 69–70.

just that her liberal theological views became more acceptable but also that her emphasis on personal latitude in beliefs became the official stance. In the early 1950s Rushmore was at the helm of efforts to create a new book of discipline before the separated Orthodox and Hicksite Philadelphia Yearly Meetings merged into one body. Because a book of discipline regulated the behavior and beliefs of all Quakers in a Yearly Meeting, what that document conveyed about the essence of Quaker faith would be as binding as any statement of belief within the Religious Society of Friends. Rushmore proposed a simple formulation for the new discipline, that Quakers were united in the belief that “God is immanent in the universe, and a portion of His spirit is the heritage of every human being.” This was essentially an endorsement of pantheism.

While Rushmore said that Quakers followed the “leadership of Jesus,” this was an endorsement of him as a source of ethics, rather than a veneration of him as God. Yet the far more important aspect of this statement of belief was that it was nonbinding; individual Quakers had ultimate authority over their own theology. As the statement put it: “As a Society we have always eschewed formal creedal statements of belief. We desire each individual member to be free to adhere to whatever form of belief he finds most helpful, but we do not lay upon any member to adhere to a fixed formula of belief if it does not meet his individual needs.”⁴⁰ The final draft of the document was accepted in 1955 and became the first *Faith and Practice* of the reunified Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. Rushmore reshaped the lives of Friends with her works. Many Friends never knew her name, and working through the structures of FGC and Philadelphia Yearly Meeting she avoided the attention Holmes welcomed. Despite her influence

⁴⁰ Jane P. Rushmore, “Our Basis of Faith.” *Friends Intelligencer* 110, no. 11 (March 14, 1953), 134; Gwyn, *A Gathering of Spirits*, 131.

on the denomination, she never achieved the same level of acclaim as other leaders such as Rufus Jones.

The Modern Mystic

Rufus Jones was over 75 years old when he met the novelist Theodore Dreiser in 1938. Dreiser had approached him for assistance in providing relief to civilians affected by the Spanish Civil War, as Jones was well known as a founding member of the American Friends Service Committee, the Quaker relief organization that worked to feed war-torn Europe in the aftermath of the First World War. Almost a full decade Dreiser's senior, Jones was still intellectually acute and a frequent international traveler, and his personal magnetism made a considerable impression. It is almost impossible to find any descriptions of Jones from around this period that fully escape a hagiographic glow. One student who attended a lecture by the famous Haverford professor a few years before had observed that "I had pictured the 'outstanding Christian mystic' as a thin, ascetic sort of man, but the fact remains I was struck by Dr. Jones' appearance." The observer recalled that Jones was a "well-built man, with a kindly but dignified face, his entire being radiated with good cheer." He spoke with a New England twang, a remnant of his early upbringing in Maine, that listeners found comforting.⁴¹ Dreiser was equally a casualty of Jones's charm and found himself a bit overwhelmed by the apparent saintliness of the Quaker professor, gushing in a letter that he was inclined to praise him far above "average so-called Christians" by using "language that your temperament would not countenance."⁴² For Dreiser, Jones was a kind of Quaker saint, a figure that proved to his contemporaries that religion was still viable.

⁴¹ Marjorie Joy Paul to Rufus Jones, February 28, 1933. Rufus M. Jones Papers, Haverford College, Box 34.

⁴² Theodore Dreiser to Rufus Jones April 23, 1943, Rufus M. Jones Papers, Haverford College, Box 43.

Dreiser even used Jones in his creative work. His final novel, *The Bulwark*, published posthumously in 1946, told a fictional life story of pious Quaker Solomon Barnes from his childhood in rural Maine to his death as a wealthy old man on his family estate outside Philadelphia. Many of the passages about the idyllic Maine childhood of Dreiser's protagonist had been closely adapted, if not outright plagiarized, from the first of Rufus Jones's three memoirs, *The Trail of Life*.⁴³ Dreiser's novel portrays the collision of religious values with modern American life. Dreiser depicts Solomon as morally upright and at times saintly, but despite his virtues, both Solomon and his loving wife are out of place in an industrializing and rapidly changing America. Each of Solomon's four children left the upright path of their parents' faith and abandon Quakerism, some to lives of vice and debauchery.

When Dreiser first began drafting the novel, decades earlier in the 1910s, the children's falls from grace were the crux of the story. Solomon might be an upright man with a quaint, naive faith in God, but his children strayed from his example. In early drafts of the novel Solomon would inevitably be defeated and crushed by the modern world.⁴⁴ Yet twenty years later when Dreiser returned to his project and finished the novel, he offered a far more optimistic conclusion. In the final version, as Solomon is near death one of his daughters returns home, and at Solomon's behest begins to read the Quaker classic *The Journal of John Woolman* aloud. Reciting the spiritual words of this eighteenth-century abolitionist to her aged father leads Solomon's daughter to a profound mystical experience, finding the Inner Light that Quakers

⁴³Gerhard Friedrich. "A Major Influence on Theodore Dreiser's *The Bulwark*." *American Literature* 29, no. 2 (1957): 180–93. In one instance, Dreiser simply changed Jones's descriptions of his family's daily Bible reading into a third person narrative and inserted character names; in another, Dreiser added a few sentences and character names to a story about Rufus Jones injuring his foot while chopping wood, which led to an infection and subsequent near-death encounter with the divine. As Gerhard notes these parallel passages are contained almost entirely in Part I of *The Bulwark*.

⁴⁴ Donald Pizer, *The Novels of Theodore Dreiser: A Critical Study* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1976), 300-304.

prize.⁴⁵ The book ends with Solomon's life praised by his fellow Quakers, his faith in God the "Bulwark" of the title. Two of Solomon's daughters find themselves transformed by his example. They do not become the plain-dress, plain-language Quakers of the past, nor do they see God in the same way as their parents, but they develop a modern faith. Dreiser had begun his novel hoping to prove that no religion, even one as gentle and kind as Quakerism, could survive the acids of modernity, but Jones convinced him otherwise. Writing to Jones, he explained, "I feel that the Quaker Faith is the only true exposition, and so far as it is carried out, realization of Christianity in the modern world."⁴⁶ The overt religiosity of the book was not what critics had come to expect from the outspoken Dreiser, who had long left behind the Catholicism of his childhood and whose most visible moment of conversion in his old age had been to formally join the Communist Party. Jones had convinced Dreiser, as he would convince many others, that mystical religion, of which Quakerism was the quintessential embodiment, had the potential to save both God and religion from irrelevance, and to provide a vehicle for modern people to find religious meaning.

As a young undergraduate at Haverford College, the center of Orthodox Quaker higher education, Jones first began to write about the connections he saw between continental mystics and Quakerism. When he graduated Jones spent a few years teaching in a Quaker secondary school, and, after a brief sojourn in Europe, Jones returned to Haverford to earn a master's degree, writing a thesis on mysticism which would greatly shape his later career. In 1893, he

⁴⁵ Theodore Dreiser, *The Bulwark* (New York: Book Find Club, 1946), 331.

⁴⁶ Theodore Dreiser to Rufus Jones, January 27, 1939. Rufus M. Jones Papers, Haverford College, Box 39. For copies of these letters and a useful examination of the correspondence between Dreiser and Jones see: Gerhard Friedrich, "The Dreiser-Jones Correspondence," *Bulletin of Friends Historical Association* 46, no. 1 (1957): 23–34.

began to teach philosophy at his alma mater. Though Jones would study philosophy at Harvard for a year at the turn of the century, he never earned a PhD.⁴⁷

Curiously, during this early career, Jones's primary reputation was not as a scholar or a theological thinker, but as a major religious leader within Quakerism. Though Jones was theologically liberal he remained a member of the FYM throughout his life. In the 1890s he emerged as one of the key voices of modernism in the FYM as editor of *The Friends Review* (which after a merger became known as *The American Friend*). In the pages of his denominational paper Jones defended historical criticism of the Bible and evolution. He fought against the desire of evangelical Quakers to introduce the practice of water baptism (which Quakers had traditionally shunned) and was rebuked harshly by evangelical Quakers for his stance. Jones found himself the subject of a Minute of Disapproval from Pasadena Quarterly Meeting, which expressed anger that Jones was not in favor of penal substitutionary atonement. The measure had no force because it was not from Jones's own meeting, but it was a rhetorically powerful condemnation. He received a scathing letter from a professor in the Penn College Bible Department accusing him of giving "evil counsel" to his readers for recommending books on historical criticism, and was berated by a Quaker from Long Beach, who told Jones he had drifted far from "our childhood faith, and the tender conscientious teachings of our sainted mothers." Another critic did not invoke the "sainted mothers" but instead felt sure it was the "sweet, simple faith of our fathers" that Jones had abandoned.⁴⁸

⁴⁷Claus Bernet, *Rufus Jones (1863-1948): Life and Bibliography of an American Scholar, Writer and Social Activist*, (Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Peter Lang, 2009), 4-6. Jones was only given a full appointment as a Professor of Philosophy in 1904. His teaching in 1893 was part-time, and it was expected he would do that while also serving as editor of *The Friends Review*.

⁴⁸J.H. Cammack to Rufus Jones, October 22, 1904. Rufus M. Jones Papers, Haverford College, Box 8, Quaker Collection, Haverford College; William L. Pearson to Rufus Jones, January 21, 1903, Rufus M. Jones Papers, Box 7, Quaker Collection, Haverford College; J.H. Douglas to Rufus Jones from Long Beach, CA," n.d. Rufus M. Jones Papers, Box 7, Quaker Collection, Haverford College; Norm P.

Jones shared the concern of many intellectuals in his generation that the acids of modernity were in the process of destroying religious faith. He wrote that humanity had outgrown a traditional faith in a God as “an object in the world of space and time.” Past generations had believed in a visible God, an omnipotent person that could speak with Abraham “at his tent door.” Scientific advances made this kind of God untenable. The astronomer did not find evidence of a divine being in the skies and geologists found no traces of one in the ground, while the study of physics would not have been improved by invoking God. There were traditional apologetic arguments that sought to prove the existence of this God, but Jones thought them flimsy. From the cosmological argument, to the argument from design, to the ontological argument, all were easily dismissed.⁴⁹

In a series of lectures given at Oberlin College, and later repeated at Yale, Jones compared the process of scientific advance to barbarians looting a sacred temple, declaring that “Every precinct of man’s inner domain has been invaded and every sanctuary of the soul has had some of its sacred vessels rifled and carried away.” He argued that the discovery of Copernican theory had left no place for God in space, that Darwinism had ruled out God’s intervention into creation, and higher criticism had emphasized the human in the production of scripture rather than the divine. The “most ruthless of all the invading hosts” Jones declared, was psychology, a science which striped spiritual agency from humanity and analyzed people as the product of biological and unconscious processes.⁵⁰ Yet Jones also knew there was no point in stubbornly resisting the advance of science and modernity. Becoming a fool for fundamentalism, behaving

Pinkhaer to Rufus Jones, March 14, 1903, Rufus M. Jones Papers, Box 7, Quaker Collection, Haverford College.

⁴⁹ Rufus M. Jones, *Social Law in the Spiritual World* (Philadelphia, PA: The John C. Winston Co., 1904), 34-37.

⁵⁰ Rufus M. Jones, *Fundamental Ends of Life* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1924), 88-89. This was part of the Taylor lectures presented at Yale.

like William Jennings Bryan at the Scopes Trial, and trying to deny evolution, was something that Jones understood brought ridicule and derision. Even more important, it was dishonest. Jones thought that scientific findings were no less true simply because they were problematic for faith. It would be up to religious thinkers to find ways to deal with these new advances and find a place for God.

Jones was quite explicit about the need to commemorate the great and now defunct traditions of the past, and also to embrace contemporary religious developments. His 1924 book *The Church's Debt to Heretics* argued this point directly, observing that Christianity had only survived and flourished by introducing radical new ideas and choosing the best ones, a sort of survival of the fittest of Christian theology. The book itself was largely a historical overview of various Christian heresies (like Marcionism, Arianism and Socinianism) intended for middlebrow audiences, but it made a larger point. As Jones explained, "heretics have mainly served the Church, by awakening it from dullness and lethargy, and by stimulating it-- 'stinging' it like a gadfly, as Socrates would say-- to new life and power."⁵¹ Jones's views in this respect were in sync with many liberal Protestants, who had sought for over a century to retain the pure unchanging truths of Christianity while discarding what they saw as the mythological accretions that theology and folk belief had built up around it. Before the Civil War, Unitarian minister Theodore Parker phrased it as a need to distinguish between the "Transient" and the "Permanent" aspects of Christianity. In nineteenth-century Germany Adolf von Harnack used the metaphor of a disposable "husk and a religiously pure "kernel."⁵² Jones mentored the young Quaker scholar Douglas Steere, who as a Rhodes Scholar wrote him from Oxford University, asking for advice

⁵¹ Rufus M. Jones. *The Church's Debt to Heretics* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1924), 26.

⁵² Theodore Parker, "The Transient and Permanent in Christianity." In *Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism: Channing, Emerson, Parker*, ed. Conrad E. Wright, (Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 1986), 113–149.

on this “hard nucleus problem.” Steere wanted to know how to distinguish the “deepest unchanging elements” of Christianity and Quakerism from what was dispensable.⁵³

Working with liberal Friends in the United States and Britain, Jones would begin to reinvent Quakerism, declaring that the core of the religion, the part that made up Steere’s “hard nucleus,” was mystical experience. At the center of this reimagined Quakerism was the idea that the divine was revealed through personal religious experiences rather than by scripture or nature. By centering on religious experience and direct encounter with the divine there was a de-emphasis on an anthropomorphic or interventionist God, and consequently Quakerism could not be falsified by scientific insight. Instead, Quakerism would emphasize a feeling of connectedness with a sort of immanent sacred reality. This concept was based as much on the ideas of two thinkers, Ralph Waldo Emerson and William James, as it was on the historical traditions of early Quakerism.

Jones would use those two thinkers to reconceptualize how Quakers thought of George Fox and the early Friends. Quakers saw their denomination’s founder, Fox, as divinely inspired, and regarded his *Journal* and other writings as having a value only slightly below that of the Biblical text itself. The first generation of Quaker leaders, particularly Margaret Fell, an early convert who provided shelter to the infant Quaker movement when it was legally persecuted and who eventually became Fox’s wife, and Robert Barclay, the movement’s first systematic theologian, were revered as exemplars for modern Quaker practitioners, holding a status as authorities perhaps comparable to the church fathers in Catholicism. Any project to reinvent Quakerism would have to reinvent Fox and the first Friends.

⁵³ Douglas Steere to Rufus Jones, February 15, 1928. Rufus M. Jones Papers, Box 27, Quaker Collection, Haverford College.

In his memoirs Jones admitted with a touch of guilt that he had originally not had much interest in the writings or thought of George Fox. He initially believed that the founder of Quakerism was too parochial to be of much value.⁵⁴ Quakers had seen Fox as tantamount to a prophet, and Fox's vision of a people gathered at Pendle Hill in 1652 had marked the birth of Quakerism. Quakers believed that Fox had restored Christianity to a purer state after centuries of corruption at the hands of institutionalized religion. Yet Fox became a difficult figure to respect in an era of science. For example, he had clearly believed in an interventionist God that punished his foes whenever they vexed him, often in particularly brutal ways; when Fox said that vengeance belonged to the Lord he meant it quite literally. Passages in Fox's writing claimed that he attained supernatural powers, that he had contended with witches and performed miraculous healings, resurrected the dead and had visions. Fox repeatedly claimed, too, that the world would end imminently.⁵⁵ Quakers had to contend with the assertions that their founder had been a miracle worker. In many respects, this strongly resembled the problem that religious liberals had when dealing with the historical criticism of the New Testament, which increasingly portrayed Jesus as a Jewish apocalyptic preacher whose ideas were alien to modern progressive political and religious agendas.

After reading Emerson, Jones developed a solution to the Fox problem. He began to identify Fox as the exemplar of Transcendentalist mysticism. Emerson had held up George Fox as one of several examples of his ideas about the soul and religion. In *The Oversoul*, Emerson listed Fox alongside Paul of Tarsus, Socrates, and Emanuel Swedenborg, among others, who, by virtue of experience or revelation, had communed with the divine mind, writing that their

⁵⁴ Rufus M. Jones, *The Trail of Life in College* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1929), 91.

⁵⁵ George Fox, *Journal of George Fox*, ed. John L. Nickalls (London: Religious Society of Friends, 1975), 172, 228, 312, 575, 578.

individual souls had connected with the universal soul.⁵⁶ In a passage in *New England Reformers*, Emerson presented Fox alongside Swedenborg and Jacob Boehme as men whose innate religiosity elevated them above the petty concerns of religious institutions.⁵⁷ It would be misleading to suggest that Emerson had a deep engagement with Fox's ideas or even that he knew very much about him, but Emerson's writings allowed Jones to consider how Fox could illuminate the larger human project of connecting with the divine.

While Emerson inspired Jones to see the value of Fox's life and writings, it was William James who provided the interpretive filter through which Jones would eventually portray Fox in his own writing. In his acclaimed 1902 book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, drawn from his Gifford lectures, James grappled with the same types of experiences that Jones had understood under the term "mysticism." James ranked Fox alongside St. Francis, Buddha and Jesus as a religious genius who had this kind of encounter, and used an excerpt from Fox's *Journal* as an example of positive religious innovation.⁵⁸ For James, religious experience was valid primarily because of the life-changing effects that it caused. What had generated the religious experience was secondary; as he put it, the central issue was the "fruits" of religion, and scholars should try to avoid being too critical of the "roots" or origins of such revelations. Jones adopted this point, using less prosaic phrasing; he argued that "mystic experiences have a life-value and validate themselves in action."⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Oversoul," in *Essays and English Traits* (Danbury, CT: Grolier Enterprises Corp., 1980), 140-141.

⁵⁷ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "New England Reformers," in *Essays and English Traits* (Danbury, CT: Grolier Enterprises Corp., 1980), 253. Emerson referred to Boehme as "Behmen," a common early English variation of the name.

⁵⁸ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. (New York: Random House, 1902), 328.

⁵⁹ Rufus M. Jones, *Quakerism: A Spiritual Movement* (Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of Friends, 1963), 69.

James remained skeptical of religious institutions and portrayed them as shallow imitations generated by the intense experiences of religious geniuses. But he saw Quakerism differently, gushing that “the Quaker religion which [George Fox] founded is something which it is impossible to overpraise.”⁶⁰ Other religious institutions became corrupted when the original religious experiences that led to their formation became diluted over time, but, Jones held, Quakers did not fall into this trap because of their focus on inward spiritual experience. He approvingly drew other examples of religious experience from the journals of John Woolman and Thomas Ellwood, showing that Quakers had continued in this tradition after the death of Fox. James saw Quakerism as a model for the future of religion, explaining that “so far as Christian sects today are evolving into liberality, they are simply reverting in essence to the position which Fox and the early Quakers so long ago assumed.”⁶¹

James’s focus on the value of religious experience itself (what Jones would have called a mystical experience) meant that the content of that experience—the specific theology that Fox advanced—was consequently less important. James’s work meant that much of the problematic Puritan-era theology and the miraculous actions of the early Quakers could be deemphasized. What mattered was that Fox, like many great religious leaders, had a religious/mystical experience of God, and his creation of the Quaker movement was important not because of what he believed but simply because as a movement it was designed to be a vehicle for personal religious experience. Prizing religious experience also meant that subsequent Quaker history

⁶⁰ James, William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. (New York: Random House, 1902), 8. The best examination of the connection between the work of Rufus Jones’ relations and William James are: Stephen A. Kent, “Psychological and Mystical Interpretations of Early Quakerism: William James and Rufus Jones.” *Religion* 17, no. 3 (July 1, 1987): 251–74; Stephen A. Kent, “Psychology and Quaker Mysticism: The Legacy of William James and Rufus Jones.” *Quaker History* 76, no. 1 (1987): 1–17.

⁶¹ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. (New York: Random House, 1902), 8.

could be seen as a series of individuals that had been privy to the same kinds of universal mystical connections to the divine. Texts like the *Journal of John Woolman*, the work that had so moved the characters in Dreiser's novel, could be read to understand the power of the authors' encounter with the divine, but readers were allowed, by this hermeneutic, to ignore all the elements that seemed a product of another era. A reader might see Woolman's religious experiences as making him a Quaker saint, whose powerful dreams of people in chains crying out led him to support abolitionism, and simultaneously ignore that Woolman spend a considerable portion of his journal expounding on the evils of maritime travel.

In his personal life Jones had a number of experiences that he eventually interpreted through this kind of Jamesian framework. Hiking in the alps in 1892 he experienced what he later described as a moment when he "felt the walls between the visible and the invisible grow thin and the Eternal seemed to break through into the world." Over decade later, while aboard an ocean liner en route to England to attend a conference he felt a similar kind of connection to the divine shortly before he learned that his young son had died of diphtheria back in the United States. In 1922 Jones was hit by a car, but upon being sent home from the hospital he felt himself spiritually restored and declared that he "no longer cared anything about arguments to prove the reality of God, any more than I did to prove the incomparable worth of human love which surrounded my life as I lay recovering."⁶² Jones' God did not have a personal relationship with him as a person might. God never spoke, nor did God provide any theological guidelines for

⁶² Rufus M. Jones, *Rufus Jones: Essential Writings*, ed. Kerry Walters (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 42-45; Elizabeth Gray Vining, *Friend for Life: The Biography of Rufus M. Jones* (Philadelphia, PA: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1958), 99.

Quakerism, just as it had not for James. For Jones, religious experience only confirmed that life had meaning and that theism and religion were valid paths.

Jones found himself partnering with a number of British Quakers who were devoted religious liberals. While Jones' connections among Hicksites and Gurneyites were important, he also derived considerable prestige from his connection with British Quakers, whom American Friends tended to admire. British Quakerism had been divided for decades between evangelical and liberal theological factions, but it had embraced liberal theology publicly in 1895 during the Manchester Conference. The conference led to the creation of summer schools that taught young adults the most recent scholarship on Quakerism and Christianity, and because British Quakers and American liberal Friends spurned seminaries and paid ministry, this kind of education offered a good substitute.⁶³ Jones was often invited to teach these courses, and he would find a particularly firm ally in a prominent young rising star in English Quakerism, John Wilhelm Rowntree, the wealthy son of a chocolate manufacturing family. Jones and Rowntree planned to author a series of history books about Quakerism that would cast the group as a mystical tradition, part of larger mystical movement within Christianity and world religion. In Jones' telling, George Fox's legacy lay in the religious tradition he began, one that prized mystical experience as a way to connect with the divine, essentially James' point expanded to be the entire focus of Quaker identity. Rowntree died in 1905 before the series could be completed, and another English Friend, Joseph Bevan Braithwaite, authored the other volumes.

⁶³ J. William Frost, "Modernist and Liberal Quakers, 1887-2010." In *The Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies*, ed. Ben Pink Dandelion and Stephen W. Angell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 79; Kennedy, Thomas C. *British Quakerism, 1860-1920: The Transformation of a Religious Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 171-177.

The Rowntree series is perhaps the clearest example of denominational history books serving as significant religious texts in their own right. The importance of these books to the direction of Quaker thought ranks with the works of the early Quaker theologian Robert Barclay. Jones' introductions for each entry in the six-volume series, which were later published separately under the title *Quakerism, A Spiritual Movement*, offered a theological treatise loosely disguised as a historical work and served as the mission statement for Jones' brand of liberal mystical Quakerism. Jones argued that modern people had abandoned religion because they had "grown weary of ancient traditions and accumulated systems." The only solution to this malaise of the twentieth century was the "sure path of experience," something that only the "mystical type of religion" could offer because it was "primarily grounded in experience."⁶⁴ Jamesian religious experience in other words was the only path forward in the modern age. Jones himself authored perhaps the most important book in the series, *Studies in Mystical Religion*, which began by discussing mysticism in early Christianity and only in the last 50 pages ended with a discussion of George Fox and the early Quakers. The book was a prequel of sorts, casting Quakers as the ultimate fulfillment of mysticism and the chief expression of religious experience in Christianity. Because it was billed as history, the Rowntree series gave Jones a firmer position from which to argue that he was not an innovator, but simply a restorationist bringing back the authentic Quakerism of the faith's founders.

The Rowntree series gave Jones the ability to act as a liturgical reformer and update the way that Quakers worshiped. In the nineteenth century, ministry during silent Quaker Meetings had heavily depended on a cadre of recognized ministers, who sat on raised benches in the front

⁶⁴ Rufus M. Jones, *Quakerism: A Spiritual Movement*, 56.

Though it had only six volumes the last volume in the Rowntree Series was published in two separate parts, making it comprised of seven books total.

of the Meetinghouse and rose to speak at length, often presenting their ministry in a characteristic sing-song tone. While this kind of ministry had declined by the start of the twentieth century, there was widespread debate about how to replace it. Should Quakers move to a paid pastorate or simply do away with separate group of ministers altogether as some of the most theologically liberal Friends wanted? Jones argued that Quaker worship was a type of group mysticism, and that this meant that Meetings should have several people speak for a brief time, building thematically off the last speaker. He also supported altering seating arrangements in the Meetinghouse, removing raised benches and arranging pews or seats in a square or circle, to not privilege any group of people as leaders of the meetings, which he said was part of Quakers commitment to "spiritual democracy."⁶⁵ Jones's positions on worship were not particularly novel, as the Hicksite ancestors of FGC Friends had adopted the same measures in the late nineteenth century, but theologically grounding these measures in mysticism was. It meant that rather than portraying himself as a liberal innovator he could argue for change as a defender of Quaker traditionalism.

Theologically orthodox readers of Jones's work (both the Rowntree Series and his multitude of other books) were quick to spot that Jones's conception of mysticism often meant leaving behind many of the trappings of traditional Christianity, and a few felt this was tantamount to abandoning faith completely. A classics professor at West Virginia Wesleyan University expressed a common sentiment when he wrote Jones that he worried that the famous Quaker was using mysticism to move away from focusing on Jesus. "Advocating mystic

⁶⁵Elizabeth Cazden "The Modernist Reinvention of Quakerism: The Independent Meetings in New England, 1920-1950." M.A. Thesis. Andover Newton Theological School, 1997, 68-70; Rufus M. Jones, *The Faith and Practices of the Quakers*. Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 2007), 46-48.

experience in general, citing great examples from the mystic life among poets, imaginative scientists and leaders or founders of non-Christian faiths will at once raise a false science and fall short of the one mystic life men need," he wrote. What was needed, he suggested, was to worship and have a relationship with Jesus, both God and the Son of God, who died and was resurrected.⁶⁶

These were not things Jones cared to focus on, but he was also cautious about appearing too radical in his theology. He always maintained that he believed in a personal God, not a distant one (though he rarely clarified exactly what he meant by this). In 1933 the Southern Baptists cancelled an invitation for Jones to participate in a lecture series at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (SBTS) due to his authorship of a chapter of the *Re-thinking Missions: A Laymen's Inquiry after One Hundred Years*, a controversial report that questioned the value of missionary work. The faculty of SBTS accused Jones of being a humanist. He reacted strongly, declaring that not only was he not a humanist but that he and "every member of the Commission [which produced the report] was not only not a humanist, but was positively an anti-humanist." With some pique, he declared the entire document had been "profoundly theistic throughout."⁶⁷ The SBTS faculty's reading of the document was plausible, but Jones could be fiercely argumentative and defensive when accused of abandoning tradition. In another case, when asked by a reader whether a passage in one of his books, *The Radiant Life*, which suggested that the universe had "man's soul for the center," indicated he was a pantheist, Jones insisted he was taken out of context. He responded, "The entire book is evidence that I do not hold for a minute

⁶⁶ Jacob Bos to Rufus Jones, December 22, 1930, Ms. 1130 Rufus M. Jones Papers, Box 29. Quaker Collection, Haverford College.

⁶⁷ Rufus M. Jones to Professor William O. Carver, March 11, 1933. Rufus M. Jones Papers, Box 56, Quaker Collection, Haverford College.

the naturalistic-humanistic view. It is a very loose statement and if it were taken out of its setting in the book it would give a wholly wrong impression.”⁶⁸

Jones’ more theologically liberal readers also often interpreted him to be endorsing a naturalistic, pantheistic kind of God while rejecting all the trappings of supernaturalism. One effusive fan from the small community of Perry Point, Maryland, wrote to Jones telling him that despite having done a prolific amount of reading in theology (which was not an idle boast, as he provided a list of his readings which included enough theology to put many seminary graduates to shame), he had found more truth in Jones “than any writer in the world.” From his readings, he concluded: “It appears to me what we call the natural is the supernatural. The Universe including man is the only Supreme power I know. If a man lives in harmony with nature he lives in harmony with God because nature is God.... Everything is God.”⁶⁹ Jones was rarely very critical of these kinds of interpretations of his theology if they were done in a complementary fashion by his fans, rather than couched in harsh language from his critics.

A few Quakers agreed with many of Jones’ critiques of traditional Christianity but were also critical of his theological liberalism. Lewis Benson, who would go on to spend a number of years as the librarian at Pendle Hill and as curator of the John Woolman house, thought that liberal Christianity was in the process of breaking down, that it had become “too accommodated... to worldly culture” and lost its distinctive focus on Jesus Christ. Drawing on the work of H. Richard Niebuhr, Benson eventually sought to create a kind of Quaker version of

⁶⁸ Rufus M. Jones to Violet Holdsworth, November 9, 1944, Rufus M. Jones Papers, Box 59, Quaker Collection, Haverford College.

⁶⁹ Mack Williams to Rufus Jones, October 20, 1930. Rufus M. Jones Papers, Box 29. Quaker Collection, Haverford College.

neo-orthodoxy, a path separate from either fundamentalism or liberalism.⁷⁰ To do this, he tried to draw extensively on his understanding of early Quakerism. Benson created the New Foundation Fellowship, which tried to walk a narrow path between these rival positions, though Benson's vision never persuaded more than a few hundred people to join him in the Fellowship. He was, however, a visible part of what could be called a neo-Orthodox backlash against the liberal, nontheistic and God-optional drift of Quakerism.⁷¹

Later scholarly commentators, both Quakers and academics, have been highly critical of Jones' understanding of history and his focus on mysticism. Even by the late 1940s historians such as Geoffrey Nuttall challenged Jones' idea that early Quakers were a mystical group, citing Quakers' close theological affinities with their Puritan contemporaries. Wilmer Cooper, the founder and Dean of the first Quaker seminary, the Earlham School of Religion, recalled meeting with Jones's brother-in-law, Harvard religion professor Henry Cadbury, who pointedly asked him if he thought that Quakers would ever have been identified as mystical were it not for Jones. Cooper observed that Cadbury "had a nice way of making a statement out of the question."⁷² In the ensuing decades Jones' reputation as a humanitarian persisted, but his theology and his emphasis on mysticism was regularly pilloried by Quaker critics. J. Calvin Keene, a professor of religion at St. Lawrence University and the first editor of *Quaker Religious Thought*, argued that Quakerism was a kind of "spiritual Christianity" rather than mystical one, contending that

⁷⁰ Lewis Benson, "Quakerism and the Religious Crisis." *The Friend (Philadelphia)* 109, no. 18 (February 27, 1936): 291–94; Lewis Benson. "Young Friends and the Religious Crisis." *The Friend (Philadelphia)* 109, no. 20 (March 26, 1936): 323–24.

⁷¹ Carole Dale Spencer, *Holiness: The Soul of Quakerism: An Historical Analysis of the Theology of Holiness in the Quaker Tradition* (Colorado Springs, CO: Paternoster, 2007), 46–48; Hugh Barbour and J. William Frost, *The Quakers* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Meeting Press, 1988), 293–294.

⁷² Wilmer A. Cooper, "Reflections on Rufus M. Jones Quaker Giant of the Twentieth Century," *Quaker History* 94, no. 2 (2005): 25–43. doi:10.2307/41947564, 29.

mysticism was not a valid form of Christianity at all.⁷³ In 1980, Gwyn accused Jones of using Fox as a puppet for his own theological agenda, downplaying Fox's focus on Jesus Christ in order to find a universal mystical faculty associated with human nature.⁷⁴ These were, of course, not purely disinterested historical arguments; all of the participants' contentions centered on the kind of theology that lay at the heart of Quakerism and about how liberal Quaker theology might become. Many who criticized Jones envisioned a more self-consciously theistic and explicitly Christian Quakerism.

Religious studies scholar Leigh Eric Schmidt perceptively observes that to focus on Jones' failures as a historian is perhaps to miss the point of his work, which was history largely in the service of theology. Jones' critics are correct that his attempt to portray Quakerism descending from a group of mystical seekers was at best a wishful fantasy; even Jones knew that he had limited evidence for this conclusion. He did, however, have a larger purpose in creating a usable past for religious liberals.⁷⁵ Jones was giving them a heritage, a fellowship that was a discernible part of the Christian tradition but one that had always thought of God and religion as inward and personal rather than the product of creeds or hierarchical institutions. Mystical liberalism was religious liberalism with a pedigree. It had a warrant to revise the basic beliefs of Christianity because it claimed that was what mystics had always done.

⁷³ Keene, J. Calvin, "Historic Quakerism and Mysticism," *Quaker Religious Thought* 14, no. 1 (January 1, 1965). <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol14/iss1/2>. For another notable example of criticism of Jones and mysticism see: Daniel Bassuk, "Rufus Jones and Mysticism," *Quaker Religious Thought* 46, no. 1 (January 1, 1978). <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol46/iss1/2>.

⁷⁴ Douglas Gwyn, *Apocalypse of the Word: The Life and Message of George Fox* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Meeting, 1986), xiii-xvii.

⁷⁵ Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality*, Second Edition (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 235-237; Leigh Eric Schmidt, "The Making of Modern 'Mysticism,'" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71, no. 2 (June 1, 2003): 273-302.

Schmidt calls our attention to the fact that the entire category of mystical or religious experience was used in this fashion. The proponents of studying mysticism and religious experience, including the renowned William James, were consciously creating an apologetic, a way for religion to survive after a traditional God had been rendered implausible by science and historical study.⁷⁶ They were also aware of the weaknesses of liberal mysticism. It was not an effective hedge against skepticism if examined too closely, because religious experience was ultimately unverifiable and accessible only to individuals. Jones himself noted this problem when he wrote, “No subjective experience... can settle for everyone else the question: Is there in the universe a God who is personal and all-loving?” Nevertheless, Jones still felt “a very weighty ground” existed for believing mystical experience connected individuals to a divine consciousness beyond their own.⁷⁷ Other Quakers had similar attitudes. Writing in *The Pendle Hill Reader*, a collection of popular modern theological writings on Quakerism, Thomas Kelly, one of Jones’ many Quaker disciples and a professor of religion at FUM-affiliated Earlham College in Indiana, admitted all religious experiences were ultimately subjective. After several pages of asserting that religious experience was the primary basis for Quakerism, Kelly argued that such subjective encounters were not more defensible as proofs of the validity of religion than older apologetics like the cosmological argument (which he felt was long debunked). Even the argument from William James that religious experience could be judged by its fruits, the lives that it transformed, seemed fallacious to Kelly. After all, he noted, the presence of unregenerate and unchanged lives could equally be cited to disprove the reality of God. Kelly concluded that grasping at this thin reed of mysticism or religious experience was better than non-belief. Kelly averred, “I do not find my faith in the reality of the experience of God shaken

⁷⁶ Schmidt, “The Making of Modern ‘Mysticism,’” 273–302.

⁷⁷ Rufus M. Jones, *Quakerism: A Spiritual Movement*, 56.

by the fact that I can find intellectual holes in the testimony, any more than I find my faith shaken by discovering that all logical proofs for God's existence are defective." Ultimately God's existence was only a matter of faith. Kelly's writing suggests that he was trying to convince himself of the reality of God; even though he knew his empirical evidence was weak, religious experience was simply the best argument that he had, even if, as he admitted, it was "not intellectually watertight."⁷⁸ Liberal mystics could remain believers even while declaring that mysticism was intellectually unconvincing, as long as they did not dwell on these issues too much.

Whatever the weaknesses of his arguments, in his lifetime Jones' views brought him literary, financial and academic success. He published 57 books and was able to make religion and theism plausible to an audience that was hungry to be convinced that the leadings that they held in their heart still held up to scrutiny. Two of his books managed to sell around 15,000 copies, a considerable number for the period and an indication of widespread interest in his ideas.⁷⁹ Jones often seemed to be a magnet for accolades. When he returned from one of his many trips abroad to give a lecture at Harvard, the program listed his honorary degrees, making him "the Rev. Rufus Matthew Jones, A.M., LL. D., D.D., Litt. D., Professor of Philosophy, Haverford College." Jones's friend and professional colleague Harvard Professor of Social Ethics Francis Greenwood Peabody wrote him jesting about how foreigners seemed to lavish honors on an ostensibly humble Quaker professor, commenting, "I am only surprised that they did not create you archbishop or archimandrite."⁸⁰

⁷⁸Thomas R. Kelly "The Reality of the Spiritual World," In *The Pendle Hill Reader*, ed. Herrymon Maurer (New York: Harper Brothers, 1942), 11.

⁷⁹ Rufus M. Jones to Henry J. Cadbury, February 27, 1945, Rufus M. Jones Papers, Box 59, Quaker Collection, Haverford College.

⁸⁰ Francis Greenwood Peabody to Rufus M. Jones, April 7, 1930. Rufus M. Jones Papers, Box 29, Quaker Collection, Haverford College.

It was not only religious seekers like Dreiser who were moved by Jones's conception of Quakerism. Moderate religious liberals in the mainline churches regarded Jones as providing a path that all religion needed to follow. Charles Clayton Morrison, the influential editor of *The Christian Century*, the magazine that served as the voice of American mainline Protestantism, wrote a powerful article, "The Quakers—An Outsiders View," championed Quakerism as the "Ultimate Protestantism," (which was ironic, as Jones believed Quakers were not Protestants) and saw it as the fulfillment of everything that Protestantism aspired to achieve. Without citing Jones directly, Morrison parroted Jones' idea that Quakers had a special affinity for religious liberalism, as he explained, "As I look over the range of existing units of Christian fellowship, I seem to see none whose genius and tradition answers more nearly the felt needs of the modern religious spirit than does the Religious Society of Friends."⁸¹ Morrison, like Jones, believed that distinctive garb of plain dress and the plain speech of "thee" and "thou" were atavistic relics of a bygone age that modern Quakers were rightly discarding. What remained, Morrison suggested, was a movement that from its earliest foundation practiced a "liberalism of tolerance and mutual respect" that did not rely on rigid dogmatic formations.

Most importantly, Morrison echoed Jones in believing that Quakerism had retained the spiritually pure core of Christianity better than other Christian groups. This spiritual core was especially present in Quaker silent worship and mysticism, which Morrison described as "akin to liberalism, though few liberals know it." The similarity between mysticism and liberalism for Morrison lay in the fact that neither one attempted to "catch life in a formula" or a creed. To act

⁸¹Charles Clayton Morrison, "The Quakers—An Outsiders View," *The Christian Century* XL, no. 45 (November 8, 1923): 1428–1430.

like a Quaker mystic, and understand that life and religious experience could not be contained within narrow “doctrinal vessels,” was “to be a true liberal.”⁸²

Harry Emerson Fosdick, perhaps the most widely known mainline Protestant minister in America of the early twentieth century, also considered himself a sort of spiritual disciple of Jones. Fosdick had read Jones’ *Social Law in the Spiritual World* shortly after entering the ministry, and he later explained “that book opened the door to a new era in my thought and life and, re-reading it recently, I perceived afresh how much of my message has been rooted in the rich soil which that book provided.”⁸³ Fosdick’s own books, including the popular *Modern Uses of the Bible*, showed this influence by citing Jones’ work. After Jones died in 1947, Fosdick got the permission of Jones’ widow to publish an edited anthology, *Rufus Jones Speaks to Our Time*, a project that Fosdick’s biographer Robert Moats Miller describes as a “an obvious labor of love.”⁸⁴

Fosdick was also an early member of the Wider Quaker Fellowship, an organization created by Jones with the goal of drawing people to Quakerism who felt that they could not join the Religious Society of Friends for a variety of reasons. Many of those that joined the Wider Quaker Fellowship, like Fosdick, were ministers, and undoubtedly the fact that liberal Quakers spurned paid ministry was a major factor in their choice to officially remain in their home denominations. As one Unitarian minister who pastored a congregation in Memphis confessed to Jones, he was "ready to come over bag and baggage to Quakerism" but could not because "like

⁸² Morrison, “The Quakers—An Outsiders View,” 1428-1430.

⁸³ Harry Emerson Fosdick, introduction to *Rufus Jones Speaks to Our Time*, Rufus M. Jones, ed. Harry Emerson Fosdick (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1951), xii.

⁸⁴ Elmer Howard Brown, review of *Harry Emerson Fosdick: Preacher, Pastor, Prophet*, by Robert Moats Miller, *Quaker History* 74, no. 2 (1985): 60–61; Miller, Robert Moats. *Harry Emerson Fosdick : Preacher, Pastor, Prophet* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1985), 37, 558.

the minister who wants to go to Rome but cannot be ordained because of his wife, so is the minister who wants to become a Quaker confronted with the problem of bread and butter."⁸⁵

There was also an effort to include non-Christians who might sympathize with Quakerism but did not feel comfortable formally joining the Religious Society of Friends because it would symbolize a break with their own traditions. The Wider Fellowship attracted a number of Jewish members, who felt they were in solidarity with Quaker principles but did not want to reject their own upbringing. The novelist Christopher Isherwood joined the Wider Fellowship despite an equal interest in Vedantism, and he understood this as a commitment to be a lifelong "friend of the Quakers."⁸⁶ Some of those involved in planning the Wider Quaker Fellowship nursed a not-entirely unrealistic hope that Gandhi and Chinese scholar Hu Shih might be persuaded to join, though this never happened. Jones frequently compared the idea to the Third Order Franciscans, the laity who lived religious lives in the service of St. Francis.⁸⁷ The embrace of non-Christians in a religious fellowship with Christians was remarkable, however. Unlike earlier efforts at connecting with other traditions, like the 1893 World Parliament of Religions, the Wider Quaker Fellowship was not directly aimed at conversion. Instead it stemmed from the idea that, because mystical experience was universal, individuals from any group might be privy to the same kind of contact with the divine that Quakers were, and that this made authentic inter-religious fellowship possible.

⁸⁵ John Clarence Petrie to Rufus Jones, December 13, 1930, Rufus M. Jones Papers, Box 29, Quaker Collection, Haverford College.

⁸⁶ Schmidt, *Restless Souls*, 256-259; Keren R. McGinity, *Still Jewish: A History of Women and Intermarriage in America*. (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 52; Daniel M. Mayton, *Nonviolence and Peace Psychology* (New York: Springer, 2009), 175; Christopher Isherwood, *Conversations with Christopher Isherwood*, ed. James J. Berg, and Chris Freeman (Oxford, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 59.

⁸⁷ Harry T. Silcock to Rufus Jones, October 20, 1930, Rufus M. Jones Papers, Box 29, Quaker Collection, Haverford College; Rufus M. Jones to Francis A. Wright, February 12, 1935, Rufus M. Jones Papers, Box 57, Quaker Collection, Haverford College.

The last group that Jones was trying to reach with the Wider Quaker Fellowship were those people that had religious objections to joining Quakers, whose conscientious scruples led to them to agnosticism or atheism and did not feel comfortable joining a Quaker Meeting. While Jones maintained that strict agreement on theology should not be a criterion of church membership, various kinds of unbelief were still outside of the spectrum of acceptable belief, even for some liberal Quaker meetings.⁸⁸

As Jones was beginning to plan the creation of the Wider Quaker Fellowship in 1930, J. Barnard Walton, the advancement secretary of FGC, wrote him to let him know that his project resembled outreach efforts of another Quaker philosophy professor, Jesse H. Holmes, and his “To the Scientifically Minded.” Holmes had told Walton that he saw a parallel between the people he was trying to reach and those that Jones was targeting with the Wider Quaker Fellowship. Walton urged Jones to reach out to the other branch of Quakers, suggesting that Jones and Holmes should “have a talk sometime and find out from each other how much there is in common between the groups with whom you are dealing.”⁸⁹ The two projects never merged, but both men were aware that they were working along similar lines for the benefit of Quakerism.

Jones was always careful to appear as a conciliating force, one of the few people that could talk to liberals in FGC and moderates in FYM. Compared to Holmes and Rushmore he was outwardly more theologically traditional, insisting on a personal God. But ultimately, he advanced views that allowed Quakerism to embrace a wider theological spectrum. By the time Jones died, one could be an evangelical, liberal, or a pantheist and profess a belief in Jones’s

⁸⁸Rufus M Jones, *Rethinking Religious Liberalism* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1935), 35.

⁸⁹J. Barnard Walton to Rufus Jones, December 8, 1930. Rufus M. Jones Papers, Box 29, Quaker Collection, Haverford College.

vision of Quaker mysticism. It was plausible to claim to be a Quaker (or at least a member of the Wider Fellowship) and be a non-Christian. Despite his seeming moderation, the effects of Jones' views were probably more far-reaching at pushing the denomination towards liberalism than either Holmes' or Rushmore's efforts.

The Path to God-Optional

By the time of Jones's death in 1948, many different notions of God was allowed within Quakerism, though outright atheism or agnosticism was uncommon. As Doug Gwyn has persuasively shown, during that decade FGC still used the word "Christian" to describe itself, but its leadership had begun to define the term so elastically as to include any kind of belief in transcendence. They were, as Gwyn puts it, "migrating towards a universalism, even a nontheism," though they still hesitated to use the terms.⁹⁰ By the 1950s for many liberal Quakers to express belief in "God" was merely to indicate that the universe had order and meaning. By 1958 Arthur Morgan, the president of Antioch College and a Quaker connected with FGC, had begun to make the argument that Quakerism should be open to non-Christians. Morgan proposed that the standards of his own Indiana Yearly Meeting be changed to allow anyone into membership whose "purposes and way of life, and whose ethical standards and practice" were in accord with Quakerism.⁹¹ Indiana did not take the step, leaving membership up to Monthly Meetings where it had traditionally been, but it was pivotal moment. Quakerism could no longer be presumed to simply be a Christian faith. While this move was certainly controversial, it would be the start of what would over the next several decades lead to a large variety of hyphenated Quakers, those who were Quaker-nontheists, Quaker-Jews and Quaker-Buddhists.

⁹⁰ Gwyn, *A Gathering of Spirits*, 201.

⁹¹ Arthur E Morgan, "Should the Society of Friends Receive Non-Christians Into Membership," February 8, 1958m FGC RG 4/025, Box 60, Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College; Os Cresson, *Quaker and Naturalist Too*. (Iowa City, IW: Morning Walk Press, 2014), 87-89.

The most remarkable thing about the work of Jones, Holmes and Rushmore was that the changes they worked upon Quaker theology were subtle and slow enough that they were rarely visible to Quakers themselves. Because liberal Quakers worshiped in silence, except for when members felt led to offer verbal ministry, it was not as if there was a fixed liturgy to reform or clergy members that could be examined for orthodoxy. As one observer noted in the 1920s, an attender of a unprogrammed Quaker Meeting was just as likely to hear a speaker quote from Walt Whitman as to listen to a selection from the Bible.⁹² Over time there were simply fewer and fewer quotations drawn from the Bible and more and more from Whitman, and when people drew from the Bible they increasingly used it poetically in ways that were not designed to address a personal God. Drawing from his experience conducting ethnographic studies among modern British unprogrammed Quakerism, Ben Pink Dandelion has observed that cultural secularization has “meant that ministry in Meeting may say very little which was explicitly religious and give very little clue as to what might be acceptable or normative Quaker theology.” Dandelion notes that the specifics of any collective Quaker beliefs can become invisible, as each individual simply embraces their own personal notion of God and Quakerism.⁹³ Jones, Holmes and Rushmore made it so that individuals could be intellectually secure in believing in their personal notion of God, usually a distant God rather than the personal being of traditional theology, and in the course of a weekly hour of silent worship most of their peers could not tell and did not care that their theologies might differ. As chapter 6 addresses, what increasingly became more important than shared belief was a shared commitment to serve others.

By the late 1950s, denominational officials in FGC themselves were unsure exactly how to classify Quakerism. One Friend, whose colleagues derided him for having extreme “Christo-

⁹²Charles Clayton Morrison, “The Quakers- An Outsiders View,” 1428–1430.

⁹³ Ben Pink Dandelion, *The Liturgies of Quakerism* (Hampshire, England: Ashgate, 2005), 66.

centric theological views,” lamented that many Quaker meetings seemed to aspire to be a secular “fellowship of pacifists, or a team of relief workers” rather than seeking to be a part of a “Christian body.” His colleague rebutted that this was a false choice because there were really far more deeply committed “Unitarian-minded Meetings, which fit into neither of the two categories described.”⁹⁴ These officials were quarrelsome, but no more heated on this than they were on issues of budgets or pension plans. There was a unity underneath their theological disputes. Further, the fight reveals that even those tasked with shepherding Quakerism were unclear on what Quakers themselves believed.

Was Quakerism a form of Christianity? Did Quakers believe in God? What did Quakers have in common? There were no longer any firm answers. The Quaker reformers of the twentieth century had worked a far greater transformation of religion than even their seventeenth century ancestors could have aspired to or fathomed. George Fox merely thought he created a purer version of Christianity. By the time Jones, Holmes and Rushmore had finished, Quakerism permitted a wide variety of beliefs and creeds. It included Christians and non-Christians, theists, pantheists and agnostics. Quakers had stripped away many of the traditional beliefs that had defined Quakerism for centuries, but they hoped they had gained a faith that could not be disproved by science or invalidated by culture, one that permitted individual thought and conscience and that ultimately might be the most viable way to survive the onslaught of secularization.

⁹⁴ Larry Miller, “Letter about Percy Bartlett’s Paper,” January 29, 1958, RG 4/ 025 FGC Box 60, Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College.

Chapter Three: Why be a Jew?

On a cold Monday evening in February 1918, Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan ventured forth from his office at Jewish Theological Seminary (JST) in Morningside Heights, New York City to visit Hunter College on the Upper East Side and address a meeting of that college's chapter of the Inter-Varsity Menorah Society, a Jewish organization for college and university students that resembled the later Hillel International. Kaplan was supposed to represent the Jewish side in a debate before the college students on the question "Judaism or Ethical Culture—Which?" Most of the students who took part in the Menorah Society were the children of Eastern European Jewish immigrants and came from what Kaplan called "old fashioned Jewish homes." They wanted to know if there was a way for them, as educated and acculturated Americans, to stay in Judaism, or if they should consider conversion to Ethical Culture, a religion created in the late nineteenth century by Felix Adler, a philosophy professor at Columbia University and the son of a prominent Reform rabbi.¹

Ethical Culture offered the morality of religion without supernaturalism or the historical baggage of Jewish ritual or history. The Ethical Culture Society's motto was "deed, not creed." It rejected supernaturalism and a personal God while emphasizing progressive social reform projects like providing free schooling to the children of the working poor. Ethical Culturists celebrated themselves as having advanced past both Judaism and Christianity toward a more universal notion of humanity, which for some Jews seemed to promise a kind of escape from the burdens of antisemitism. Because Jewish quotas remained in effect at most major American universities, antisemitism precluded certain kinds of employment, and Jewish tradition prohibited intermarriage, conversion to Ethical Culture allowed assimilation without the intense

¹ Adler was sometimes referred to as a Rabbi in newspaper accounts or later discussions of his work, but there is no evidence that he ever actually received rabbinic ordination himself.

perception of betraying Judaism that conversion to Christianity elicited. For some upwardly mobile Jews, particularly those in New York City, Ethical Culture was therefore a tempting option. Ethical Culture was still remarkably smaller than the American Jewish community; in 1916, it reported only a paltry 2,850 members compared to a Jewish population of around three million, but it had grown rapidly and expanded by almost 40 percent in a single decade, mostly by appealing to disenchanted Jews.²

As Kaplan gave his talk to the students, he found that defending Judaism from Ethical Culture was less of the “real intellectual tussle” than he had anticipated. Partly this was because Kaplan, a leader in the liberal wing of Conservative Judaism, had begun to integrate many of the teachings of Ethical Culture into his own vision of Judaism. He did not believe in a personal God and was critical of the idea that the Jewish people were specially chosen by God. Kaplan thought that Judaism had to modernize its interpretation of religious law, the halakha, to accommodate the modern era. He argued that one did not have to leave Judaism to embrace many of the insights of Ethical Culture.

What Kaplan did not tell the students was that he himself was uncertain in his defense of Judaism. Adler had been one of Kaplan’s professors while he was earning his master’s degree at Columbia University and served as a role model to the young man. A few years earlier, as a young undergraduate at Columbia, Kaplan had seriously contemplated joining the Ethical Culture movement. In the pages of his diary, Kaplan confessed after the talk that even at the age of 37, he “often thought that if I had been drawn into the movement I might have been more spiritually

² Bureau of the Census, *Census of Religious Bodies 1916: Part II: Separate Denominations, History Description and Statistics* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1919), 676; Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 375.

satisfied than in Jewish work.”³ He wondered if his life could have been different if he had accepted the offer of a scholarship that the Ethical Culture Society had made him back in his undergraduate days. Rather than becoming a rabbi and a professor of preaching at JTS, Kaplan might have been one of a handful of Ethical Leaders, the clergy of the society, and perhaps even Adler’s successor at the helm of the movement. For Kaplan, who often felt theologically circumscribed by his colleagues at JTS and in the Conservative Jewish rabbinate, Adler’s society seemed to offer him the prospect of greater intellectual freedom. How much more effectively might he have championed the cause of liberal religion and been an advocate for a religion without an interventionist God, if he had not had to battle against colleagues at JTS who wanted to move the denomination to the theological right in order to placate Orthodox Jewish critics?

Yet Kaplan also harbored resentment towards Adler and those of his followers with Jewish origins; he could not forgive them for abandoning Judaism. The meeting with the Menorah Society gave Kaplan the chance to recall the failings of Ethical Culture, to convince himself that he had made the right choice in staying a Jew, and to conclude that they had erred in leaving. Ethical Culture, he said, could not “evoke loyalty” in the same way that Judaism did, because Jews were united through “common interests and a common history.” Ethical Culture was unable to “fire the imagination and thrill the heart” as Judaism could.⁴ While Kaplan agreed with most of the theological positions espoused by Ethical Culture—and he was just as skeptical of a supernatural, personal God as Adler was—Kaplan could not jettison his Judaism as Adler had done. He sought a way to remain Jewish while discarding many of the trappings of traditional belief.

³Mordecai M. Kaplan, *Communings of the Spirit: The Journals of Mordecai M. Kaplan Volume I 1913-1934*, ed. Mel Scult (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2001), 113.

⁴ Kaplan, *Communings of the Spirit: Volume I*, 113.

It was by no means inevitable that Kaplan would stay Jewish, however. Adler's intellectual and religious path out of Judaism would have been an easy one for Kaplan to emulate because their backgrounds were similar. Though Adler, born in 1851, was three decades Kaplan's senior, both men emigrated from Europe with their families to the United States in their early childhoods. Both were the sons of rabbis, with the obligations that entailed.⁵ Adler was expected to follow his father into the Reform rabbinate and take over his pulpit. Kaplan's father Israel (discussed in chapter 1) was an Orthodox rabbi. Both Kaplan and Adler lost their traditional faith in the process of being exposed to higher education. Adler had finished his doctorate in Germany at the University of Heidelberg, where he had abandoned his faith and found himself drawn to Kantian thought. Kaplan had felt his beliefs challenged while at City College, where Adler was one of his professors.

Kaplan could have agreed with Adler and decided that a lack of faith in a personal God should lead to a universalistic religion (rather than just a Jewish one) centered on ethics. Both men found themselves in fundamental agreement in rejecting two of the most common ways of being Jews. Neither accepted that belief in a monotheistic God or racial identity could be central to Jewishness. But Kaplan would find in the Jewish tradition—with its history, law, music, art and all of its culture—enough of a reason to stay in the fold, while Adler thought that Ethical Culture could take Jewish ethics and discard the rest as outmoded.

Their respective analyses of the situation of American Jews led them to very different conclusions. Kaplan knew it was not inevitable that people born as Jews in the early twentieth-

⁵ Adler's father, Samuel, held a doctorate from the University of Giessen in addition to his ordination as rabbi. The elder Adler was also a noted scholar of Jewish history. See: Bernhard Friedberg, "Adler, Samuel." In *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, ed. Isidore Singer (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1901), 199.

century United States would continue to define themselves that way. For Kaplan, the central problem was “why be a Jew?”⁶ He worried that unless this question was answered, and Jews had good reason to retain their identities rather than assimilate, Judaism would disappear. Many Americans of Jewish origin did not see their religion as very important; estimates in the *American Jewish Year Book* from 1919 stated that less than one fourth of American Jews attended a congregation regularly.⁷ In the distant past, as a subject people in Christian and Muslim kingdoms, Jews had been tied together by the fact that their communities were largely autonomous and self-governing with their own laws and social structure. Kaplan, who was particularly attentive to history in his writing, worried that those assumptions no longer held sway in the twentieth century, as nation-states demanded the undivided political loyalty of their citizens. Nineteenth-century Jewish emancipation in Europe had laid the groundwork for this crisis by guaranteeing individual Jews the right of political citizenship. But this gain also came with a sacrifice: Jews could not maintain separate national loyalties to the Jewish people. Democratic societies like the United States posed a unique challenge for the practice of Jewish culture as Jews gained full participation in social and civic life. Paradoxically, the ghetto and antisemitism had helped perpetuate the Jewish community, driving Jews to band together in solidarity, while civil rights and inclusion into national culture threatened it. As Kaplan explained, “the task now before the Jew is to save the otherness of Jewish life.”⁸

Adler examined the same issue and concluded that it was not really a problem. He believed that Jews assimilating into a grander national and global whole was desirable. There was no need to fight to retain Judaism, a religion that was irrelevant in the modern world. Ethical

⁶Mordecai M. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life* (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 2010), 182.

⁷Sarna, *American Judaism*, 224.

⁸ Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, 178.

Culture was blatantly supersessionist, intended to take what Adler regarded as the best aspect of the Jewish religion, its ethical core, and supplement that with the best parts of Christianity and philosophy, and thereby realize a new kind of worldview.

The desire to stay Jewish meant that Kaplan rejected Adler's cosmopolitan vision of Ethical Culture. But Kaplan was also at odds with the two most common intellectual avenues liberal religious Jews were taking to maintain their religious faith. To try to make Judaism and existence in a democratic society more compatible, many Reform Jews presented Judaism as a religion dedicated to the worship of a monotheistic God, which meant distancing themselves from the idea that Jews were a national community of their own. Other Jews tried a different strategy and posed the idea of Jews as being racially distinct from white Americans, with Jewish identity as a biological kinship.

Each of these options, according to Kaplan, came at too high a cost. Kaplan did flirt with the idea that Jews were a separate race, and his invocations of Oswald Spengler and vocal support for Zionism were always tinged with racial implications about the nature of Judaism. Yet race was too risky to serve as the center of Judaism. For Kaplan, being an American was as important as being Jewish, and to be fully a part of American culture, Jews had to be identified as white. Meanwhile, Kaplan could not bring himself to submit to belief in a traditionally-conceived monotheistic God while maintaining his intellectual integrity. He found himself between Scylla and Charybdis. On one hand, his views on God might lead him to make a decisive break with the Jewish religion, while on the other, the path of retaining Jewish identity might come at the price of giving up his views on race and God.

By the 1920s, Kaplan began to develop a solution that would allow him to retain his integrity and his Judaism, ideas that would form the basis for Reconstructionist Judaism. At JTS,

Kaplan's teaching challenged tradition. He would break students' faith and build it up anew, teaching rabbinical students and future Jewish day school teachers that Judaism was not purely a religion, nor were Jews a race. Instead, as reflected in the title of his 1934 masterwork, Judaism was a civilization. He taught that Judaism was "far more comprehensive than Jewish religion." It included "that nexus of history, literature, language, social organization, folk sanctions, standards of conduct, social and spiritual ideals, esthetic values, which in their totality form a civilization."⁹ It was still important to be religious, and religious traditions and institutions were a key part of Jewish civilization, but the Jewish religion was not totally synonymous with Jewish civilization. There was no grand purpose to being a Jew other than to be part of this civilization. As Kaplan memorably explained, the point of reciting the Shema, the daily prayer that the devout said each morning and evening, was not to endorse monotheism or talk with a divine being, but "simply because it provided an occasion for experiencing the thrill of being a Jew."¹⁰

Praxis was always important to Kaplan, and his ideology quickly gave rise to Reconstructionism, originally intended to be a movement across Jewish denominations. In addition to teaching at JTS, he served as a congregational rabbi, and his congregation, called the Society for the Advancement of Judaism (SAJ), would become a platform for his views. Many of his former rabbinical students at JTS became his disciples and began promoting his understanding in their own congregations or through the publications of the SAJ. In 1935 Kaplan's followers formed a magazine, *The Reconstructionist*, creating another outlet to disseminate their views. Though Kaplan still conceived of himself as part of the liberal wing of Conservative Judaism, he had hopes that Reconstructionism would become an interdenominational Jewish movement, drawing in Reform, Conservative and secular Jews.

⁹ Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, 178.

¹⁰Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, 182.

Deborah Waxman, the current head of Reconstructionist Judaism, describes the seeming contradictions of the early Reconstructionist movement, writing, “They aimed to be modern in the face of anti-modernist Orthodox; particularistic in the face of universalist Reform Jews; ethnic in the face of those who would insist that they were only religious; religious in the face of secularists; diaspora-affirming in the face of political Zionists; and as deeply connected with other Jews around the world as they were with fellow Americans.”¹¹ Yet the movement also managed to be broad. While himself a skeptic about the idea of a personal God, Kaplan did tolerate divergent opinions about theology from his followers. Reconstructionism as it developed contained both theist and what might be described as agnostic or non-theistic members, making it more diverse in terms of religious beliefs than the Ethical Culture Society. Permitting such liberal theology, however, put Reconstructionism into conflict with Conservative Judaism, and ultimately, by the 1960s, Reconstructionism would become its own denomination.

The close connection between Kaplan and Adler has been noted by others, most notably Jewish Studies scholar Shaul Magid. In his book *American Post-Judaism* Magid compares Adler, Kaplan and Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, the founder of the Jewish Renewal movement, a 1960s effort to create a religiously and politically liberal form of gender-egalitarian traditional Judaism. Magid argues that the key difference between Kaplan and Adler was that Adler discarded the category of ethnicity to leave Judaism behind, while Kaplan kept Judaism intact by making it an ethnic category. Magid wants to set up both men as forerunners of Schachter-Shalomi, whom he regards as having realized the project of retaining Judaism but decoupling it from ethnicity through allowing the participation of non-ethnic Jewish people (such as the spouses of Jews) in

¹¹ Deborah Waxman, “Ethnicity and Faith in American Judaism: Reconstructionism as Ideology and Institution, 1935-1959.” Dissertation, Temple University, 2010, 6-7.

Jewish Renewal by having them hold a sort of “resident alien status.”¹² While Magid provides useful insight into how Adler and Kaplan both rejected Reform Judaism, he errs in suggesting Kaplan was fixated on ethnic identity; Kaplan, after all, saw Jews as defined by community and culture, and took considerable steps to minimize the connection between biological kinship and Judaism.¹³

This chapter portrays Kaplan and the foundation of Reconstructionism differently. It argues that Kaplan and Adler shared the project of rejecting supernaturalism and the idea of a personal God. Both men opposed the idea of a Jewish identity hinging on religion or race, categories that modernity had made perilous grounds for identity. But they differed on what these things meant for the perpetuation of Judaism.

For Adler, the loss of these certainties meant that one had to leave Judaism. Adler’s example shows that choosing to stop defining oneself as Jewish was a possible option, even a tempting choice because it seemed to promise an escape from both religious irrationality and antisemitism. Adler, working with the same facts as Kaplan, thought that Judaism not endure in the United States and that Jews would ultimately be better off if it disappeared. Kaplan on the other hand felt it was his responsibility to ensure Judaism could survive. His central innovation was finding a way to be Jewish based on a new standard, civilization, which could endure the

¹²Shaul Magid, *American Post-Judaism: Identity and Renewal in a Postethnic Society* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013), 35- 56. Magid uses the word “ethnicity,” though he admits that the term only gained widespread currency after the Second World War, writing that the term both men actually used, race, “means something very different today” and thus should not be employed (p. 33). I am skeptical of substituting these terms because debates in the early 20th century, which Adler and Kaplan reacted to, were specifically about whether Jews were a race, and if they were part of the “white race.” Ethnicity was a term adopted in part to allow Jews and other “white ethnic” groups to have a distinctive group identification while still being conceived of as white. To collapse these terms generates considerable misunderstanding of what Adler and Kaplan were rejecting.

¹³ Kaplan and the Reconstructionists never fully separated biological descent and Jewish identity, but they did make it more elastic by adopting the idea that descent could be patrilineal as well as matrilineal as long as a person was raised Jewish.

acids of modernity. This solution was a more drastic step than anything attempted by Quakers or Unitarians; it not only made God optional in Judaism, but went further by trying to make Judaism transcend the category of religion altogether.

By contemporary standards, the fact that Kaplan continued to identify himself as Jewish despite his skepticism about a personal God seems unremarkable, which is a testament to how pervasive his ideas about Jewish identity eventually became. According to the 2013 Pew Religious Landscape Survey, approximately six out of ten American Jews see Judaism as being about culture and values. A full two-thirds of American Jews believe that someone can be Jewish and not believe in God.¹⁴ Increasingly, they also believe that Jews should not be defined as a distinct racial group, but rather as a cultural identity. Kaplan's legacy is both a denominational community, Reconstructionism, but also the idea that Jewishness is more than belief or birthright.

On the Same Path?

Kaplan and Adler's thinking was highly similar; the pivotal difference lay in their attachment to their Jewishness. Mordecai Kaplan's scrupulous biographer Mel Scult persuasively argues that much of Kaplan's thinking about God came from Adler's teachings, which held that "God" was a human, symbolic construct, but also ultimately expressed a poetically true vision of reality. According to Scult, Adler was also instrumental in introducing Kaplan to Matthew Arnold, whose ideas of a non-anthropomorphic God would become widespread in Kaplan's writings by the first decade of the twentieth century.¹⁵

¹⁴ "Chapter 3: Jewish Identity," *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project* (blog), October 1, 2013, <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/chapter-3-jewish-identity/>.

¹⁵ Mel Scult, *The Radical American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014), 71-73.

Kaplan maintained personal connections with the Ethical Culture Movement. He sent two of his daughters, Naomi and Selma, to the Ethical Culture-run Fieldston School, where the Society's religious views were part of the curriculum. At his daughter's graduation, Kaplan listened to an address given by the elderly Adler, which he later declared was the finest lecture that he had ever heard. Writing in his private journal Kaplan would refer to his old professor as a kind of spiritual guide, urging himself to "remember what Felix Adler said about anger as in need of being resisted because of its tendency to upset the very purposes one cherishes most," which worked to calm Kaplan down when he lost his temper.¹⁶ Kaplan would also freely borrow many of Adler's ideas, invoking them both in his teaching at JTS and as a rabbi at the SAJ. In his congregation he would call his assistant rabbi the "leader" in imitation of the Ethical Culture Society's practice of naming its clergy "ethical leaders."¹⁷ In 1922, before adopting the name "Reconstructionism" for the new movement, Kaplan wondered if he might call it the "Jewish Ethical Culture Society" and even pitched this idea to SAJ's board of trustees. According to Scult, the trustees pressed Kaplan about the similarity between his proposed Jewish Ethical Culture Society and Adler's Ethical Culture, and in reply Kaplan "launched into a long tirade against the Ethical Culture Society and charged that it lured Jews away from the Jewish people." Kaplan specifically lashed out at Adler for being "unethical" and disloyal for abandoning Judaism.¹⁸ It was clear that Kaplan believed the name scheme would frankly acknowledge his intellectual debt to Adler but also note their central difference: Kaplan's version of the Ethical Culture Society was explicitly a Jewish movement, while Adler's was not.

¹⁶ Mordecai M. Kaplan, *Communings of the Spirit: The Journals of Mordecai M. Kaplan Volume II 1934-1941*, ed. Mel Scult (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2016), 43.

¹⁷ Ira Eisenstein, *Reconstructing Judaism: An Autobiography* (Wyncote, PA: The Reconstructionist Press, 1986), 92.

¹⁸ Mel Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1993), 261.

Adler, Kaplan and Reform

Before addressing Kaplan's departure from Adler, it is critical to understand their key differences with Reform Judaism. Reform Judaism had arrived at the idea that Judaism was about ethical monotheism as a result of a long process of religious shift. In the latter half of the nineteenth century German and American Reform Jews had made efforts to eliminate many of the restrictions of the halakha that made life in non-Jewish industrialized nations difficult. Observing the Jewish sabbath (Friday night into Saturday) by refraining from travel or work made it difficult for Jews to take certain jobs. Kosher dietary laws prevented eating with non-Jews, which could be a major barrier in engaging in business. Traditional Jewish worship was often perceived as noisy and chaotic by non-Jews and acculturated German and American Jews. The restrictions imposed by Jewish law were often a reason some American Jews gravitated away from religious observance or tried to assimilate more completely into non-Jewish society. Reform rabbis changed Jewish practice to accommodate these concerns. They loosened restrictions on what kind of work was prohibited on the sabbath (writing and driving, for example, were no longer frowned on) and a few even moved services to Sunday to accord with the schedule of their Christian neighbors. They eliminated dietary laws and altered religious services to resemble those of Protestant churches by including a lengthy sermon, introducing mixed-gender seating, playing organ music, and in some cases, even retitling the rabbi to be a "minister." The process of changing religious law was justified by the idea that the Talmud was a human creation.

Yet if they abandoned the halakha, Reform Judaism would need a theology that explained the core of Jewish identity, and they needed it to withstand the same kinds of criticisms based around scientific discoveries and historical criticism facing Christian denominations. What they

retained was a belief that the Bible revealed an ethical, monotheistic God to the Jewish people. Adler's professor during his time in Germany, Abraham Geiger, perhaps the foremost Reform Jewish thinker, argued that God's revelation was given progressively to the Jewish people. They interpreted it in their own historical context and had a mission to spread that revelation to the world. This provided a way to retain the concept of the Hebrew Scriptures as in some sense divine, but also allowed historical criticism of their origins and the acknowledgement that they did not accord with modern scientific advances. It also provided a reason to be Jewish. Jews had a special task to model and spread ethical monotheism, as they were at once a chosen people and part of a universally applicable religion. The Pittsburgh Platform of 1885, which became the definitive statement of Reform Judaism, declared that the Jewish connection with God was paramount, as it announced, "[Reform Jews] recognize in every religion an attempt to grasp the infinite one.... We hold that Judaism presents the highest concept of the God-idea as taught in our Holy Scriptures and developed and spiritualized by Jewish teachers in accordance with their moral and philosophical progress of their respective age."¹⁹

These Reform theological ideas did not work for Adler, for the same reasons that a few decades later they would not work for Kaplan. Neither man believed in a providential God that could give specific revelations to anyone. Neither would admit to atheism, but their notions of the divine implied an extremely distant God.²⁰ Adler referred to his belief in "the unknown God" or the "infinite," but he rejected the notion of an anthropomorphic being that had any kind of

¹⁹ Pittsburgh Platform quoted in: Sylvan D. Schwartzman, *Reform Judaism in the Making* (New York: The Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1955), 114.

Reform's own focus on God in the Pittsburgh Platform was partly a reaction against Felix Adler's creation of the Ethical Culture Movement, which the Rabbis present felt might lure Jews away from their religion.

²⁰ When Kaplan defined atheism, he suggested the term implied being purposely selfish. This notion of atheism is more like objectivism than contemporary definitions of atheism as being about a disbelief in God.

agency. This was the issue that had most directly driven him from the Jewish fold. When Adler was still a candidate to succeed his father as the chief rabbi of Temple Emanu-El, the trustees had questioned if he still believed in God. Adler replied that he did, but not the God of the Jews. He subsequently left Judaism behind and never returned.²¹

Kaplan's vision of God often shifted and was somewhat elusive; on some occasions he seemed to say "God" was what humans created by living ethically. He was more specific about what he did not believe about God, blasting what he felt was the traditional rabbinic conception of God centered on a being spatially "residing in heaven." Kaplan simply did not see any way that older Jewish notions of a personal God, or even a divine being, could be accommodated in modern religious communities. Most often, rather than talking directly about God, Kaplan used the term "God-idea" to suggest that God could be thought of in different ways.²² Early in the development of his thought, Kaplan believed that only a liberal notion of a pantheistic kind of God could save Judaism. As he explained, "Unless its mythological ideas of God give way to a conception of divinity imminent in the workings of the human spirit. . . . The Jewish people have nothing further to contribute to civilization."²³ In the late stages of his career during the 1960s, Kaplan began to identify as a humanist and even joined the American Humanist Association, but he also mellowed in his insistence that his views should be universal, deciding that the specifics of the "God-idea" should be up to individuals.²⁴

²¹ Horace L. Friess, *Felix Adler and Ethical Culture: Memories and Studies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 68; Benny Kraut, *From Reform Judaism to Ethical Culture: The Religious Evolution of Felix Adler* (Cincinnati, OH: Hebrew Union College Press, 1979), 35-46, 40, 55, 79.

²² Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century*, 221.

²³ Mordecai M. Kaplan, "A Program for the Reconstruction of Judaism." *The Menorah Journal* 6, no. 4 (August 1920): 188.

²⁴ Kaplan's connection to Humanism is further addressed in chapter 6.

He wanted to allow individuals to choose their own conceptions of God while still having membership in a religious community. Many of the popular liberal religious understandings of God were plausible and meaningful, he contended; there was no clear reason to prefer one to another. Kaplan mused that ultimately, “it makes no difference whether we accept Spinoza’s, Comte’s, Matthew Arnold’s, Wall’s, Hocking’s, Royce’s or Wieman’s conception of God. The point is that each of these men suggested some identifiable experience as the source of our belief in God, in place of the theurgic conception offered by tradition.”²⁵ Kaplan’s list of plausible views was populated by the same writers that were popular with Quakers, Unitarians and liberal Protestants; Jews did not necessarily need a uniquely Jewish conception of God. Obviously if Jews could have the same concept of God as Protestants, then staying Jewish could not simply be a matter of believing in a certain kind of God.

However, individuals who found none of these liberal religious understandings of God compelling were also free to try “one of their own.” The specifics of God did not matter much for Kaplan because the “God-idea” was about fulfilling a role, allowing Jews to bring “what is best in him to Jewish life.” It should “fill the void” that the older traditional God had for prior generations.²⁶ There did not have to be a uniform interpretation; Jewish civilization could permit different people to hold different conceptions of God.²⁷ For most people in the modern world this meant rejecting an anthropomorphic notion of God, perhaps envisioning God as the “aspect of reality which elicits the most serviceable human traits, the traits that enhance individual self-worth and further social unity.” God could be found in a sense of communal cooperation, or the expression of love, rather than as an entity. A smaller number of Jews might find this new notion

²⁵Kaplan *Communings of the Spirit: Volume I*, 266.

²⁶Kaplan *Communings of the Spirit: Volume I*, 266.

²⁷ Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, 397.

unsatisfying and would want to retain the older, anthropomorphic notion of God, something that he thought should also be allowed. Any idea of God should be acceptable within the Jewish civilization, he wrote, if it led to religious behavior that sought to realize the “highest ends of human aspiration.”²⁸

Completely reconceptualizing what “God” meant was permitted within Reconstructionism, and allowing all Jews to choose their own personal definition of God opened Kaplan up to the potential criticism from both orthodox religious traditionalists and critics of religion, neither of whom wanted God to mean something other than a supernatural, personal entity. Kaplan was zealous in his rebuttal, defending his usage of the term “God,” declaring: “It is entirely appropriate... to retain the greater part of the ancient religious vocabulary particularly the term ‘God.’ As long as we are struggling to express the same fundamental fact about the cosmos that our ancestors designated by the term ‘God’, the fact of its momentousness or holiness, and are endeavoring to achieve the ideals of human life which derive from that momentousness or holiness, we have a right to retain their modes of expression.”²⁹ Religious language was like science or philosophy, Kaplan asserted; it could change and still retain a connection with the terminology and developments of the past.

Kaplan’s view of God was illustrated in one memorable family story from his daughter Judith, which was recorded by Kaplan’s biographer. She wrote that at age eleven, she concluded that God was not real and that she was an atheist. Deeply disturbed by this epiphany, she subsequently prayed in gibberish during her nightly prayers, so she could manage to both maintain her intellectual integrity and prevent her sister from overhearing and reporting her to their parents. Convinced that her religious doubts would upset her father, the rabbi, whose

²⁸ Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, 397.

²⁹ Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, 398.

theological views she and the rest of the family did not really comprehend, Judith eventually went and tearfully confessed her skepticism about God's existence to him. A calm Kaplan asked his daughter, "what do you mean by God?" He proceeded to explain that he did not believe in a supernatural God either, but rather in "the vision of a power within us that works for a better life."³⁰ Judith would end up being a prominent figure in Reconstructionist circles as an adult, becoming the first woman to receive a Bat Mitzvah after Kaplan invented the ceremony, and eventually marrying Kaplan's protégé Rabbi Ira Eisenstein. Her childhood "atheism" served as more of a marker that she was in the theological mainstream of Reconstructionist beliefs than as any kind of long-term religious stumbling block.

Her father, however, had even grander goals than simply de-emphasizing the idea that revelation was God-given; he wanted to move Judaism away from a focus on God entirely. He was critical of Judaism as a religion. As he once explained to the SAJ, religion "was an empty term which might refer to almost anything. . . There is no human belief or practice which we might not designate as religious."³¹ Kaplan thought that the category of religion was too amorphous, impossible to separate from culture, tradition and philosophy, and he did not think the term was a useful means for defining the Jewish people. Adler, in decades prior, was equally aware that religion was a problematic term without a fixed meaning, though he was content to say that Ethical Culture could be a religion for those who wanted it to be a religion, and a philosophy or system of ethics for the people that did not want to label it as such.

Neither Adler nor Kaplan could accept that the Jewish people were chosen by God over those of other religions. For Adler, such Jewish claims were a barrier to creating a religion that had truly universal reach. If Reform Judaism wanted to preach the kind of universal message that

³⁰ Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century*, 353.

³¹ Mordecai Kaplan quoted in Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century*, 280.

Abraham Geiger claimed was the end goal of Judaism, then, Adler felt, there was no reason for reluctance to preach that universal religion immediately. Why should Jews continue as a separate people? Adler believed that religious Judaism had served its purpose. Its vision of monotheism had been one stage of human religious evolution, but now the Jewish people would and should eventually dissolve into a greater American and worldwide population, losing their distinctiveness. Kaplan did not reach the same conclusion, but he shared the same criticism of Reform thought, and he did not believe Jews had any kind of unique religious genius. In fact, careful study of history taught him that Jewish ideas about God were fluid, which posed a problem for Reform that because it was “subject to change from age to age, [it] can scarcely live up to the claim made for it by Reformism that it is ‘the central truth for the human race.’”³² Kaplan struggled to find a reason for Jews to stay Jewish if there was no religious reason why they were set apart from other peoples. There was no distinct Jewish God and no special Jewish mission.

The Race Option

Reform leaders were focused on a monotheistic God as central to Judaism for a key reason. As Reform Rabbi Louis A. Mischkind wrote, “The observer must of course recognize that the unwonted insistence of many Reform leaders upon the purely ‘religious’ aspect of Judaism was due directly to a desire to contrast this phase of Jewish life with the exaggerated emphasis placed by opponents upon the racial or purely blood factor.”³³ If Kaplan wanted to hang on to Judaism without making it purely religious, there was another intellectual option open to him, a path that Adler's hopes for a universal religion and Jewish assimilation had led him to reject. If Jews were

³² Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, 115.

³³ Louis A. Mischkind, “Taking Stock of ‘Reform.’” *The Menorah Journal* 6, no. 5 (October 1920): 295–300.

not a religious group, they could still be a distinct racial one, part of a "Hebrew race" separate from other white Americans. Racial identification could provide an answer to Kaplan's question of "why be a Jew?" with the reply that being Jewish was a matter of blood and inheritance, making it impossible to cease being Jewish. It would also provide a way for secular and religious Jews to claim to be authentically Jewish; they would all share racial kinship with the Jewish people whatever their theological leanings. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, racial science had developed a veneer of scientific plausibility (which it would rapidly lose in the wake of the Shoah), which strengthened the appeal of this option. To his credit, Kaplan ultimately rejected this line of thinking about Jewish identity, seeing Jewish racial distinctiveness as both incorrect and potentially a threat to the acceptance of Jews in the United States.

The idea that Jews were racially distinct from white Americans had a number of prominent adherents among Jews. It was a particularly popular line of thought among Reform rabbis, even though this conflicted with their stated goals of making Judaism into a universal religion. As scholar Eric L. Goldstein documents in his excellent history of Judaism and whiteness, it was not uncommon to see statements like those of Rabbi Solomon Schindler, who touted Jewish racial distinctiveness as the defining characteristic of Jewish identity in his 1887 sermon "Why Am I a Jew?"³⁴ Reform rabbis rarely demonstrated a clear interest in expanding the denomination beyond those born Jewish, seemingly out of a belief that Judaism was a racial identity. In 1896, W.E. Todd, a non-Jew who had been trained for the Congregationalist ministry, wrote to a local rabbi that he had been convinced of the truth of Reform Judaism

³⁴ Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 11. This section is also informed by the broader scholarship on Judaism and whiteness. See: Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 171-200; Karen Brodtkin. *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999).

through his reading and wanted to study at Hebrew Union College to be a rabbi. Todd was as academically qualified as many of the Hebrew Union rabbinical students, who often had limited experience with Jewish religious life. Todd had formal training in ministry and worked in a religious congregation. But despite the profession that Reform aspired to be a universal religion, reaching beyond the confines of Jews, the rabbis responding to Todd determined that he could not be a rabbi because he was not born as a Jew. One wrote, “Let him turn Unitarian, which is the next thing to Reform Judaism.”³⁵ The concept that Jews were as much a racial group as members of a religion persisted in Reform and some Conservative circles into the twentieth century. Articles regularly appeared in academic journals, written by both Jews and non-Jews, debating whether Jews (especially Ashkenazi Jews) constituted a separate race from Europeans, and if so, what kind of race.³⁶ For Jews there were advantages and disadvantages to being seen as “European” or white in the United States. To be included as white might reduce antisemitism, yet to be non-white had the advantage of binding Jews together with strong blood ties. In an era with a widespread fear of secularization, the solidarity of race might be more concrete than that of religion. Racial logics could be very threatening to Jews, however. One non-Jewish Harvard professor of political economy, writing in the *Menorah Journal* to a Jewish audience, offered an ultimatum: “Those who elect to reject the call of Zionism [to create a separate Jewish nation-

³⁵ Bernhard Bettmann quoted in Dana Evan Kaplan, “W. E. Todd’s Attempt to Convert to Judaism and Study for the Reform Rabbinate in 1896,” *American Jewish History* 83, no. 4 (1995): 440.

³⁶For examples see: Stephen G. Rich, “The Jews: Race or Conglomerate,” *The Journal of Educational Sociology* 2, no. 8 (1929): 471–78; Solomon Zeitlin, “The Jews: Race, Nation or Religion: Which? A Study Based on the Literature of the Second Jewish Commonwealth,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 26, no. 4 (1936): 313–47; Maurice Fishberg, “Physical Anthropology of the Jews II.-Pigmentation,” *American Anthropologist* 5, no. 1 (1903): 89–106; Arnold White, “The Jewish Question: How to Solve It,” *The North American Review* 178, no. 566 (1904): 10–24.

state] must therefore do one of two things—they must disappear through amalgamation, or they must endure race hostility.”³⁷

Adler believed that Jews were a distinct race, and he considered himself part of that race. Yet he thought that the existence of Jews as a separate people was a problem because it generated antisemitism. Just as Ethical Culture aspired to allow Jews to assimilate religiously by rejecting the Jewish religion, Adler also hoped that they could assimilate racially. He urged that over generations Jews should amalgamate with other white racial groups, with the end goal of eventually becoming “extinct.” Adler’s racial ideas led him to criticize Jewish endogamy and venerate intermarriage, which served to draw some intermarried couples to Ethical Culture. Early in his career, during an 1880 talk, Adler argued that German antisemitism would cease if the Aryan and Jewish races mixed. He explained that all racial groups had specific racial traits; Jews were gifted in religion and ethics while Aryans were scientific and philosophical, and therefore Germany and the world would benefit from them blending together.³⁸

Early on in his writing, when he was still comfortably within the Conservative Jewish fold, Kaplan, meanwhile, had bought into racial theories, and even mused on the need to maintain racial purity to maintain the vitality of the Jewish race. But by the time he had settled on his intellectual project of Reconstruction, he had come to firmly oppose using race as part of any definition of Judaism. Scholar Noam Pianko observes that “Kaplan was more consciously seeking an alternative to race than his predecessors.”³⁹ As Kaplan explained in his journal in

³⁷ Thomas Nixon Carver, “The Choice Before Jewry,” *The Menorah Journal* 5, no. 1 (February 1919): 8–11.

³⁸ Felix Adler, “The Question of Intermarriage,” *The Standard* IX, no. 5 (January 1923): 171–76; Kraut, 132, 189–191.

³⁹ Goldstein, 182; Noam Pianko, *Zionism and the Roads Not Taken: Rawidowicz, Kaplan, Kohn* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 111–112. Also see: Waxman, “Ethnicity and Faith in American Judaism,” 13.

1928, the concepts of Judaism as a religion or of Jews as a race were not “adequate” to allow Judaism to perpetuate itself in a society like the United States. Avoiding assimilation required “a new concept or thought tool.”⁴⁰ Sharing a racial kinship with other Jews would not solve the problem of how to organize the Jewish community or perpetuate the Jewish religion. It offered a shallow kind of affinity compared with Zionism and culture. According to Kaplan, “racialism, apart from being inconsistent with historical truth, carries with it all the dangerous implications of nationalism without any of the redeeming traits.”⁴¹ Kaplan knew as well as anyone that identifying Jews as a distinctive race could allow antisemites to more easily discriminate against Jews than if they were simply defined as white. He compared the status of Jews to blacks in the United States, observing that “the colored people constitute a race in a far truer and deeper sense than the Jews, yet some of its members would give half their lives to be absorbed by the whites.”⁴² For Kaplan it was important that Jews in the diaspora be able to be fully integrated into the American nation, and for that to happen Jews had to be seen as racially indistinguishable from their Protestant neighbors. Trying to build Jewish solidarity based on an idea that would ensure Jewish rejection from the fruits of American life, Kaplan felt, was ultimately foolish.

The rejection of both halakha and the notion that Jews were a race led Kaplan to contemplate radically new answers to the question of who was a Jew. Tradition had held that the child of a Jewish mother or a convert who underwent a lengthy conversion process, including immersion in a mikvah and an appearance before a rabbinical court, was a Jew. Writing a public appeal in 1959, Kaplan argued that in the modern world there could be no “supernatural basis” for determining Jewish status, and that the traditional notion of matrilineal descent was

⁴⁰ Kaplan, *Communings of the Spirit: Volume I*, 261.

⁴¹ Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, 230.

⁴² Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, 230-231.

outdated. Instead Kaplan argued that “voluntary self-identification with the Jewish people and with its spiritual heritage, however one may interpret it, should make one a Jew.”⁴³ In 1968, shortly after Reconstructionists were organized into a denomination, the movement tried to realize this vision by recognizing the legitimacy of patrilineal descent, accepting that the children of a Jewish father as well as a Jewish mother could be Jewish, if they were raised in Jewish traditions.⁴⁴ The fact that it required the children of either parent to be raised as Jews was a major step towards realizing Kaplan’s ideal that it was culture, rather than blood, that made someone Jewish. Judaism was not supposed to be about any kind of innate biological trait, but about practice and ritual.⁴⁵ In reality the decision still required children to have one Jewish biological parent, so being Jewish was still understood as an inheritable status rather than arising solely from participating in community (which Kaplan had wanted), but it was nevertheless an attempt to loosen the connection between biological kinship and Jewish identity. Reform Judaism would follow Reconstructionism and accept the validity of patrilineal descent in 1983.

Kaplan’s choice to pivot away from racial definitions of Judaism is likely one of the major reasons that Reconstructionism continued to be a viable movement after the Second World War. After the Shoah, there was a stigma attached to racial definitions of Judaism; the Nazis had used such notions to enact the Nuremberg laws and carry out a genocide. On the other hand, Adler’s ideas that Jews should racially disappear through intermarriage and assimilation did not age well, and subsequent Ethical Culture Leaders did not emphasize these aspects of his thought.

⁴³Mordecai M. Kaplan, “‘Dear Friend’ Appeal Letter,” January 20, 1959, Reconstructionist Foundation, Box 47, Folder 1, Doctor Mordecai M. Kaplan, 1959. American Jewish Historical Society, New York, NY.

⁴⁴Dana Evan Kaplan. *Contemporary American Judaism: Transformation and Renewal* (Columbia University Press, 2009), 136-137.

⁴⁵Kaplan’s Zionism (addressed in chapter 6) did have racial aspects, especially his regard for Zionist settlers as a civilizing influence on “savage” Arabs.

The Ritual Option

Perhaps the largest difference between Kaplan and Adler was that Kaplan spent most of his life as a Conservative Jewish rabbi, which led him to place a greater importance on tradition and ritual than did Adler. Prior to founding Ethical Culture, Adler had been steeped in Reform Judaism and its intellectual world. Ethical Culture reached the logical telos implied by Reform thought by stripping away anything particularly Jewish from its services (which notably were held on a Sunday, instead of Saturday). Kaplan was not eager to jettison what he saw as distinctively Jewish practices, and eventually he would determine that they were part of the core of what it meant to be Jewish in the first place.

In theory, Conservative Judaism represented a middle branch of American Judaism, retaining respect for halakha while still being willing to consider reinterpretations in light of the conditions of the present. It aimed to keep much of the tradition prized by Orthodoxy, while allowing a limited amount of the kind of innovation embraced by Reform. In the early twentieth century, the leading philosophical architect of Conservative Judaism was the President of JTS, Solomon Schechter, a European scholar of Judaism. Schechter advanced the notion of “Catholic Israel,” which was supposed to prioritize Jewish unity over differences in theology. In practice, at any given moment Conservative Judaism tended to tilt towards one view or the other; the Rabbinical Assembly bitterly divided into three theological factions, a left wing, a right wing and a center. The right wing was closely connected with Orthodox Judaism and was strongly resistant to any modification of practice that they felt violated European traditions. Kaplan was the leader of the left-wing faction, along with Milton Steinberg, Ira Eisenstein, Solomon Goldman and Eugene Kohn.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Michael R. Cohen, *The Birth of Conservative Judaism: Solomon Schechter's Disciples and the Creation of an American Religious Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Ira

For all his theological liberalism about the nature of God, Kaplan did try to faithfully obey Jewish law. He kept kosher his entire life and urged others to try their best to do so as well.⁴⁷ He was not always entirely scrupulous in his religious observances (on several occasions he guiltily confessed to his journal that he had been writing on the sabbath), but he did make the same effort to keep the sabbath as most Conservative rabbis. Kaplan never wanted Reconstructionism to wholly abandon the halakha, but he did want it to be free to revise halakha to freely to suit modern needs.

Kaplan did not intend halakha to be revised to simply make it *easier* for Jews to assimilate. He felt a visceral discomfort when dealing with Reform rabbis, whom he interpreted as flagrantly violating Jewish law. Once, when visiting Rabbi Stephen Wise in 1923 to inquire about the possibility of taking a professorship at the Reform Jewish-run Jewish Institute of Religion, which might have been more congenial to liberal religious views than JTS, he was upset to find his “deeply rooted Jewish habits jarred” by discovering that Wise’s teenage daughter had just returned from hiking on the sabbath. This was enough for Kaplan to conclude that he could never be entirely comfortable among Reform Jews, with their laxer notions of

Eisenstein, *Reconstructing Judaism: An Autobiography* (Wyncote, PA: The Reconstructionist Press, 1986), 105.

⁴⁷ Scult, *The Radical American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan*, 227. Intellectually, Kaplan would later ground his belief in ritual in the theories of Émile Durkheim. Durkheim’s emphasis on how religious ritual really served as a means of communal solidarity had an obvious appeal to Kaplan, who sought to use it to cement Jewish community. As Mel Scult has documented, however, despite the fact that Kaplan sometimes cited Durkheim as an influence, he could have only read Durkheim’s writings after they were translated into English in 1915, which was after the period when he had already begun to formulate many of the ideas that would make up Reconstructionism. Reconstructionism was Durkheimian in nature, but it was not modeled directly on the ideas of the sociologist. See: Scult, *The Radical American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan*, 92.

sabbath observance.⁴⁸ Though Kaplan had a few Reform followers, most of his close associates agreed with his views.⁴⁹

The Fourth Denomination

Adler's solution to his religious doubts was to leave Judaism. Kaplan had perhaps the harder task. He had to come up with a way to maintain his integrity and remain an observant Jew.

Kaplan's solution was Judaism as a civilization. As a 1961 *Time* profile of Kaplan and Reconstruction described it, "the essential idea of the Reconstructionist movement is that Judaism is neither religion, race nor culture, but a combination of all three, in what Dr. Kaplan calls 'peoplehood.'"⁵⁰ Peoplehood was perhaps not extremely different from what Matthew Arnold had termed culture, comprising tradition, language, religious ritual and nationalism; the theology of Judaism was less important.

Kaplan would first begin to outline his views in a series of articles that appeared in the *Menorah Journal* in 1915 and 1916. This periodical, published by the Menorah Society, regularly included a diverse selection of viewpoints from prominent men in different segments of the Jewish community in the United States. It was considered a highbrow and intellectual outlet.

⁴⁸ Kaplan, *Communings of the Spirit: Volume I*, 181-182. Kaplan did not note another divide that kept him from Reform Judaism. Historically, most Reform Jews had been Ashkenazi Jews of western European, particularly German, descent. Kaplan and most of the people associated with what would become Conservative Judaism were of Eastern European Jewish origin and had immigrated to the United States much more recently. These divisions meant that choosing a Jewish denomination involved more than just matters of theology.

⁴⁹ Steinberg found Reform's rejection of ritual law deeply unsettling, which posed a difficulty when he became rabbi of the Park Avenue synagogue, which was affiliated with the Reform movement. It had non-Jews who sang in the choir and used Reform prayer books. During his time as rabbi he made the choir exclusively Jewish, changed the prayer books and severed the synagogue's connection with the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. See: Simon Noveck, *Milton Steinberg: Portrait of a Rabbi* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, Inc., 1978), 59.

⁵⁰ "Religion: The Reconstructionist," *Time*, June 23, 1961, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,894517,00.html>; Waxman, "Ethnicity and Faith in American Judaism," 161-162.

While the *Time* magazine article refers to Kaplan as "Dr." this is an error as he never received a doctorate.

In “What Judaism is Not,” Kaplan argued that Judaism evolved over time, from the philosophically-infused Platonic thought of Philo to the Haskalah rationalism of Moses Mendelssohn. Judaism needed to become relevant to the modern era, and to do that it had to discard the old metaphysical speculations of the past. Kaplan argued that the time for theology was past; it was instead time to discuss Judaism in terms of history, science and sociology, to speak the “language of concrete and verifiable experience.”⁵¹ In the second article in the series Kaplan went further, insisting that Judaism was not an ethical monotheistic religion, as Reform taught, but “the soul or consciousness of the Jewish people.”⁵²

Ostensibly Kaplan taught homiletics at JTS, instructing the novice rabbis on how to perfect their preaching. His course bore little resemblance to many seminary classes in the subject, however, and improving his students’ oratorical skills was a secondary ambition. Ira Eisenstein, a young rabbinical student at the time, observed that Kaplan demanded of the seminary that his “students would not learn *how* to preach but *what* to preach.”⁵³ Kaplan also held an appointment as the head of the Teachers Institute at JTS where he taught “Religion,” and he sometimes claimed that this was his primary teaching interest; it also crept into his instruction of his rabbinical students. What Kaplan meant when he said he taught religion was that he raised questions about the place of Judaism and the Jewish tradition in the modern world and asked his students to conceptualize how traditional Jewish practice might adapt to accommodate American life. He often began his classes at the Teachers Institute with a survey:

“1. Describe your Jewish upbringing and your reaction to it.

⁵¹ Mordecai M. Kaplan, “What Judaism Is Not” *The Menorah Journal* I, no. 4 (October 1915): 215.

⁵² Mordecai M. Kaplan “What Is Judaism? Second Paper” *The Menorah Journal* 1, no. 5 (December 1915): 309–19.

⁵³ Eisenstein, 64.

2. Give your idea of the history of Judaism; state how Judaism came into existence and whether it has undergone any change, and if it has, what is the nature of those changes.

3. Would you advocate changes for it in the future? If this, of what nature should those changes be?

4. What value do you attach to (a) religious ceremonies, such as the observance of Sabbaths and festivals, dietary laws, etc.? (b) to prayer in general, and to the prayers in our rituals in particular?

5. What do you conceive to be the relation of Jewish nationality to Jewish religion?"⁵⁴

The point of this was to make students realize that Judaism was not a static tradition. While they might study the wisdom of medieval rabbis in other classes, in Kaplan's classes, students like Steinberg were supposed to think about what in Jewish faith could be jettisoned and what should be saved.⁵⁵ Kaplan asked his students to sort through the Jewish traditions in the same way.

Before the Enlightenment, Judaism had been bound together by a shared religious faith, particularly the belief in a personal God and a hope of salvation. Historical criticism of the Bible and scientific developments had imperiled that belief for many of the same reasons that they had come into question among American Protestants. Kaplan's own solution to the dilemma of what to discard and what to retain was far more radical than those of his Christian counterparts, in large part because the problem was more complicated. He felt the threat that was posed by the forces that others labeled the "acids of modernity" was not only to Judaism as a religion but to all Jewish identity. Kaplan saw making students question their faith as a key part of his job. He

⁵⁴ Example quoted from David Kaufman, "Jewish Education as Civilization: A History of the Teachers Institute," In *Tradition Renewed: A History of Jewish Theological Seminary*, edited by Jack Wertheimer (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1997) 1:602-603.

⁵⁵ There is an obvious similarity here with Theodore Parker's effort to distinguish between "transient" and the "permanent" in Christianity, and Adolf von Harnack's notion of "kernel" and "husk."

thought that it was useful if rabbis went through a period of atheism or non-belief, and he looked down on those who never expressed such doubts. Many of Kaplan's students had been raised in traditional observant homes and schooled in yeshivas, and he often seemed to take a kind of delight in raising doubts about the Mosaic authorship of the Torah or the value of various rituals.⁵⁶ But his attempt to destroy the religious worldview of his students was only the first phase of his project. He wanted to build them up again.

Kaplan tended to tap dissatisfied former yeshiva students to teach at the Teachers Institute. In 1915 he wrote of teacher Israel Konowitz, "Konowitz is a man of about forty-two who came from Roumania about ten years ago... He is keen on system and order to a degree seldom to be observed even among college bred men at their best. He is well versed in the usual studies of the 'Yeshivah Bachur' and has a command of both the Bible and Agadah. He makes a very fine appearance, well built, clear face with dark eyes and hair, and black beard. One would little suspect that behind such appearance there lurks a critical faculty that has become dissatisfied with ancient religious values, and that is seeking for light."⁵⁷ Writing before his retirement Kaplan remarked that Teacher's Institute had graduated 675 men and women, 200 of whom had developed Jewish education sizably. He observed that many of the most important Jewish communal leaders were Teachers Institute graduates.⁵⁸

With a core composed of men he had trained for the rabbinate at JTS, Kaplan forged a tight-knit social circle, and this would become the nucleus of the board of *The Reconstructionist* in 1934, the flagship periodical of what Kaplan hoped would be a religious movement that would spread across the major Jewish denominations. Twice weekly board meetings for the

⁵⁶ Ira Eisenstein, *Reconstructing Judaism*, 63-64.

⁵⁷ Kaplan quoted in Kaufman, "Jewish Education as Civilization," 1:591.

⁵⁸ Kaufman, "Jewish Education as Civilization," 1:611.

Reconstructionist often took place in Kaplan's house.⁵⁹ The literal familial closeness of the leaders of the movement resulted in a widespread joke that Reconstructionists had their own version of the holy trinity: the father Mordecai Kaplan, his son-in-law Ira Eisenstein, who was also his heir apparent as leader of the movement and who served as the assistant rabbi at SAJ, and holy ghostwriter, Eugene Kohn, one of Kaplan's former students. The closeness did not always mean that things functioned smoothly. Judith Eisenstein would verbally spar with her father, even about his work, cursing his insistence on "God-damned perfectionism" which kept him from finishing *Judaism as Civilization* for over a decade. Ira Eisenstein lamented that Mordecai Kaplan could be a "dominating presence," and Eisenstein spent half-a-dozen years in Chicago, which he claimed was partially an effort to put some distance between himself and his father-in-law.⁶⁰ One of Kaplan's other acolytes was Rabbi Max Kadushin, who earned the nickname "his master's voice" from his JTS classmates due to his loyalty to Kaplan (the nickname explicitly compared Kadushin to the dog in the famous gramophone ad). When Kadushin tried to leave New York to get some distance from Kaplan, he had his wife confront the elder rabbi, who, according to Kaplan's biography, "told him of her unhappiness with the fact that Kaplan was dominating her husband."⁶¹

Deborah Waxman has cautioned against using Kaplan as a stand-in for all Reconstructionist thought, pointing out that there were other collaborators that led to the creation of the Reconstructionist movement. Yet Waxman also acknowledges Kaplan exerted an intense amount of control over the early movement and its beliefs.⁶² Just as Adler could never be disentangled from Ethical Culture, and early Ethical Culture is very much rooted in Adler's

⁵⁹ Noveck, *Milton Steinberg*, 88.

⁶⁰ Eisenstein, 172, 134, 235.

⁶¹ Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century*, 233.

⁶² Waxman, "Ethnicity and Faith in American Judaism," 21-24.

biography, the beginnings of Reconstructionism were rooted in Kaplan's life and ideas, even if both men saw their followers take slightly different tacks.

Kaplan could be commanding but he did not want mindless followers. He could tolerate and encourage a certain amount of intellectual dissent within Reconstructionism. Steinberg, for instance, disagreed with Kaplan's naturalistic theology and thought that Judaism should have some kind of clear concept of God. What mattered to Kaplan was loyalty to him and the movement, which Steinberg professed. As he once told Kaplan, "I am in your debt for an entire system of thought, for much of my Jewish orientation, for whole areas of my ideals, communal and individual, and for the demonstration afforded by your own life of the attainability of these ideals and of their dignity when they take on embodiment."⁶³

To a significant degree, Kaplan's bravado and his desire to command covered up his intense self-doubts and depressions, which he candidly confessed in the pages of his journal. He would despair about the fact that he had not published a book until his mid-40s, or that he often mangled Hebrew and spoke it in public only with great difficulty, and that while he projected confidence, it was largely a mask for others.⁶⁴ While he had a reputation for terrifying students, he was far more brutal on himself than he was on almost anyone else.

The same year that Kaplan formed the board of the *Reconstructionist*, he published his magnum opus, *Judaism as Civilization*, a lengthy and intellectually broad work that drew from a vast number of influences. It favorably referenced Adler, though because he was a controversial figure within American Judaism, Kaplan did not emphasize his influence. The other sources of Kaplan's thought were eclectic. Kaplan could toss off a reference on one page to cultural Zionist

⁶³Milton Steinberg, "Letter to Mordecai Kaplan," May 21, 1945, Milton Steinberg (1903-1950) Papers; P-369; box 3; folder 9, American Jewish Historical Society, New York, NY.

⁶⁴Mel Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century*, 208. Mordecai Kaplan, *Communings of the Spirit: Volume One*, 179, 225, 244

Ahad Ha-am, quote the writings of Emile Durkheim on religion and a few pages later draw inspiration from Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West*. Other references in *Judaism as Civilization* would not have been out of place in a work written by a theologically liberal Protestant. Deborah Waxman, currently the President of Reconstructing Judaism, noted in her history of the movement, "In its approach to religion, Reconstructionism shared much with expressions of religious liberalism that emerged in Christianity as well as Judaism in the nineteenth and early twentieth century."⁶⁵ For the idea that the doctrines of the Jewish religion were not a fixed system of eternal truth, but rather were historically contingent and hence subject to revision, Kaplan credited the University of Chicago Divinity School Dean Shailer Matthews, who had said the same thing about Christianity. Like any good American religious liberal, Kaplan also invoked Emerson.⁶⁶ These liberal Christian influences were intentional. Kaplan was attentive to the changes among Christian groups and saw the embrace of many Protestant denominations of modernism as a sign that they were more responsive than Judaism was to changing conditions. In 1920 he wrote in the pages of the *Menorah Journal* that "the churches, which are the last to yield to the demands for change, have become extremely active of late and are making desperate efforts to hold onto the hearts of the masses." Jews could not afford to avoid making similar, or even more drastic accommodations to changing social and religious conditions.⁶⁷

Yet if there was a clear source other than Adler for the ideas that drove Kaplan in *Judaism as a Civilization*, and for creating Reconstructionism as a movement, it was the pragmatists. Just as

⁶⁵Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, 74, 185, 261, 466, 536; Waxman, "Ethnicity and Faith in American Judaism," 9.

⁶⁶ Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, 468, 125, 499.

⁶⁷ Mordecai M. Kaplan, "A Program for the Reconstruction of Judaism," *The Menorah Journal* 6, no. 4 (August 1920): 181–96.

they had for Rufus Jones and the Quakers, the writings of William James underpinned much of the religious understandings of Kaplan and his Reconstructionist followers.⁶⁸ For Kaplan, James was central. He was mentioned throughout *Judaism as Civilization* and Kaplan taught James to his students at JTS; they would meet every Saturday night to discuss his ideas about religious experience. Above all, Kaplan and the Reconstructionists took the notion from James that the consequences of a belief, the cash value, was its most important aspect.⁶⁹

Kaplan and his followers were equally indebted to another pragmatist, Columbia University philosophy professor John Dewey. Emerging as a national figure by the early twentieth century, Dewey was a religious naturalist whose conception of God was as a metaphor, rather than a personal, supernatural or existent entity. Dewey extolled the virtues of democracy and shared democratic culture, something Kaplan prized even while he insisted that Jews could maintain an existence in two worlds, both American and Jewish civilizations. In 1934, the same year that Kaplan published *Judaism as a Civilization*, Dewey delivered the Terry Lectures at Yale University, which would be published as *A Common Faith*.⁷⁰ While there is evidence that Kaplan invented the term “Reconstruction” independently, as his way of describing the need for the reformulation of Jewish life in the modern era, he would have been aware that two of his key influences had popularized the term: Dewey in the 1919 *The Reconstruction of Philosophy* and Adler in the 1924 *The Reconstruction of the Spiritual Ideal*.⁷¹ Kaplan admired Dewey so much

⁶⁸ Adler had a slight connection to James; one of his proteges, the Ethical Leader William Mackintire Salter, was married to James’s sister-in-law and was a frequent correspondent of the philosopher, but there is no obvious evidence that James loomed large in Adler’s thought. See: Amy Kittelstrom, *The Religion of Democracy: Seven Liberals and the American Moral Tradition* (New York: Penguin Press, 2015), 260.

⁶⁹ Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century*, 395.

⁷⁰ Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, 117, 385.

⁷¹ Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century*, 61; John Dewey, *The Reconstruction of Philosophy* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1920); Felix Adler, *The Reconstruction of the Spiritual Ideal* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1924).

that he at times used his work as part of his daily devotions, praying using Dewey's words. It was a vacation ritual; on the Jersey shore Kaplan would substitute Dewey and Cultural Zionist leader Ahad Ha-Am's writings in place of a traditional siddur.⁷² Kaplan's colleagues at JTS were aware of his affinity for Dewey. On one occasion, the Talmud Professor Louis Ginzberg delivered a veiled criticism of Kaplan's theological views by publicly declaring at a Hanukkah party that "long after John Dewey is forgotten, the Talmud will live on."⁷³

Kaplan's followers found similar inspiration. Milton Steinberg was perhaps even more enthralled with Dewey than was his mentor. He took classes from Dewey at Columbia during his studies at JTS. According to his biographer, it was during these times when Steinberg "came the closest to having what he described as a mystical experience."⁷⁴ It seems paradoxical that Steinberg's closest connection to the Divine was in the classroom of perhaps the best known American skeptic of traditional religion and God, but Steinberg apparently saw himself as broadminded enough to draw such inspiration from even unlikely sources, which was one of the reasons he found himself aligned with Kaplan in the first place.

Kaplan tried to spread his message not just to his fellow rabbis and his students at JTS, but also to the Jewish laity. He was not always successful at communicating the nuances of his theology, and Kaplan's preaching was so dense that it was sometimes difficult for his audience to understand. Yet this did not mean that Kaplan was unable to convey his beliefs. He was able to communicate his vision of a Judaism without supernaturalism, with a reinterpreted idea of God, and based on a shared sense of peoplehood, in many interactions he had with those who sought his guidance or wisdom as a rabbi. To enable this outreach, Kaplan set up the SAJ.

⁷² Scult, *The Radical American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan*, 213.

⁷³ Ira Eisenstein, *Reconstructing Judaism*, 109.

⁷⁴ Noveck, *Milton Steinberg*, 1, 34.

The ideas that would eventually undergird Reconstructionism were integrated into Kaplan's ministry at the SAJ. Reconstructionism may have been deeply philosophical, but serious efforts were undertaken to make its ideas intelligible to the laity. Judith Kaplan Eisenstein wrote music and plays for the SAJ that positively celebrated living in an age of religious skepticism. One song she wrote had the lyrics:

Everything is upside down./ David never wore a crown/ Shyster lawyers wrote the Torah/
Psalms belong in the Gemorrah/ Dearie me, can it be./ Revelation is not true/ Abraham was not a
Jew/ Ezekiel was a prophet false/ Miriam danced a Danube waltz/ So they say, anyway./ Ten
commandments were lobbied thru/ By the W.C.T.U/ Evidences still remain/ That Yahweh rode
by aeroplane/ SO WHAT?⁷⁵

The point of this silly song was that even the most shocking revelation, like the idea that "Yahweh rode by aeroplane," a sly reference to the idea that God was limited or nonexistent, could be handled by the community. Another song about the SAJ set to the tune of the Internationale begins with the phrase "O come, ye doubters of revelation."⁷⁶ Judith Kaplan Eisenstein's tone was more jocular than her father's, but her insistence on Judaism without a conventional idea of a God echoed his, and it was a message that she communicated to everyone in the pews.

Sylvia G.L. Dannett, who grew up in the SAJ and would later have a career as a writer, complained that sometimes as a child, "[Kaplan's] sermons became so profoundly philosophical I couldn't understand them and Dad had to explain their content to me." Yet she would still cite Kaplan alongside her parents as the largest spiritual influence on her life. Even as a child she

⁷⁵ Judith K. Eisenstein, "Mix-Up," N.D. RG 2, Ira and Judith K. Eisenstein Plays, Scripts and Cantatas, Box 17, Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, Ira and Judith Kaplan Eisenstein Reconstructionist Archives.

⁷⁶ Judith K. Eisenstein, "What Is the SAJ?," N.D. RG 2, Ira and Judith K. Eisenstein Plays, Scripts and Cantatas, Box 17, Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, Ira and Judith Kaplan Eisenstein Reconstructionist Archives.

recognized that he had removed traditional prayers from the siddur, particularly those prayers in which Jews thanked God for not being made gentiles and men thanked God for not being made women, which she saw as an essential modernization of Jewish practice. Reflecting on those changes years later, she wondered how any Jews could continue to use the old language, which she felt was sexist and prejudiced. Kaplan's influence, she explained, ultimately caused her to "awaken to my Jewish world."⁷⁷ The complexity of Kaplan's arguments may have been lost, but Dannett understood that he was changing Judaism in ways that she agreed with, that his interventions removed what otherwise would have been obstacles to her being religious in the first place.

Kaplan's convictions about the divine also found their way into his pastoral work. In 1927 he was sought out by newspaper editor Thomas P. Sherman of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, to facilitate his conversion to Judaism so that he could marry his Jewish fiancée, Pearl Wachmann. Sherman agreed to convert in order to get the consent of Wachmann's father for the marriage, but he detested the idea of being Jewish and wrote Kaplan that he found the Jewish faith irrational. Kaplan replied back, arguing forcefully that Judaism was about more than mere belief; individuals stood anchored in great communities, and one could not simply practice ethical life using a common set of universal ethics because such a thing did not exist. Kaplan contended that communities like Judaism shaped people in subtle ways. "It smacks of ingratitude for people who live on the momentum of great traditions," he wrote, "to take unto themselves entirely the credit for what they are, without recognizing the social forces to which they owe perhaps the best

⁷⁷Sylvia G.L. Dannett, "Rabbi Mordecai Menachem Kaplan, My Rabbi," 1967. RG 1, Articles about Mordecai M. Kaplan, Box 19, Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, Ira and Judith Kaplan Eisenstein Reconstructionist Archives.

that is in them."⁷⁸ Kaplan's eloquent letter encapsulated the core of Reconstructionist doctrine, that Judaism was about more than theology, it was about peoplehood. Its arguments persuaded Sherman to undergo circumcision by a surgeon as part of the conversion process, but his fiancée broke up with him immediately afterwards, making a painful end of his attempt to join the Jewish people.⁷⁹

Hersey and Acceptance

Adler's renunciation of Judaism had made him a veritable boogieman for Jews. Kaplan's "reconstruction" of Judaism was more accepted but did not meet with universal approbation. Charles Clayton Morrison, the editor of the *Christian Century*, who had lavished such praise on Jones and liberal Quakers, expressed scorn and fear of the new movement. Morrison implied in the pages of his journal that by conceiving of Jews as more than a religious group, Kaplan and the Reconstructionists would make it impossible for the Jewish people to assimilate in the United States. Morrison argued that both Jews and Christians should feel that their religion was correct and contend against each other over the merits of their faith. He seemed to imply this would result in Jews being converted to Christianity, which would mean that Jewishness would cease. He did not accept the idea that there could be mutually respectful toleration of separate ideas of religious truth. Moreover, he raged against the idea that Reconstructionists would want a pluralistic identity as both Americans and members of a Jewish civilization, which he regarded as really "indivisible from the Jewish race" and a "self-contained national community within the

⁷⁸ Mordecai M. Kaplan, "Letter to Thomas P. Sherman," August 3, 1927, RG 1, Mordecai M. Kaplan Correspondence, Box 22, Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, Ira and Judith Kaplan Eisenstein Reconstructionist Archives.

⁷⁹ Thomas B. Sherman, "Letter to Mordecai Kaplan," 1927, RG 1, Mordecai M. Kaplan Correspondence, Box 22, Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, Ira and Judith Kaplan Eisenstein Reconstructionist Archives; Pearl Wachmann, "Letter to Mordecai M. Kaplan," September 12, 1927, RG 1, Mordecai M. Kaplan Correspondence, Box 22, Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, Ira and Judith Kaplan Eisenstein Reconstructionist Archives.

American national community.” If Jews did not assimilate, Morrison warned, the “spirit of tolerance would shrivel up.”⁸⁰ The end of the article was perceived by Reconstructionists as an antisemitic threat, though not one that Morrison ever carried out.⁸¹

The Jewish community also reacted negatively. Conservative Judaism still hoped to maintain connections with the Orthodox, and Kaplan’s theological radicalism prevented that. Kaplan’s presence as a professor at JTS was one of the chief reasons that a planned merger between JTS and the Orthodox-run Yeshiva University collapsed.⁸² Reform was equally leery. Abram Hirschberg, a Reform rabbi from Chicago, explained that “there are many men in the liberal rabbinate of America who are uncompromisingly opposed to Dr. Kaplan’s belabored thesis that Judaism is a civilization. To be a Jew, as we understand the term, is not to belong to a Jewish nation, but to follow a certain religious credo, to follow a definite spiritual way of life, to belong to an historic people, whose genius found its most eloquent expression, not in any particular racial heritage or any distinctive national culture but in ethical monotheism that has given to the world its God and its compelling sense of moral responsibility.”⁸³

The Orthodox response to Kaplan was the most dramatic. When Kaplan published *Judaism as Civilization* he was savaged by some critics. One Orthodox writer, making a pun on the wording of the Islamic creed, the Shahada, declared that Kaplan’s work was intended to prove “There is no God and Kaplan is his prophet.”⁸⁴ Orthodox rabbis in New York belonging to the

⁸⁰ Charles Clayton Morrison, “The Jewish Problem.” *The Christian Century* LIII, no. 18 (April 26, 1936): 624–26; Deborah Waxman, “Ethnicity and Faith in American Judaism: Reconstructionism as Ideology and Institution, 1935-1959.” Dissertation, Temple University, 2010, 101-111.

⁸¹ Ira Eisenstein, “Ira Eisenstein Journal,” May 5, 1936, RG 2, Ira and Judith K. Eisenstein, Box 37, Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, Ira and Judith Kaplan Eisenstein Reconstructionist Archives.

⁸² Mel Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century*, 213-215.

⁸³ Abram Hirschberg, “Identifying the Jew.” *The Christian Century* LIII, no. 19 (May 6, 1936): 676.

⁸⁴ Aaron Rosmarin quoted in Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century*, 343; Edward K. Kaplan, *Spiritual Radical: Abraham Joshua Heschel in America, 1940-1972* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 73.

Agudat HaRabbanim formally excommunicated Kaplan in 1945, seeing him as a heretic after the publication of a Reconstructionist prayer book that tried to implement Kaplan's ideas liturgically. They burned the book after the excommunication.⁸⁵ Rabbi Leo Jung would angrily declare that "Reconstructionism is the destruction of the Jewish faith" and accused Kaplan of "creating a new 'religion'" entirely from borrowings from Jewish tradition.⁸⁶ Though the ruling would have little effect on Kaplan's daily life, the censure clearly hurt him deeply. Milton Steinberg wrote to comfort Kaplan, telling him that the Orthodox rabbis had engaged in "medieval barbarities," and that Kaplan still commanded Steinberg's allegiance and affection. He told Kaplan that the prayer book would have a lasting impact. Steinberg noted that his father, a man who was "Orthodox, but rationally so," found the book edifying and even loaned it to his friends. Steinberg thought that it was just a matter of time before their shared liberal religious sentiments prevailed, declaring "that which is reviled today by bigots will be lauded by their fairer-minded children."⁸⁷

Kaplan wouldn't have to wait for the next generation for his ideas to find some degree of acceptance. By 1937, four years before his excommunication by the Orthodox, Reform Judaism had begun to integrate some key Reconstructionist ideas into the Columbus Platform, the statement of faith that replaced the Pittsburgh Platform. The Columbus Platform referred to the "Jewish people," rather than just the "Jewish religion," essentially accepting Kaplan's idea that Jews were defined by peoplehood as much as by their theology. The statement also echoed

⁸⁵ Zachary Silver, "The Excommunication of Mordecai Kaplan." *The American Jewish Archives Journal* LXII, no. 1 (2010): 21–48; Jeffrey S. Gurock and Jacob J. Schacter. *A Modern Heretic and a Traditional Community: Mordecai M. Kaplan, Orthodoxy and American Judaism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 140-141.

⁸⁶ Leo Jung quoted from Gurock and Schacter. *A Modern Heretic and a Traditional Community*, 143.

⁸⁷ Milton Steinberg, "Letter to Mordecai Kaplan," June 13, 1945, Milton Steinberg (1903-1950) Papers; P-369; box 3; folder 9, American Jewish Historical Society, New York, NY.

Kaplan in calling for maintaining Jewish culture and practices as far as was possible, a reverse of Reform's earlier antipathy towards much of traditional ritual. It also allowed Reform Jews to choose to support Zionism, formerly an extremely divisive subject among the denomination, which had seen the creation of a Jewish nation as an impediment to assimilation into American society. (Kaplan's own relationship to Zionism is discussed in chapter 6.) It even had subtle echoes of Kaplan's views on God, during the revisions of the platform references to a personal God excluded from the document, a sign of the growing influence of humanists and religious naturalist rabbis within the Reform movement.⁸⁸

Reform did not emulate Reconstructionists in all respects. Reform might have allowed Zionism, but they did not make it a central part of their identity, and this came to be a critical difference between the two groups. Almost a decade after the Columbus Platform was passed, Reform Rabbi William H. Fineschriber, speaking to the media, disparaged Reconstructionism as simply being "Reform Judaism with a Zionist base."⁸⁹ Significant theological differences also remained between the two groups. While many Reform rabbis had largely abandoned the idea of a supernatural, interventionist deity, and some went further into outright religious naturalism or humanism, officially, Reform notions of God would also still have excluded Kaplan's own theistic naturalism and non-theism. Reform Judaism continued to see monotheism as of paramount importance, denoting theism as the "fundamental standard" of Reform Judaism.⁹⁰ Reform Jews were theological liberals, who shared many ideas with Reconstructionists, but most

⁸⁸ Sarna, *American Judaism*, 51; Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 319-320.

⁸⁹ "Prof. M. Kaplan Raps Orthodox and Reform." *Jewish Times, Philadelphia*, February 1, 1946, RG 1, Articles about Mordecai M. Kaplan, Box 18, Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, Ira and Judith Kaplan Eisenstein Reconstructionist Archives.

⁹⁰ Meyer, *Response to Modernity*, 319. For further reflection on Reform Judaism's drift towards God-optional religion and the controversy about the inclusion of non-theism see the epilogue.

of the denomination was not willing to embrace the God-optional direction that Reconstructionism had taken.

Beyond Reform Judaism, Kaplan's views would have a wide impact. Kaplan even served as an inspiration for Jewish literature. Author Chaim Potok, who graduated from JTS a few years after Kaplan left, would include a fictionalized portrayal of the Reconstructionist leader in his 1969 novel *The Promise*, the follow-up to his best-seller *The Chosen*. Set during the 1950s in New York City, Kaplan's stand-in in the novel is a supporting character named Abraham Gordon, a professor and rabbi at a thinly fictionalized version of JTS who embraces historical criticism.⁹¹ Gordon's views are so controversial that he is excommunicated by a group of Orthodox rabbis, a clear reference to Kaplan's own excommunication. Gordon's books do not merely challenge the idea of a six-day creation or a literal revelation on Sinai. They raise the question of what it means to be a Jew in a modern scientific age when these ideas have become implausible. Gordon is intellectually alluring and dangerous, particularly because his reformulation of Jewish life extends to the very existence of God. Potok explains in the novel:

Gordon was a humanist, a naturalist. For him supernaturalism and mysticism were irrelevant to modern thought. Revelation was a fiction, believed in by the ancients but no longer believable today. Religion was a creation of man; its purpose was to make meaningful certain aspects of human existence. Religious rituals heightened the routinized activities of man. God was a lofty human idea, a goal, a man created aspiration, an abstract guarantor of the intrinsic meaningfulness of the universe.⁹²

⁹¹ In the novel Gordon teaches at Zechariah Frankel Seminary, named after a key early thinker in what would become Conservative Judaism. Like the real JTS, it is a center of Conservative Jewish thought located in Manhattan.

⁹² Chaim Potok, *The Promise* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1969), 77.

The bulk of the novel's plot hinges around the protagonist Reuven and his friend Danny Saunders's efforts to cure the mental illness of Gordon's son, who suffers psychological trauma due to the Orthodox condemnations of his father. While being excommunicated no doubt troubled the real Kaplan, there is no evidence of any effects as dramatic as those in the novel occurring.

Potok's reimagined Kaplan is a bit more polished than the real version. Gordon, unlike Kaplan, is a scholar with a PhD rather than a rabbi, a more prestigious position of which Kaplan would likely have been envious. Gordon is soft-spoken and gentle, while Kaplan's charisma and forceful personality were essential to attracting disciples and followers, making it a large part of why Reconstructionism emerged

At points in *The Promise*, Gordon was clearer at articulating the ideals of Reconstructionism than Kaplan often was.

Kaplan's former student Milton Steinberg also conveyed Reconstructionist teachings in his writings. Rabbi Steinberg's deeply personal and emotionally powerful 1939 novel *Like a Driven Leaf* placed the drama of modern religious doubt about Judaism firmly into the past. The novel depicted a heavily fictionalized version of Rabbi Elisha Ben Abuyah, a historical figure briefly mentioned in the Talmud and other rabbinic literature, as Steinberg wrote about the seduction of Greek philosophy and the political upheavals of the Bar Kochba revolts of the second century. In the novel, Elisha is taught Greek philosophy in childhood, but after his father's death he is raised to be a devout Jew, eventually becoming a rabbi and a member of the governing body of Judaism, the Sanhedrin. His early philosophical training causes him to doubt his beliefs, and eventually the problem of theodicy leads Elisha to renounce Judaism and belief in God. With his religious convictions shattered, Elisha is excommunicated. He goes to Antioch with the hope of developing a philosophy that will provide a solid foundation for morals, ethics and a belief in God with the same mathematical certainty as Euclid was able to prove geometry.

As he is trying to create such a systematic philosophy, he runs afoul of the Roman governor of Antioch and is forced to choose between dying horrifically by torture or aiding the Romans against the rebellious Jews. Elisha reluctantly aids the Romans, complicit in the devastation of Judea in an orgy of violence. The depiction seems to thematically anticipate the horrors that Europeans Jews would shortly undergo. Elisha repents at the end of the novel, and at the book's

as a viable branch of Judaism. Yet Potok was essentially truthful in portraying Kaplan's ideas and his understanding of how Judaism would develop.

conclusion he is a broken man, upset at having betrayed his people and convinced that there is no logical way to prove religious truth because there is no way to prove first principles. Elisha, as an author surrogate, explains at the end of the novel:

For all truth rests ultimately on some act of faith, geometry on axioms, the sciences on the assumptions of the objective existence of the world of nature. In every realm one must lay down postulates or he shall have nothing at all. So with morality and religion. Faith and reason are not antagonists. On the contrary, salvation is through the commingling of the two, the former to establish first premises, the later to purify them of confusion and to draw the fulness of their implications. It is not certainty which one acquires so, only plausibility, but that is the best we can hope for.⁹³

Elisha explains that he should have realized that he already possessed what he needed without the need for further religious seeking. Religion exists to give life meaning, he explains, and to create human connection and fellowship. Writing about the novel, historian Jonathan Steinberg, the son of the author, correctly observes that there is “more than a whiff of John Dewey, William James and Mordecai Kaplan in the idea that faith is merely a ‘pattern of behavior’ designed to ‘express devotion to his fellows.’”⁹⁴

Steinberg wrote several non-fiction works, the most well-known of which was the 1946 *Basic Judaism*, a guide to Judaism for gentiles and Jews with little background in their own faith. Though the book was marketed as “nondenominational” in its Judaism, offering a simple overview, it really advanced a Reconstructionist view of theology. Steinberg argued that Jews did not have a fixed creed, providing them with intellectual freedom; this was almost identical to the argument made by Quakers and Unitarians. As he wrote in *Basic Judaism*, Judaism was “basically libertarian on issues of theology” allowing adherents “considerable latitude as to

⁹³ Milton Steinberg, *As A Driven Leaf* (New York: Behrman House, 1939), 473.

⁹⁴ Jonathan Steinberg, “Milton Steinberg, American Rabbi: Thoughts on His Centenary,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 95, no. 3 (2005): 588-589.

conceptions of [God].” Each person had to decide what they thought of God; “whether He is envisaged as transcendent or immanent, whether as an abstract principle of being or . . . as supremely personal.” Everything from Spinozan pantheism to a traditional belief in a supernatural God who had physically given Torah to Moses on Sinai was permissible. Different philosophies of Judaism might legitimately develop different images of God; as he put it, “Rationalists comprehend Him through reason, mystics through intuition, traditionalists in Torah, moralists in the good life.”⁹⁵ There were a few restrictions; Jews could not believe in intermediaries between themselves and God, or in any kind of vicarious salvation, because those things were Christian, but otherwise a broad latitude of views was healthy.⁹⁶ As he put it, there could really be “no adequate description of God” because God was “too big for us,” but each perspective on God might contain a small element of divine truth.⁹⁷ Steinberg saw this pluralism of beliefs about God as one of the great strengths of Judaism, allowing everyone to find a personal “God-Idea” that spoke to them.

Basic Judaism continues to be popular into the twenty-first century, often serving as individuals’ first exposure to Jewish thought. Another of Kaplan’s followers, Ira Eisenstein, wrote *Creative Judaism*, a popular summary of the ideas presented in his father-in-law’s book *Judaism as a Civilization*. Unlike *Basic Judaism*, it declared its Reconstructionist influence overtly and became an important text for congregations that were increasingly defining themselves as separate from the rest of Conservative Judaism.

In 1968, Reconstructionists, at the prodding of Ira Eisenstein, founded Reconstructionist Rabbinical Seminary just outside Philadelphia, allowing them to train rabbis independent of the

⁹⁵ Milton Steinberg, *Basic Judaism* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1947), 34, 39, 51.

⁹⁶ Steinberg, *Basic Judaism*, 57-58.

⁹⁷ Steinberg, *Basic Judaism*, 53.

Conservative or Reform movements and definitively marking this as a new branch of Judaism. Kaplan's idea that Judaism itself would be transformed by his Reconstructionist vision proved only partially accurate. Reconstructionist views that Judaism was not purely a religious identity had achieved acceptance, particularly in Reform circles, but Kaplan's theological idea that one could be Jewish and not believe in any kind of transcendent God only truly found a place in the newly emerging Reconstructionist denomination. As Deborah Waxman explains, Reconstructionists argued, "Religion itself could be radically redefined to have meaning in a modern context. A supernatural God could be set aside as a conception of the divine created by an earlier generation of Jews to meet their social and religious needs."⁹⁸ Even if they were willing to accept that it was Jewish culture and identity that made people Jews, and not race or religious beliefs, Kaplan's reconceptualization was too radical for even many theologically liberal Jews.

Adler's ideas, on the other hand, did not meet with as much sustained success. There was another generation of Ethical Leaders after Adler who tended towards materialism and naturalistic theologies while rejecting his Kantian worldview. Ethical Culture's Fieldston School and other institutions persisted, though the movement never had the mass success that Adler had dreamed possible. By the time of his death, no one thought that Ethical Culture was a serious rival to any form of Judaism. It was simply a small religious group of its own.

Kaplan's choice not to leave Judaism meant that he was ultimately more influential than Adler, his old teacher. Kaplan, unlike Adler, is still studied closely by clergy and laity. His ideas are not purely historical curiosities, and still seem to represent a dynamic path for the

⁹⁸ Waxman, "Ethnicity and Faith in American Judaism," 364.

future of Judaism. Unlike Adler, Kaplan had managed to find a path that could enable him to stay in the faith of his childhood, without sacrificing his intellectual integrity.

Chapter Four: Outgrowing the Past

One weekend in winter 1925, Albert C. Dieffenbach, the editor of the Unitarian denominational magazine *The Christian Register*, made a visit to the Twin Cities to give a guest sermon at the churches of two very different kinds of ministers, Frederick May Eliot of St. Paul and John H. Dietrich of Minneapolis. Recounting the trip afterwards to his readers, Dieffenbach pointed out that among the entire American Unitarian Association it would be hard to envision two congregations with a sharper contrast; they were “as far apart as East is from West.” On paper the two communities had much in common; both ministers were religious liberals, both were successful preachers, and their respective churches were thriving and packed with members. What separated them were divergent positions on the central issue in 1920s Unitarian theology. Eliot was a theist and Dietrich was a humanist.

On the Sunday morning when Dieffenbach visited Dietrich’s humanist congregation, he found the auditorium packed. He estimated that there were over 700 people present: the usual Sunday audience, eager to hear his sermon. There would have been an even larger crowd, but municipal safety regulations prevented more people from clustering together in the theater where Dietrich usually preached. Each week the congregation gathered to hear a message on how humanity, not God, could overcome adversity and solve the world’s problems. In his guest sermon, Dieffenbach denounced the fundamentalist movement and defended evolution -- light fare for a crowd used to their usual minister mocking the idea of any kind of supernaturalism, seeing no use for God in his religion. Dieffenbach was impressed by the audience, who “were of the kind we regard as beyond the ordinary church, pioneers and radicals, with critical but fair attitude, and one standard, rational truth.” Dieffenbach found the idea of humanism seductive, with its rejection of the importance of the existence of God and its praise of human potential.

After a relaxing meal Dieffenbach went over to Frederick May Eliot's church to give an evening sermon. Held in a conventional steepled church building, the service seemed much more traditional. Dieffenbach gave the same sermon, although here his views were more provocative, a challenge to his listeners. Around half of the 300 people in the pews came from mainline Protestant churches, "inquiring orthodox minds" as Dieffenbach explained, who liked Eliot and were willing to give Unitarianism a chance.¹ According to Dieffenbach, whereas Dietrich reached out to those whose radical religious views might otherwise have left them unchurched, Eliot drew from those mainliners whose loyalty to tradition otherwise might never have allowed them to set foot in a Unitarian church.

The most remarkable thing, readers of *The Christian Register* were informed, was that the two ministers were not at odds. Despite their differing theological convictions, they were friends, and Dieffenbach lauded this collegiality as what separated Unitarianism from other denominations, explaining: "The thing which surely unites them is the perfect law of liberty. That is the great central principle and dogma—it is a dogma—of Unitarianism."² Unitarians might not agree on theology, but they did agree that theology was up to each person to decide for themselves. The article underplayed just how much tension existed between the two factions in Unitarianism and presented the solution of mutual tolerance as far simpler than it was, yet it contained elements of truth. While full of angst, the emergence of humanist thought into Unitarianism never became a full-fledged schism because of the strong Unitarian commitment to freedom of belief.

Tensions

¹ Albert C. Dieffenbach, "Preaching in the Twin Cities," *The Christian Register* 104, no. 46 (November 12, 1925): 1113.

² Dieffenbach, "Preaching in the Twin Cities," 1113.

Like the preceding chapters, this one uses the lives and thoughts of denominational religious leaders to explain how a denomination came to accept a diversity of positions on the nature and existence of God during the first half of the twentieth century. That process for Unitarians, however, was substantially different than it had been for Quakers or Reconstructionist Jews. Like Reconstructionist Jews, Unitarians were led by a closely connected cohort of male clergy, but they differed because unlike the Reconstructionists, the Unitarians began the century as an independent denomination. As a denomination the Unitarians were a far more unified body than were the Quakers; they had no major schisms. At the same time, they were less rooted to their traditions and dependent on the legacy of their forebears than Quakers were; being “Unitarian” was a commitment to values rather than a commitment to being part of a people. Yet Unitarians were still sectarian. For its members, being a Unitarian symbolized currency with new religious developments and robust intellectual freedom, and standing on the vanguard of religious liberalism. Humanists and theists within Unitarianism might argue about what the limit of that intellectual freedom should be, and whether that freedom extended to not believing in God. But nonetheless, Unitarians chose to allow for that diversity of theological thought, rather than to impose conformity.

This chapter starts by considering the career of the main opponent of humanism within the Unitarian fold, William L. Sullivan. Often caricatured in modern Unitarian denominational histories as a voice of religious conservatism, Sullivan was a complex figure who had once been a leading liberal but who lived to be considered an anachronism. Sullivan started his career as a Catholic priest, but his scholarship and theologically modernist convictions led him to leave that faith, abandoning the notion that Jesus was God, to become a Unitarian minister and evangelist. Sullivan was at the vanguard of liberal evangelicalism in the 1910s and early 1920s, only to

rapidly find himself outpaced by the degree of theological change happening within Unitarianism.

Sullivan feared that humanism would destroy the key Christian beliefs that he considered to undergird Unitarianism: the Fatherhood of God, the Brotherhood of Man and the example of Jesus of Nazareth.³ He felt that his denomination was being taken over, the theology stripped away. Sullivan's struggle to preserve a niche in the Unitarian community for Christian belief is a reminder that the move to God-optional religion often entailed a painful loss of tradition and meaning.

Sullivan's foe John Hassler Dietrich was a man with a lofty sense of mission; he considered himself a religious reformer of the caliber of Martin Luther, purging supernaturalism from religion to take it to what he saw as its next phase of evolution, without the crutch of a belief in God. Dietrich's religious journey had taken him from life as a small-town theologically conservative evangelical minister into Unitarianism. He eventually became the creator of the humanist movement embroiled in theological controversy with Unitarian theists. Yet despite Dietrich's grand ambitions to reconstruct religion, he also felt strongly tied to his denominational home and held back from leaving Unitarianism. By the end of his life Dietrich tempered his views, and he ended up believing in a pantheistic God.

Both these figures, the humanist and the theist, were passionate about their religious views, but they nevertheless choose to stay associated with the denomination and compromise with their theological opponents. They venerated free inquiry and the right for individuals to determine their own views, which they saw as core to Unitarianism. This is a story of tensions and friction between large personalities, not a narrative of a schism, simply because cooler

³ Sullivan, like many ministers of this era, understood these the "Fatherhood of God" and "brotherhood of man" in strictly gendered terms.

heads, and a shared idea of Unitarian intellectual freedom, prevailed. The result was a new kind of religious denomination, in which even the existence of God was a personal matter. Liberal Quakerism had made it so that almost anyone who felt comfortable using the term “God,” in whatever sense, could join their society. Unitarianism would go further, turning itself into a virtual parliament of world religions.

Catholic Modernist to Unitarian Traditionalist

To say that William L. Sullivan’s life and career was an unusual one would be an understatement. He lacked the Harvard degrees and the elite New England pedigree that made up the stereotype of a distinguished Unitarian minister. Sullivan was the child of Irish immigrants who had emigrated from Cork only a year before his birth in 1872. He felt called to the Catholic priesthood from a young age. He later recalled that at the age of four or five he was entranced with the spectacle of Sunday Mass, which inspired in him “an awe not far from terror.” As an adolescent Sullivan felt confirmed in this vocation when he read through Alban Butler’s hagiographic *Lives of the Saints* and found himself enraptured with tales of heroic martyrdom and sacrifice for the Catholic church.⁴ He entered seminary, completed his Bachelor of Divinity at Catholic University in Washington D.C., and after his mother’s death relieved him of family obligations, he was ordained in 1899 and joined the Paulist Fathers.

⁴ William L. Sullivan, *Under Orders* (New York: Richard R. Smith, 1944), 30-31, 59. The following sections all benefit from scholarship on Sullivan’s involvement with Catholic modernism. See: John Ratte, *Three Modernists: Alfred Loisy, George Tyrell, William L. Sullivan* (London, England: The Catholic Book Club, 1972); William L. Porter, *Divided Friends: Portraits of the Roman Catholic Modernist Crisis in the United States* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2013); R. Scott Appleby, “Modernism as the Final Phase of Americanism: William L. Sullivan, American Catholic Apologist, 1899-1910,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 81, no. 2 (1988): 171–92; Warren E. Duclos, “Crisis of an American Catholic Modernist: Toward the Moral Absolutism of William L. Sullivan,” *Church History* 41, no. 3 (1972): 369–84.

The Paulists had been founded in the middle of the nineteenth century by Isaac Hecker with the idea of spreading Catholicism in the United States. Sullivan took to this task with gusto, traveling as a missionary preacher in Tennessee and earning a reputation as spirited evangelist and preacher. Eventually he would return to Catholic University to teach theology at the Paulist-run St. Paul's College.

Despite a growing reputation as a preacher and scholar, Sullivan found himself nursing growing intellectual doubts about the historicity of the Bible, the place of science, and the truth of the resurrection of Jesus. His anxieties increased after reading Protestant accounts of Catholic history; he was especially concerned about the actions of the Spanish inquisition and Vatican I (where papal infallibility had been promulgated). Back in seminary, he had found the curriculum intellectually stultifying, too concentrated on what he saw as a medieval world of neo-scholastic theology and insufficiently engaged with modern philosophical and historical problems. Only one of his professors at Catholic University alluded to the importance of historical criticism, as Roman Catholicism was officially opposed to such scholarship. Catholic University was by no means an intellectual backwater; in the period, it was the most impressive Catholic intellectual center in the United States. For Sullivan, it still seemed far from the kind of engagement with modern scholarship that he wanted.

Sullivan's path finally led him to become one of the leading American Catholic modernists. He was inspired by European Catholics who had taken a similar trajectory, particularly by French priest Alfred Loisy, who was removed from his position at the Catholic University of Paris, and the Irish Jesuit and historical critic George Tyrrell. In his autobiography, Sullivan referred to his European colleagues as examples of his "heroes of disillusionment." Together with several colleagues Sullivan founded a bi-monthly journal, *The New York Review*. Sullivan

later recalled, “Our purpose was in no sense destructive. We hoped to bring to the knowledge of intelligent priests and lay-folks some of the critical and philosophical questions, which, sooner or later, they would have to face anyhow, and to give these questions such solutions as a liberal and loyal Catholic scholarship could discover.”⁵ Yet the journal was short lived, folding after just a few years due to pressures from the Catholic hierarchy.

The papal condemnation of “modernism” and other forms of historical criticism as heretical in the 1907 encyclical *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* would push Sullivan to the breaking point with the church. He resigned from the Paulists and left the Catholic church in 1909, staying a little over a year after Loisy was excommunicated by the Pope and two years after Tyrell was. Though Sullivan left of his own choice, it was probably only a matter of time until his critics within the Church would have managed to have him excommunicated as well.

Sullivan expressed his reasons for leaving Catholicism for Unitarianism most clearly in his 1911 novel, *The Priest: A Tale of Modernism in New England*, in which his protagonist was torn between the religion of his heart, Catholicism, and the religion of his head, Unitarianism.⁶ When it came to fiction, Sullivan was not a subtle writer. The novel was a curiously inverted version of Harold Frederic’s *The Damnation of Theron Ware*, the tale of a Protestant minister’s loss of faith due to his association with a Catholic priest (discussed in chapter 1). Sullivan’s book depicted an intellectually parochial Catholic priest, Ambrose Hanlon, attractive and manly, arriving to take charge of a parish in a small town. He encounters a wise and sagely Unitarian minister, Josiah Danforth, who has a saintly Quaker mother. The minister shares his knowledge

⁵ John Haynes Holmes, *I Speak for Myself: The Autobiography of John Haynes Holmes* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), 106.

⁶ [William L. Sullivan], *The Priest: A Tale of Modernism in New England*, by The Author of “Letters to His Holiness, Pope Pius X,” (Boston, MA: Sherman, French & Company, 1914). The main love interest in the book explicitly tells Hanlon that he has a “Unitarian mind,” which is paired with his “Catholic soul.” See: [Sullivan], *The Priest*, 244.

of historical criticism and religious liberalism with his naive Catholic colleague. The minister's patriotism and attachment to an American identity also impresses Hanlon, and contrasts with the evil anarchists and socialist immigrants who have come to town to create trouble. Hanlon also harbors a budding attraction to a beautiful, exceedingly virtuous Unitarian woman in Reverend Danforth's flock, resulting in an implicit love triangle between her, Hanlon, and the minister. The love triangle resolves when the leader of the anarchists murders the Unitarian minister, and Hanlon preaches his friend's funeral sermon, which incurs the wrath of his Catholic superiors for consorting with Unitarians. His superiors relieve him of his priestly duties and sentence him to a life of penance in a monastery, while Hanlon wrestles with whether to obey or not. The beautiful Unitarian woman arrives as he is going to his train to leave for the monastery and exhorts Hanlon to carry on Danforth's work. The novel heavily implies that he chooses to leave Catholicism. The book ends with Hanlon and his love interest holding hands on a train platform.

Long passages of dialogue between the priest and Reverend Danforth show Sullivan working through the intellectual and emotional challenges of historical criticism that caused him to leave the priesthood. In the novel, Danforth's knowledge of German higher critics like Adolf von Harnack strikes Hanlon almost like another language or a kind of magical incantation; when the two men first meet, Danforth references his affection for the "religionsgeschichtliche Methode" and asks Hanlon's view on Lucian authorship of Acts, casually inquiring of the priest, "Did you ever happen to draw up a comparative table of Greek vocabulary of the third Gospel and the We-sections?"⁷ Readers are not supposed to understand these references. It would have been easy enough to use "history of religions method" rather than using German, but the language was intended to leave readers with a sense of the hopeless imbalance experienced by a

⁷ [Sullivan], *The Priest*, 55-56.

priest trained mostly in patristics and Catholic theology. One repeated joke in the novel is that Hanlon's bishop is so parochial about such modern learning that he keeps referring to Adolf von Harnack as "Herman Harnack."⁸

Over the course of the novel Hanlon follows Danforth's advice and becomes immersed in this new intellectual world. Danforth teaches him that the search for religious truth is virtuous, that religion progresses only because of innovators, and that "civilization will continue to be semi-barbaric until the word 'apostate' ceases to be a term of disgrace and becomes a word of honor." As a result of his searching, Hanlon's religious faith changes, but under Danforth's sagacious Unitarian influence he does not question the value of Christianity even as he begins to doubt the Catholic understanding of theology. He becomes a consummate religious liberal. Sounding much like Emerson, Hanlon declares that "dogmas must die in old forms and be born in new and freer forms." Danforth is positively portrayed for combining his rationalism with a warm piety focused on personal faith in Jesus. This is contrasted with another Unitarian minister, who is briefly shown as drawing too heavily on rationalism.⁹ Sullivan's point, and it is not subtle, is that religious liberalism had to be combined with traditional-sounding piety, a love of Jesus and a commitment to Christian tradition.

The necessity of embracing new theological constructions includes the need to reconceptualize God in ways utterly different from the understanding of the Church fathers and early Christians. Hanlon explains, "Had I the outlook upon the universe which the Nicene theologians had, I should have no difficulty in believing that [Jesus,] the victim of a Jewish mob was the Eternal Infinite. But my outlook upon the universe is other and wider than theirs, since I

⁸ [Sullivan], *The Priest*, 136.

⁹ [Sullivan], *The Priest*, 60, 214, 165-166.

live in a later and vastly more intelligent age, and I cannot believe in a Deity who thus localizes and as it were, parochializes himself.”¹⁰

Close to the end of the novel, it is revealed that Danforth, the Unitarian minister, is going to be removed from his pulpit by his trustees for his patriotic stand against the vice and mob rule represented by the Italian immigrants in town. Sullivan has characters compare this removal to Christ’s crucifixion. Before he is to preach his last sermon, Danforth and Hanlon, the Unitarian minister and the priest, go and get Dorothy Wakefield and the three pray together, a gathering which Sullivan presents as a modern version of Gethsemane. Hanlon walks Wakefield home and she reveals that the two men need each other, just as Catholicism and Unitarianism both need each other:

To that religion pure, free, spiritual, mystical, the Unitarian faith that I love, has priceless elements to contribute. Your ancient church, too, has other priceless elements. Prophets, teachers, and it may be martyrs, are needed to combine Unitarian freedom and simplicity, with Catholic solidarity and spiritual richness. This is the Cause I mean. And I believe that the beginning of the divine work could hardly be committed to better hands than Josiah Danforth’s and yours. Mr. Danforth has a mystical, shall I say a Catholic, soul. You, of course, possess that too; but, if I am not bold in saying so, you have come to realize that you have a Unitarian mind. How rare and magnificent an opportunity for you to work together. And now the hope is shattered, the dream dissolved.¹¹

As Sullivan presents it, there is a subtle erotic charge to the complementary religious natures of the two men, and the two faiths. These spiritual qualities are recognized by a woman that seemingly romantically desires both of them.

The vision for Unitarianism as outlined in *The Priest* was not purely religious; it also had nationalistic and nativist elements. For Sullivan, a first-generation immigrant who had worked

¹⁰[Sullivan], *The Priest*, 214.

¹¹[Sullivan], *The Priest*, 243-244.

hard to shed his Irish upbringing and to gain a modicum of acceptance in educated Protestant circles, this was a personal issue. If he had assimilated into the United States, then others should do so as well. Sullivan's descriptions of immigrants often drip with venom. An Italian immigrant's dialogue is entirely in broken dialect.¹² Sullivan repeatedly makes clear that all these immigrants are involved in the labor movement, and that this revolutionary, harmful and unpatriotic. Danforth, the Unitarian minister, in contrast to the villainous Catholics, is held up as ideal because of his nationalism and love of the flag. Early on in the novel, he engages in a long speech on stage where he is shown to be tolerant of Catholicism, arguing Catholics have earned the right to construct a chapel in the town and worship freely because Catholics died in American wars, fighting for the flag. Danforth finishes this speech with a cry of "America for Americans!" before a huge flag descends from the rafters, Sullivan describes it as a "beautiful banner" of "thrilling loveliness."¹³ When Danforth dies, it is a supposedly Christlike death, killed by an immigrant mob he is trying to calm, while literally draped in the American flag.

As a novel, *The Priest* shows continuities with the themes and style of sentimental literature of the nineteenth century, which as Ann Douglas famously observed in *The Feminization of American Culture*, was overwhelmingly written by New England clergy or women closely connected with them. Religious studies scholar Dan McKanan has persuasively observed that being sentimental did not prohibit having a larger message, and this genre often used fiction as a vehicle to advocate for liberal theological perspectives.¹⁴ Sullivan's novel may be seen as a particular late addition to this tradition, a contribution from someone who grew up

¹²[Sullivan], *The Priest*, 84.

¹³ [Sullivan], *The Priest*, 20.

¹⁴ Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977); Dan McKanan, *Identifying the Image of God: Radical Christians and Nonviolent Power in the Antebellum United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

outside of it trying his best to emulate its conventions. Even Sullivan's subtitle, *A Tale of Modernism in New England*, could be seen to claim this heritage, harkening back to Catherine Sedgewick's 1822 *The New England Tale*.

Liberal Protestant and Unitarian critics who read the book might not admire the prose, but they found this message compelling, feeling that the intellectual journey the author described was authentic and urgent.¹⁵ Sullivan's hero desired to remain Christian, but he also knew that he could not be Christian in the way he had been before. The priest, fictional or real, has been brought to doubt intellectually, but he still wants to maintain a pious faith that is akin to the one he had before.

Sullivan followed his fictional hero in more than just his religious views. Intellectual doubts led each to leave the Catholic church, and both found consolation in romantic love after leaving the priesthood. After several years teaching in an Ethical Culture high school, in 1913 Sullivan married Estelle Throckmorton, an intellectually-inclined teacher at a Washington D.C. high school. Their romance seems to have blossomed only after Sullivan had left his old faith behind.¹⁶ Before their marriage, Throckmorton was a devout Catholic and the two had been friends from Sullivan's time as a priest, maintaining a correspondence for years. Initially she was

¹⁵ Sullivan's papers contain press clippings for over two dozen reviews or notices of publication for the book, for examples see:

"Review of The Priest: A Tale of Modernism in New England," *The Christian Register*, June 8, 1911, William Laurence Sullivan Papers, bMS 467/5, Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School; "A Modernist Romance," *The Chicago Evening Post*, 1911, William Laurence Sullivan Papers, bMS 467/5, Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School.

¹⁶ "Entry on Francis Estelle Throckmorton in The Orange and the Blue Year Book, Business High School, Washington D.C., 1910, William Laurence Sullivan Papers, bMS 967, Box 12, Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School.; Record, August P. "Letter to Estelle Throckmorton Sullivan from First Unitarian, Detroit August P.," N.D. William Laurence Sullivan Papers, bMS 967, Box 12, Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School. Catholic historian William L. Porter argues that there is little evidence that Sullivan left the church to get married or that his connection with Throckmorton affected his decision to leave the priesthood. See: Porter, *Divided Friends*, 283.

extremely disturbed by Sullivan's turn away from orthodoxy. During their courtship, she reacted with horror to the anonymous publication of *Letters to His Holiness Pope Pius X*, a book that offered a critique of papal infallibility and Catholic traditionalism that claimed to be authored by a Catholic priest, correctly surmising that Sullivan was the author.¹⁷ After years of letters her anger cooled, and once she became Sullivan's wife she would join him as a Unitarian.

Sullivan was admitted to the Unitarian ministry a year after *The Priest* was released. Sullivan had left the church of his fathers and forsaken the priesthood; he would offer a few sharply critical attacks on that church from his new liberal religious community. To Catholic historians like R. Scott Appleby and William L. Porter, Sullivan represented the farthest vanguard of Catholic liberalism, so much so that he could not be contained within the church itself.¹⁸ Within Unitarianism, however, Sullivan would fight a different battle as defender of evangelical religious liberalism, becoming a bastion of orthodoxy and tradition against those further to the theological left.

Despite generating a few newspaper headlines for being a married former Catholic priest, Sullivan initially found success in his new role as a Unitarian minister. After serving as an associate minister at All Souls Unitarian Church in New York, he became pastor of that church upon its full-time minister's death. He was quickly celebrated within the denomination for his rare gift for preaching; he had a style that managed to be intellectually rigorous, heartfelt and

¹⁷ Porter, *Divided Friends*, 283-284.

¹⁸ Appleby, Carleton Winston, *This Circle of Earth: The Story of John H. Dietrich* (New York: G.P. Putnam and Sons, 1942); "Untitled Article on John H. Dietrich Heresy Charges," *The Truth Seeker*, May 20, 1911; Wesley Mason Olds, "Three Pioneers of Religious Humanism; a Study of 'Religion without God' in the Thought of John H. Dietrich, Curtis W. Reese, and Charles Francis Potter." (1973); Phillip Vivian, *The Churches and Modern Thought: An Inquiry Into the Ground of Unbelief and an Appeal for Candour*, Third Edition (London, England: Watts & Co., 1911); Nicolas Walter, *Humanism: Finding Meaning in the Word* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1998); Matthew Hollis, *Now All Roads Lead to France: A Life of Edward Thomas* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011); Phillip Thomas, *A Religion of This World: Being a Selection of Positivist Addresses* (London, England: Watts & Co., 1913).171-92.

eloquent. It won him accolades, including the privilege of giving the Duddleian lecture on religion at Harvard. In 1917 Sullivan was awarded a Doctor of Divinity by Meadville Theological School, the main seminary for the American Unitarian Association. For a Unitarian minister to receive such an award was a rubber stamp from the denomination that his career was going well.

Sullivan assumed a position well within Unitarian orthodoxy. Addressing the American Unitarian Association in a speech on liberal evangelization, Sullivan declared that their shared faith should allow intellectual latitude but should not lose sight of the goal of focusing on God. As he put it, Unitarianism must be “a religion of liberty, of joy in liberty, and a religion which places stress, lasting and confident emphasis upon that thing without which liberty is a delusion and a danger, without which we are immature for liberty and unripe for progress—the sense of august, of awful responsibility, face to face with eternity and God.”¹⁹ Unitarianism was supposed to be intellectually free, yet like all faiths it had limits. For almost a decade of Sullivan’s ministry this theological position was broadly acceptable, and he would eventually be employed by the Unitarian Layman’s League as a traveling evangelist, conducting missions work and giving talks to spread this vision of Unitarianism throughout the United States. By the end of the 1920s, however, there was a vocal liberal contingent that would challenge Sullivan: Unitarians who called themselves humanists.

It was ultimately not only Sullivan’s views that caused controversy, but the man himself. Some of it was his personality. In a speech before the AUA he confessed that when it came to intellectual debates, “I am by nature and I dare say by inheritance a belligerent.”²⁰ While he was

¹⁹ William L. Sullivan, “Liberal Evangelism- Its Spirit,” American Unitarian Association, 1916, William Laurence Sullivan Papers, bMS 967, Box 6, Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School.

²⁰ Sullivan, “Liberal Evangelism- Its Spirit.”

not a showman courting controversy for the sake of publicity or personal aggrandizement, he had left the Catholic church precisely because he did not back down from conflict.

Sullivan, of course, did not believe in a God that was personal or supernatural; for him God was not a being that had parted the Red Sea or become incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. Had he believed these things he could have stayed within the Catholic Church. Instead, his defense of Unitarian theism was focused on a different kind of God. From his pulpit at All Souls Church in New York, Sullivan preached that God was the thing that meant life had purpose and that human values, and morality itself, were grounded in something other than relativism. He explained that “Everybody serves justice and right and truth, if he serves them at all, on the intimate persuasion, whether he admits it or not, that these things are everlasting, that they do exist and hold us by Divine authority.” Without God, all human efforts were eventually condemned to futility. As he put it:

If we did not believe that in the soul of the universe was a life that enunciates and announces these ideals of the soul to us, then we should have to believe they are only our fancy, but in the great resources of nature, in the depths of being, there is nothing that means anything to correspond with these ideals and that presently, when here in a few ages we are told all human life shall perish; it will be as if it had never been; villainy and heroism will all alike have been covered up in one impartial dust of fate; nobility and vulgarity, the saint and the scoundrel, all alike to the end. One lives and a few collect power; let it be so, but in the soul of things- no difference- all alike are moving together to an equal extermination.

For Sullivan, individual lives were brief, while humanity’s efforts to do good often failed or were flawed from the start. While he accepted the findings of evolutionary science and recent discoveries within the natural sciences, he did not see science itself as leading to a fundamental improvement in living conditions as his humanist adversaries did. It could not take away the fundamental issues with human nature, he believed. Socialism and calls for political reform that moved many other liberal religious ministers greatly disturbed him, and he saw them as misguided utopian schemes that often ended in violence and death. His worldview might be

labeled deeply Augustinian due to its deep pessimism about the capacity of human beings to overcome their deficiencies. A generation later, religious liberalism would be characterized as forgetting about sin, a charge never made of Sullivan. God mattered to Sullivan because God was the only thing that really offered hope; God made the struggle of frail humans worthwhile. According to Sullivan, God remained the final arbiter of moral action in a world in which doing good might mean being crucified, the assurance of purpose in an otherwise brutal universe. Sullivan's novel *The Priest* often repeated the metaphor of heart and head. Sullivan had hoped that he could bring this heart, pietistic faith, into Unitarianism, but by the 1920s the humanists raised the prospect of steering the denomination away from God entirely.

Sullivan was highly vulnerable to attack by his foes because he still carried the baggage of his background as an ex-priest. As one of the most intellectually cultured and promising members of the Catholic church, Sullivan's journey to Unitarianism gave that denomination credit. But Sullivan was not wholly welcome among his new Unitarian fellows. Because he had been a Catholic, he was viewed with suspicion by some ministers. There was still rampant anti-Catholicism in every Protestant denomination (Quakers dealt with a particularly acute instance of it when Herbert Hoover ran for the presidency against Catholic Al Smith in 1928), but it was particularly pernicious among Unitarians, who defined their liberalism in part based on a contrast with Roman Catholicism. Unitarian ministers and denominational periodicals seemed to relish portraying the inevitable future of religion worldwide as divided between two extremes, the open-minded and intellectually rigorous world of liberal religion expressed in Unitarianism, or backwards, ritualistic and dogmatic submission to the Pope and the Roman Catholic Church. It was often the most liberal and progressive Unitarians who were the most anti-Catholic. The nineteenth century Unitarian minister Thomas Wentworth Higginson, while proclaiming the

value of non-Christian faiths in his brief for liberal religious toleration, *The Sympathy of All Religions*, managed to end his plea for tolerance with the image of a stuffy, dark Catholic cathedral having curtains ripped open so that the laity could see how the “darkness” made by priests and attendants would be removed for new light. In the twentieth century, a few of Higginson’s heirs would not let Sullivan forget that he had once been on the side of Rome.

Sullivan’s humanist opponents challenged his past as a Catholic priest, tarring him with the allegation that he was still in his heart and heritage a Catholic. One correspondent to John Dietrich assured him, “The Sullivans and the rest of the priests can utilize their Roman cunning in underground petitioning and star chamber sessions . . . fume and fret [while] your work goes on in increasing effectiveness.”²¹ Dietrich’s wife and biographer declares that her husband and his allies felt “that Sullivan did not envisage the ideal of Unitarianism, but at heart was still a Catholic.”²² For Dietrich, his work to remake religion without the need for God and for what he felt were supernatural myths was the core of his life. He was just as devoted to creating a theology that removed God and enshrined humanity as Sullivan was to stopping him. With their views so set, it was almost inevitable that they would clash over the fate of Unitarianism.

John Hassler Dietrich From Heresy to Humanism

John Hassler Dietrich did not have the Boston Brahmin pedigree that one might expect of a future leader among the Unitarians; like Sullivan he came originally from outside the faith. He was born in 1878 to a family of farmers in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, who were part of the Reformed Church. The family had given Dietrich his middle name, Hassler, after their minister

²¹ Lester Mondale to John H. Dietrich, July 6, 1930. Folder 3. Correspondence, 1927-1932. John H. Dietrich Papers, Minnesota Historical Society.

²² Carleton Winston, *This Circle of Earth: The Story of John H. Dietrich* (New York: G.P. Putnam and Sons, 1942), 170.

Jacob Hassler, who in turn nursed hopes that Dietrich might someday enter the ministry.²³

Dietrich certainly had a natural personal charisma that made him well suited to a career in the pulpit, though initially he lacked the kind of social grace that was prized in a minister. When Dietrich was fifteen his father gave up farming, choosing instead to raise pigeons full-time. This was lucrative enough to pay for Dietrich to complete preparatory school and eventually to attend Franklin and Marshall College. In college, Dietrich's primary interest was outside the classroom; he played football, joined a fraternity and developed a reputation as a troublemaker and ladies' man. After graduation, he was dismissed from his first professional position as an instructor at his high school alma mater after being caught drinking in violation of the school's policies. After a series of other jobs, including as an encyclopedia salesman and a stint as a personal secretary of a millionaire (who regularly took him to services at the Unitarian church), Dietrich entered Eastern Theological Seminary. At seminary Dietrich's rebellious tendencies inclined away from sophomoric pranks and instead became theological. He wrote a controversial course paper advancing a moral atonement theory of Christ's death, rather than substitutionary atonement.²⁴

As an undergraduate at Franklin and Marshall, Dietrich crossed paths with Albert Dieffenbach, whose own career would later be intertwined with Dietrich's. When they met, Dieffenbach was a recent graduate of Johns Hopkins attending the nearby Reformed Theological Seminary. The two were fraternity brothers in Phi Kappa Sigma, and remained in close touch once they entered the Reformed Church's ministry, becoming pastors of churches in Pittsburgh.

As a young Reformed Church minister, Dietrich quickly managed to earn notoriety among his fellow Christian clergy for his radical religious convictions. A local journalist declared that "during the last five years, there probably has been no one man in the City of Pittsburgh who has

²³ Winston, *This Circle of Earth*, 2-4.

²⁴ Winston, *This Circle of Earth*, 13, 28-30, 44-45.

been more vilified.”²⁵ Part of the reason he was so controversial was that by this point in his career Dietrich was essentially a deist. He proclaimed that “God” was the “Power at the heart of this universe [that] has Will, Intelligence and Consciousness and manifests itself in stringent laws.” There was no special role for Jesus, no original sin or need for salvation. Dietrich expressed agnosticism about the existence of an afterlife, but he remained hopeful that God cared enough for human beings to allow them to exist in some fashion after death. As his critics noted, this was not traditional Christianity, although not yet the God-optional religion he would later practice either.

Both Dietrich and Dieffenbach collaborated to generate controversy when they invited Rabbi J. Leonard Levy to give guest sermons at their respective churches. The sermons marked the first time a Jew had given a sermon in a Christian church in the city of Pittsburgh. Levy, who led the nearby Rodeph Shalom Temple, was something of a kindred spirit, and after he spoke on the future of religion in Dietrich’s church, he and Dietrich agreed to annually exchange pulpits. The Reformed Church quickly reacted, the local synod forbidding any pulpit exchanges and officially censuring both Dietrich and Dieffenbach for having allowed a non-Christian to preach to their congregations. There were rumors in the local press that both men might face heresy charges, though ultimately they escaped further consequences for that incident. Dietrich’s congregation, St. Mark’s of Pittsburgh, made clear that they stood behind the charismatic preacher no matter what the Reformed Church thought about it.

While inviting the Rabbi did not get Dietrich removed from the ministry, by 1911 his liberal theology had so galvanized members of the Allegheny Classis of the Reformed Church that they charged him with heresy (a classis was a mid-level ecclesiastical governing body). As one writer

²⁵ Gertrude Kelley, “Interesting Chats with Interesting People,” *The Spectator*, 1911. John H. Dietrich Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, 3.

in a free-thinking paper, *The Truth Seeker*, remarked, “In accusing Rev. John H. Dietrich of heresy, the Allegheny Classis of the Reformed Church appears to have got the right man.”²⁶ One friend affectionately wrote Dietrich to congratulate him, jesting that being the subject of a heresy trial was the highest honor to which any minister in the twentieth century could aspire.²⁷ The Classis charged him with denying the divinity of Jesus, the Virgin Birth and the infallibility of the Bible. The charges were true, so Dietrich choose not to defend himself. He was stripped of his ministerial status by the Reformed Church, much to the regret of his congregation. Like Sullivan, Dietrich was cast out of the church of his birth and found safe harbor among the Unitarians.

Following the advice of Walter L. Mason, the minister of the Unitarian Church in Pittsburgh, Dietrich applied for and was accepted into the ministerial fellowship with the AUA. Dietrich became the minister of the First Unitarian Society in Spokane, Washington, and for the first several years his liberal religious views seemed unexceptional, similar enough to the other members in the religious fellowship. As a minister he was mostly distinguished by his charismatic preaching. By 1915, however, Dietrich would begin to develop the ideas that would become the basis for Unitarian Humanism.²⁸ He could not do that as freely as he wanted in Spokane, and he agreed to become a minister of a congregation in Minneapolis, only accepting the position when they assured him that he would have complete intellectual freedom. The pastoral search committee in Minneapolis assured him that such freedom was one of the hallmarks of Unitarianism. One member of the committee wrote, “If you should say we are all

²⁶ “Untitled Article on John H. Dietrich Heresy Charges.” *The Truth Seeker*, May 20, 1911.

²⁷ James M. Kiody, “Letter to John H. Dietrich from Harrisburg, PA,” February 21, 1910, John H. Dietrich Papers, Minnesota Historical Society.

²⁸ Mason Olds, *American Religious Humanism*, Revised Edition (Hamden, CT: HUManists Association, 2006), 54-56.

going to hell we could smile complacently, and grant you the right to say it if it pleased you.”²⁹

As Dietrich prepared to turn his old church over to a supply minister, Sullivan passed through the city, one of his many journeys as a traveling evangelist for the AUA, and the two met as friendly colleagues and fellow laborers in the cause of liberal religion.³⁰ They would not stay that way.

Near the end of his time in Spokane, Dietrich’s religious thinking had been altered by an anti-Catholic book printed by the Rationalist Press Association of London and given to him by a congregation member. While Dietrich was not particularly moved by the text, the back of the book contained a list of other publications by the press and Dietrich ordered several of them. Connected with the British freethought, skeptical, and atheist movements, the Rationalist Press produced books that were critical of organized religion, lauded the capacity for human beings (or at least white European-descended men, as the authors assumed their readers to be) to achieve social betterment through their own agency, and placed a high value on the sciences. Dietrich’s second wife and biographer, presumably writing based on Dietrich’s recollections, described how “Tearing the wrappings off their staid English covers upon their arrival, he read each book carefully and judiciously.”³¹

One of the English books that Dietrich later cited as particularly influential was *The Churches and Modern Thought: An Inquiry into the Grounds of Unbelief and an Appeal for Candor* by Harry Vivian Phelips. Phelips was a self-described rationalist and a fierce critic of religion who portrayed historical criticism and evolutionary science as having rendered Christianity implausible. He argued that intellectuals simply concealed their skepticism out of a desire to

²⁹Wilbur W. Rankin to John H. Dietrich,” August 7, 1916, John H. Dietrich Papers, Minnesota Historical Society.

³⁰Samuel A. Eliot Letter to John H. Dietrich,” September 9, 1916, John H. Dietrich Papers, Minnesota Historical Society.

³¹Winston, *This Circle of Earth*, 117.

protect the social order from upheaval by the lower classes. Phelps believed that society needed to replace theism with rationally grounded moral standards. Phelps envisioned a future rationalist society guided by a philosophy of “scientific humanitarianism” to end war and use eugenics to prevent “degenerates” from reproducing.³² While Dietrich rejected Phelps’s arguments that religion as a concept was outdated, Phelps’s emphasis on science (including the use of eugenics) moved him.

Dietrich also encountered the term “humanism,” which he would adopt for his own religious beliefs. The term had earlier roots; there had been renaissance humanists who were interested in classical learning, and in the early nineteenth century Samuel Taylor Coleridge had used “humanism” as a synonym for unitarianism, but Dietrich first encountered the word in the writings of another British rationalist, Frederick James Gould. Gould was a positivist who belonged to Auguste Comte’s Religion of Humanity. Gould, like Dietrich, used the term in contrast with theism to describe his religious principles.³³ Years later, after reading some of Dietrich’s sermons, Gould wrote the minister to praise him and to express his approval that he had so effectively conveyed these “essentially Positivist ideas.”³⁴

Dietrich corresponded with another English positivist, Phillip Henry Thomas. Thomas, father of future poet Edward Thomas, was a civil servant, vocal supporter of the Liberal Party, an occasional attender of English Unitarian churches (which were not in close contact with their

³² Winston, *This Circle of Earth*, 117; Phillip Vivian, *The Churches and Modern Thought: An Inquiry Into the Ground of Unbelief and an Appeal for Candour*, Third Edition (London, England: 1911). Eugenics ideas are discussed particularly on pages 336 to 337. Phelps sometimes published under the pseudonym Phillip Vivian.

³³ Winston, *This Circle of Earth*, 121-122; Nicolas Walter, *Humanism: Finding Meaning in the Word* (Prometheus Books, 1998), 35-36.

³⁴ F.J. Gould to John H. Dietrich, Folder 3. Correspondence, 1927-1932, John H. Dietrich Papers, Minnesota Historical Society. Gould wrote Dietrich after reading Curtis Reese’s edited collection of *Humanist Sermons*.

American counterparts), and, like Gould, associated with the Religion of Humanity and served as a minister of their Holborn church. Dietrich drew ideas for his preaching from Thomas' 1913 *A Religion of This World: Being a Selection of Positivist Addresses*, particularly seizing upon the idea that although theism was an outmoded belief, human beings still needed religion and religious organizations to help them find fulfillment and lead good lives.³⁵ In a letter to Dietrich, Thomas confessed his "ambition to see Unitarianism declare itself frankly for humanism or Positivism." He urged Dietrich to "join forces" with the positivists to help realize the religion of humanity.³⁶ Dietrich increasingly had no issue publicly proclaiming such a belief; he bluntly declared in his writing that "The gods have had their day, let man now take over the job."³⁷ These connections between Positivism and humanism were widely known. One mainline critic of humanism, Yale Divinity School professor Douglas Clyde Macintosh, mockingly suggested that if humanists really prized truth they should have termed themselves "neopositivists."³⁸

Dietrich's Humanism was, for some, the only kind of religion that they could accept. One of Dietrich's congregants explained his religious background: raised a Presbyterian, he had become an agnostic before gravitating towards the idea of "creative evolution" and a belief that the universe had intentionality and design. He had avoided organized religion until visiting Dietrich's church in Minneapolis, where he "was enthusiastically shocked to discover intelligence and religion combined into one religion."³⁹ Dietrich's congregation eventually even included Clarence

³⁵Matthew Hollis, *Now All Roads Lead to France: A Life of Edward Thomas* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011), 42-43; Phillip Thomas, *A Religion of This World: Being a Selection of Positivist Addresses* (London, England: Watts & Co., 1913).

³⁶ Phillip Thomas to John H. Dietrich, September 28, 1918. John H. Dietrich Papers, Minnesota Historical Society.

³⁷ John H. Dietrich, "Untitled Book Forward," N.D. John H. Dietrich Papers, Minnesota Historical Society.

³⁸ Douglas C. Macintosh quoted in Winston, *This Circle of Earth*, 131.

³⁹ Robert C. Pope to John Dietrich, November 25, 1952. Correspondence, 1933-1957, 1968. John H. Dietrich Papers, Minnesota Historical Society.

Darrow as a member.⁴⁰ Darrow, who had been the lead defense counsel during the Scopes trial, the Tennessee court case where a teacher had been prosecuted for teaching evolution, was famed for his often-irreverent agnosticism. Darrow's skepticism was inherited, as his father had left his childhood Methodism behind to study for the Unitarian ministry at Meadville Seminary. By the time Darrow's father had completed his theological education he could not subscribe even to what Darrow would later characterize as the comparatively "mild tenets" of mid-nineteenth century Unitarianism. Darrow's father ended up rejecting organized religion completely, and his son would follow his path.⁴¹ Darrow's "conversion" to join Dietrich's church indicated how much Unitarianism had shifted in a generation, and it made national news that even the most famous skeptic of organized religion might find Humanism acceptable.

Liturgically, Unitarian Humanist services departed only slightly from traditional Protestant forms of worship. A considerable amount of care was taken to make sure the services seemed familiar to those coming from other denominations. Attendees of the 10:30a.m. Sunday service at Dietrich's First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis, for example, would have been greeted at the door and given a paper order of service that looked almost identical to those found in other Protestant churches. Worship began with an organ prelude and a hymn. The music lyrics might have been surprising to newcomers; one service used "The Spirit of Man," a hymn written by British agnostic activist Charles E. Hooper which pointedly did not reference God but instead expressed the hope that the triumphant human spirit would set captives free and take possession of the earth. But even this novelty was cloaked in the familiar, and newspaper ads for the Unitarian Society reassured potential congregants that although the lyrics of hymns might be

⁴⁰ "Darrow No More Agnostic Than I Am, Pastor Says," *St. Paul Dispatch*, September 24, 1923. John H. Dietrich Papers, Minnesota Historical Society.

⁴¹ Clarence Darrow, *The Story of My Life* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932), 10-11.

new, they were all set to “old familiar hymn tunes.”⁴² Bible reading typically did not occur in the service, so where a neighboring Methodist or Presbyterian church would have used verses from the Old and New Testaments, Dietrich instead inserted public readings of poetry, often related to the topic of his sermon for that day. On the day he spoke on Walt Whitman, for example, an excerpt from his poem “Passage to India” was read aloud.⁴³

Dietrich’s oratorical ability and personal charisma was a key part of his appeal. Frederick May Eliot, the President of the Unitarian Association, invoked Dietrich as the ideal preacher when writing to other ministers on the art of homiletics, observing that “John Dietrich can preach for sixty minutes, and nobody wants him to stop. John Doe preaches twenty minutes and the man in the back pew looks at his watch and thinks it must have run down.”⁴⁴ By 1926 Dietrich boasted that his services had a weekly attendance of over two thousand, and the radio broadcasts of his services were estimated to reach 90,000.⁴⁵

Dietrich’s ideas reached an even wider audience beyond his congregation because they were regularly featured in *The Christian Register*, the main denominational periodical of Unitarianism. Because Unitarianism was a unified denomination, the editor of this weekly magazine, Albert C. Dieffenbach, held even more sway than editors of Quaker periodicals did. Dieffenbach’s editorial policy was very deferential to humanists in part because he had a close friendship with Dietrich. Dieffenbach spent much of the 1920s describing himself as a theist, but

⁴² “What People Think About the Unitarian Society of Minneapolis and Its Minister John H. Dietrich,” The Laymen’s League, ca 1920. John H. Dietrich Papers, Minnesota Historical Society; “1922 Autumn Series Sermon Topics.” First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis, 1922. John H. Dietrich Papers, Minnesota Historical Society; “Order of Service.” First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis, November 5, 1922. John H. Dietrich Papers, Minnesota Historical Society.

⁴³ “Order of Service,” First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis, November 5, 1922. John H. Dietrich Papers, Minnesota Historical Society. In its publications, the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis always referred to Dietrich’s talks during these services as being an “address” rather than a sermon.

⁴⁴ Frederick May Eliot, “How Long to Preach?” *Unitarian Horizons*, October 15, 1938, 6.

⁴⁵ “John H. Dietrich Alumni News,” *The Mercerburg Academy Alumni Quarterly*, 1926, 111.

he clearly favored humanism in the pages of his magazine, and by the 1930s he would become a key humanist leader.

He was not the only figure in the new moment. Probably the most significant other figure was his fellow minister Curtis Reese (who was introduced in Chapter 1). Reese had been preaching non-theistic religious views for several years and was a leading figure in the Western Unitarian Conference. When he met Dietrich, Reese began to describe these views as humanism, and the two would form a strong partnership in advancing the new viewpoint.

Dietrich insisted that humanism did not inherently "exclude a faith in God," although he thought that other humanists who used the word should only employ it to describe the highest ethical ideals of human beings, and not a deity capable of thought, action or even existence.⁴⁶ Dietrich, in his own writing and preaching, tried to avoid the use of the word God, believing it to be useless because the word meant too many different things. As he explained, "no matter what it may signify, there is usually a word that expresses the idea more clearly. For instance, if God means to one 'the totality of being' or 'the moral ideal,' why not use these words and avoid all misunderstanding?"⁴⁷ Curtis Reese's edited collection, *Humanist Sermons*, included contributions from a number of theistic ministers, including Frederick May Eliot, who used the word God in either a pantheistic way, or to refer to a transcendental order to the universe.⁴⁸

Most Unitarian humanists were vigorous in asserting that they were not atheists, making extremely clear that they deeply resented comparison to atheists.⁴⁹ Minister E. Stanton Hodgkin,

⁴⁶ John H. Dietrich, "Unitarianism and Humanism" In *Humanist Sermons*, edited by Curtis W. Reese, n.d. 99-97.

⁴⁷ John H. Dietrich, "Opinion on 'My Idea of God,'" *Unity*, March 28, 1927, 62.

⁴⁸ Henry Wilder Foote and George Gilmour, "Humanist Sermons: Two Reviews," *The Christian Register* 106, no. 36 (September 8, 1927): 704-706; Frederick May, Eliot "Humanism and the Inner Life." In *Humanist Sermons*, ed. Curtis W. Reese, (Chicago, IL: Open Court Publishing Company, 1927), 185-196.

⁴⁹ For example, see: Albert C. Dieffenbach, "Dr. C.E. Park's View of Humanism," *The Christian Register* 108, no. 21 (May 23, 1929): 444.

in an address before the Unitarian Layman's League that was later printed in *The Christian Register*, derided the idea that humanists were atheists as a false "accusation," comparable to how the first Christians had been maligned by the Romans as atheists, or how the predecessors of modern Unitarians had been ridiculed as atheists by Calvinists. While it was true that humanists did not "believe in the kind of God that has prevailed to a large extent in the past," they could accept other notions of the divine, Hodgkin asserted. He noted that "almost all humanists are willing to call the great reality that enshrouds and encloses the whole of life, that presses upon us every moment of time, that gives significance and meaning to the whole life, God, if that is any great satisfaction to anyone." The terminology of pitting humanists against theism was inaccurate, he suggested; instead, he argued, it was more appropriate to see the humanists as "cosmic theists" who believed in an impersonal God, in contrast to "personal theists."⁵⁰ Yet Hodgkin was not entirely accurate, something pointed out by theist minister Marion Franklin Ham, who indicated the large number of humanists who had written or given sermons in which they disavowed theism completely or did not believe in God no matter how the term was conceived. John Dietrich wrote in to weigh into the budding controversy, denouncing any attempt to label humanists as atheists, arguing that they were simply humanists and that it was pejorative to call them anything else. "Has Mr. Ham fallen into the old fallacy of calling everyone who does not believe in his God an atheist?" Dietrich asked. "I imagine there are many humanists who, if they cared to use the indefinite term 'God,' could say with Socrates, 'I believe in God, but my belief is beyond the understanding of my accusers.'"⁵¹

⁵⁰ E. Stanton Hodgins, "Argument for Humanism," *The Christian Register* 107, no. 42 (October 18, 1928): 837–39.

⁵¹ John H. Dietrich, "Mr. Dietrich to Mr. Ham." *The Christian Register* 107, no. 51 (December 20, 1928): 1046.

Whatever their views on God the humanists sought to preserve religious inclinations, which made them reluctant to embrace the label of atheism. They asserted that they could have religious experiences and the same feeling of reverence that other kinds of religious believers felt. Dieffenbach, for example, believed that humanity was “instinctively, probably incurably religious.”⁵² Humanism made use of these universal religious impulses, directing them to engage in social action and scientific advancement that would serve human beings, but it did not belittle religion. Humanism was a critique of belief in God, or at least a critique of a personal and supernatural God, not a critique of organized religion. For its proponents humanism was the religion of the future and offered a way to save what was good about religion from being discarded by the implausibility of contemporary theology.

Another reason that many humanists were so reluctant to be labeled atheists was because it was a “snarl” word, often used as a dismissal rather than a genuine label for other theological positions. To declare oneself an atheist was to take a very extreme position in religious discourse, and to embrace what was usually a slur. A few humanists, like Roy Wood Sellars, admitted that the label was an appropriate descriptor of their position, though they did not prefer the term.⁵³ A slightly larger subset of humanists was comfortable labeling themselves agnostics, which they saw as expressing uncertainty between atheism and theism, a kind of safe intellectual middle ground, but for the most part they followed Dietrich in seeing humanism as the only tenable descriptor of their position.

While he rejected the label of atheist, Dietrich was also very opposed to using the word “God.” God for him had a fixed meaning; as he explained, “For centuries this word has signified

⁵² Albert C. Dieffenbach, “Atheism Plans Invasions,” 107, no. 33 (August 16, 1928): 658.

⁵³ George R. Dodson, “Religion, Coming of Age, Leaves Behind-,” *The Christian Register* 108, no. 1 (January 3, 1929): 4–5.

an external, individualized, personal Being, and to most people [it] signifies this today.”

Liberals and modernists, realizing that the old “God” was undeniable, had used the term to apply not to a personal deity but had redefined it to talk about abstractions like the “‘totality of being’ or ‘internal moral urge’,” generating confusion among the public because these thinkers did not actually believe in God. While Dietrich understood that this act preserved the ability of intellectuals to believe in "God," he felt that this remained a form of intellectual dishonesty. “The word ‘God’,” Dietrich wrote, “is used today with a very uncertain significance, and therefore to my mind had better be dropped.” If religious liberals wanted to discuss these abstractions, he felt, they should say clearly what they meant, which had little to do with the "God" of the people in the pews.⁵⁴

Other humanists agreed that liberal theologians had rendered the idea of "God" nearly meaningless through redefinition as a way to avoid admitting they did not believe. Massachusetts Unitarian minister Bruce Swift pointed out that academics who advocated for theism, like Meadville professor Robert J. Hutcheon, Union Theological Seminary professor Eugene W. Lyman and Oberlin President Henry Churchill King, had sought to save "God" from the encroachment of skepticism by making the term purely symbolic. Swift compared the state of their theology to a sinking ship; he joked "As the ship goes down, this name ["God"] is apparently saved by nailing it to the mainmast in the hope, that somehow, its presence will save men." This icon, Swift believed, really offered little comfort because it had been drained of all meaning; one could not pray to such a God. Far better to be humanist and admit the problem.⁵⁵ His colleague in the Massachusetts ministry, Henry W. Pinkham, echoed his disdain for the word

⁵⁴ John H. Dietrich quoted in H.F. Manchester, “Dr. Dietrich Urges Religion of ‘Reality,’” *The Boston Herald*, January 27, 1929, 3.

⁵⁵ Bruce Swift, “Is God Only Symbol?” *The Christian Register* 106, no. 38 (September 22, 1927): 736–37.

"God" and suggested that for humanists, "science has shown us how to do for ourselves what earlier men asked God to do for them."⁵⁶

Dietrich and his allies in the Unitarian ministry pushed the bounds of what was acceptable in their denomination. Throughout the late 1910s and 1920s, the question of how adaptable Unitarian theology should be was raised in a number of venues. Were views like Dietrich's beyond the pale? Should Unitarian ministers be required to believe in a personal God? If not, what bound the denomination together? There was a simmering tension over these issues, but conversations and interactions between theists and humanists remained remarkably civil, considering the high stakes of the issues being debated.

Articles in *The Christian Register* fanned the flames of controversy. Unitarian minister George Dobson wrote in defense of theistic Unitarianism. He made it clear that Dietrich's ideas would meet firm resistance in the denomination, deepening a growing divide between humanist and theist factions. Sullivan aligning himself on the side of Dodson and the theists, his discomfort with the most liberal elements of Unitarianism had finally broken out into the open. He authored an article in the *Christian Register*, "God, No God and Half-God," which noted the threat in the rise of humanists who sought to eliminate God from Unitarianism and enshrine human reason and achievement in God's place. Sullivan worried that more moderate ministers were also a problem, diluting their theology by seeing God as only a kind of evolutionary process working to make human beings better.⁵⁷ To Sullivan this was the same threat that he had

⁵⁶ Henry W. Pinkham, "God- Everyman's Definition," *The Christian Register* 107, no. 26 (June 28, 1928): 518.

⁵⁷ William F. Schulz, *Making the Manifesto: The Birth of Religious Humanism* (Skinner House Books, 2004), 30; William L. Sullivan, "God, No-God, Half-God," *The Christian Register* 100, no. 33 (August 18, 1921): 775–76.

The reference to Emerson's "half-Gods" was not noted in the article, but may have been intended.

written about in *The Priest*, in which he had lampooned the Unitarian disciples of Herbert Spencer with no sense of the spiritual and emotive power of belief.

Dietrich tried his best to avoid direct conflict but did not shy away from it when pressed. In 1921, as Unitarian ministers prepared to meet in Detroit for a denominational conference, the Church News Association of New York tried to run a sensationalistic news story about how Unitarian radicals wanted to have the denomination use the conference to repudiate any belief in God. Only a Conservative faction stood against them, the paper asserted. If the radicals won, which the article suggested was possible, Unitarian layman and former U.S. President William Howard Taft and his family would leave the denomination in protest.⁵⁸ The story was grossly inflated; even the most extreme humanists did not hope to pass one resolution at one conference to make the denomination humanist. Dietrich had been scheduled to appear at the conference as part of an address series titled “The Faith that is in Us” with two more conventionally theistic ministers, including William Sullivan. This would potentially be a demonstration of the broad range of views present within Unitarianism. Because Dietrich worried that he might misrepresent the denomination at such a difficult juncture, however, he attempted to cancel his address. “I do not believe my faith is in any way representative of our body as a whole,” he wrote, trying to explain that his views might create the same disagreements that they provoked whenever he expressed them outside his own congregation.⁵⁹

Dietrich’s friends and colleagues would not allow him to back down. Palfrey Perkins, a minister and General Secretary of the General Unitarian Conference, consoled Dietrich, telling him “I think you must realize, from the correspondence the last few weeks in the ‘[Christian]

⁵⁸ “Church News Association Draft Article,” *Church News Association*, September 1, 1921. John H. Dietrich Papers, Minnesota Historical Society.

⁵⁹ John H. Dietrich to Mr. Griffin, September 7, 1921. John H. Dietrich Papers, Minnesota Historical Society.

Register,' how many men are sympathetic to your views."⁶⁰ Alfred Dieffenbach, who actually ran the paper, was even blunter to his old friend. "Go and take your stand" he urged his friend. Dietrich was wrong to think that only his own career and religious convictions were at stake. Dieffenbach reminded him, "This is infinitely more than a merely personal matter, it makes you represent the life and progress of the church, and all those who are worth a whoop are with you in heart and soul." While not all the Unitarian humanists might agree with every aspect of Dietrich's theology, Dieffenbach asserted that Dietrich ("you, and you alone") could be the "bulwark of our liberty."⁶¹

Dietrich gave in and gave the talk. From the pulpit he announced that the Kingdom of God would be realized purely through human efforts, and that human beings, not an external God, controlled human destiny. As he put it, "Let others hold their ideas of God if they will, but we must insist that whatever God does he does through men and not for men." The millennial age that humans believed God and providence would construct must be built by humans for themselves. The address was not atheistic; it was apathetic about God, as God became irrelevant to the new humanist faith.⁶²

Sullivan gave an address immediately following Dietrich, aiming to directly respond to his contentions. According to Sullivan, Unitarians had always been bound together to by a sense of moral law, which was progressively revealed to the human soul by means of conscience. Unrestrained freedom of belief, advocated by the humanists, would strip Unitarianism of purpose, leave it a meaningless hollow shell. He spoke powerfully of how faith in the divine was

⁶⁰ Palfrey Perkins, "Letter to John H. Dietrich from Boston," September 21, 1921. John H. Dietrich Papers, Minnesota Historical Society.

⁶¹ Albert C. Diffenbach, "Letter to John H. Dietrich from Boston," September 12, 1921. John H. Dietrich Papers, Minnesota Historical Society.

⁶² John H. Dietrich, "The Faith That Is in Us," *The Christian Register* 100, no. 43 (October 27, 1921): 1014–15.

the core that united Unitarians together: “The passion for this Source of righteousness has made you a church. The loss of it will unmake you as a church, infallibly.” Ultimately, Sullivan warned, the loss of faith in God could lead to “chaos and the wreck of worlds.” It was a rhetorically powerful speech, and when Sullivan finished several of the ministers in the audience urged him to keep going.⁶³

Even as he raised Sullivan’s ire, Dietrich tried to maintain denominational collegiality. Unitarian ministers were a fraternity of sorts, and on the last day of the conference, as a joke, the oldest and youngest ministers were dispatched as a delegation to the “ladies” of the women’s organization. After a mocking address, Dietrich and Dobson were dispatched as a humanist/theist delegation to the lay women. They strolled out arm and arm, to the mocking cheers of their fellows.⁶⁴

Relations between the two factions remained tense despite these efforts to maintain civility. One anonymous letter from a Unitarian minister published in *The Christian Register* expressed just how marginalized theistic Unitarians could feel from humanist preaching. The letter writer asked readers to imagine his shock as a guest preacher—it was unclear if this was an intellectual exercise or something from the writer’s experience—stood in the pulpit of his church and declared that the congregation “now stands at the death bed of Christianity.” The minister declared that the congregation should “get rid of the God idea” and instead celebrate human life as the most sacred thing in the Universe. The author described the guest minister singing a Unitarian hymn, changing the words from “Lo, the dawn of Peace, / Lo the Son of God has

⁶³ William L. Sullivan, “The Faith That Makes a Church,” *The Christian Register* 100, no. 44 (November 3, 1921): 1039–40.

“Source” is capitalized in the original text, presumably to highlight that it refers to the divine.

⁶⁴ Frank H. Burt, “The Theist and the Humanist: A Comedy of (and by) the Clergy,” *The Christian Register* 100, no. 43 (October 27, 1921): 1018.

come,” to “Lo, the dawn of Peace, / Lo, the Day of Man has come.” The anonymous writer worried that humanists who presented themselves as the logical evolution of Unitarianism and human religion left little leeway for the Unitarian Christians who had previously made up the denomination.

Theistic Unitarians and humanists would be better off apart, the anonymous article writer declared. Theistic Unitarians were held together in fellowship by a shared belief in God and by inspiration in the life of the man Jesus of Nazareth, while humanists were trying to do something wholly new. Humanists were not evil, he determined, but they should have their own organization and not try to take over a fundamentally theistic Unitarian project. He explained, "Let the Humanists hold their distinguishing faiths and aims, and further them as the ‘New Religion of Humanity’ to the extent of their motive power; but let them do this in their own way, in a domain of their own, not under the ‘Unitarian’ name and in the churches of the Unitarians." He still hoped that humanists and theistic Unitarians could work together on service projects and for the welfare of others, but he did not want humanists in the Unitarian fellowship. They posed too much a risk, he suggested, writing, “I cannot be at one with them, when they seek to take from me all ‘faith in God,’ all ‘divine worship’ and all the aspirations and hope which I have cherished...”⁶⁵

Critics of humanism also sensed that a number of humanists hoped to have their views take over the denomination and gradually eliminate theism altogether. These humanists often held the conviction that the end of theism would simply come about in either a few years or in some decades as part of an inevitable phase of the development of religion, and many agreed that the issue did not need to be forced. E. Stanton Hodgkin, the minister of the First Unitarian

⁶⁵ Anonymous, “Humanists and Fellowship,” *The Christian Register* 104, no. 41 (September 28, 1925): 985.

Church of Los Angeles, for example, equated theism with belief in geocentrism, and suggested that similar scientific developments in astronomy allowed humanity to abandon the belief that the earth was the center of universe. Developments in religion would lead all thinking people to abandon belief in God, he said. Practical consequences for Unitarianism flowed from this belief, however. Hodgkin complained that the Unitarian service books published by the AUA, which contained hymns and prayers for worship, would need to remove many of the mentions of God and contain more humanist material.⁶⁶ Another humanist, S.M. Augustine, a trustee of the Unitarian church in Berkeley, California, took to the pages of *The Christian Register* to warn Unitarians not to “retard the progressive movement by taking a reactionary attitude” to the inevitable end of theism. Instead they should realize that theism was being invalidated by humanity’s natural evolution and understand that Unitarianism needed the “liberal intelligent minds [of the humanists] more than they need the church.”⁶⁷

Theists felt that they had to respond. Like Sullivan, the other ministers who rejected humanism were by no means theological conservatives; many had been at the vanguard of liberal religion only a generation earlier. Clay MacCauley, for example, had a distinguished career. He had spent over two decades in Japan as a Unitarian missionary, was a vocal critic of American imperialism, and authored over twenty books on subjects ranging from an ethnology of the Seminole tribe to Japanese grammar. In his theology he was a pantheist, seeing God as universal and everywhere.⁶⁸ Despite his liberal religious views, he saw humanism as a threat to the very existence of Unitarianism. Writing in the pages of the *Pacific Unitarian*, MacCauley denounced

⁶⁶ E. Stanton.Hodgin, “Believes Humanistic Element Are Needed,” *The Christian Register* 106, no. 2 (January 13, 1927): 26–27.

⁶⁷ S.M. Augustine, “The Church Needs Them,” *The Christian Register* 104, no. 44 (October 29, 1925): 1060.

⁶⁸ “Clay MacCauley, “Man of Many Parts, Is Dead,” *The Christian Register* 104, no. 48 (November 26, 1925): 1167.

the fact that humanists were leading Unitarians away from the worship of God, which he saw as the central purpose of their religious fellowship. MacCauley argued that humanism had no more place in a theistic denomination than a Republican had in speaking at the Democratic National Convention.⁶⁹ While he claimed to have no more animosity towards humanists than he harbored towards any other religious group, he felt they were intruders within the Unitarian Association, and they should separate from the AUA and organize their own denomination.

Other critics of humanism nursed their grievances at a distance. John Haynes Holmes, whose commitment to socialism, activism and pacifism often put him at odds with the AUA, mocked the humanists in his autobiography as expressing a “shabby, second-hand sample of the agnosticism of the nineteenth century” or “a feeble echo of the atheism of ancient days.” Holmes’ criticism was not that there was something inherently heretical or condemnatory about philosophically rejecting a belief in God, but rather that removing the idea of God from religion impoverished it artistically and creatively. All good preaching, he felt, needed to reference God. God was evocative and expressed the highest aspirations and longings of humanity. Holmes pointed out that Unitarian humanists were zealously critical of the mere mention of the deity. He had once been asked to contribute several hymns to a humanist hymnal only to find them excluded because they mentioned God. This prohibition on speaking about God, he argued, meant the removal from religious life of the most touching hymns, the majority of the books of the Bible, the exclusion of the great poetry, of the works of “Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Dryden, Pope, Johnson, the metaphysical poets, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Tennyson, Browning, Emerson, Whitman, Lowell.” The humanist was essentially a cultural philistine,

⁶⁹ Clay MacCauley, “Limits in Church Fellowship,” *The Pacific Unitarian* 35, no. 9 (October 1925): 143–44.

MacCauley had also been a captain in the Union Army during the Civil War, and notably had escaped from a Confederate prison camp.

Holmes explained, unless great theistic art came into worship, declaring that “His soul is going to run dry early, and the souls of those he ministers to are going to gasp for living water.”⁷⁰ For Holmes, God was essentially the loftiest conception of humanity, and without the rhetorical device of "God," there was nothing powerful enough to preach about.

In 1929 Sullivan, angered by the humanistic turn within Unitarianism, submitted an article to *The Christian Register* that expressed his concerns about the direction of the AUA. The periodical's editor, Dietrich's old friend Dieffenbach, claimed that the article was too divisive, and rejected it from the magazine. As Sullivan was a well-respected Unitarian minister, however, there was a presumption that he should have access to the columns of the denominational publication, and consequently Dieffenbach's maneuver caused a minor crisis. Sullivan's submission was not as fiery as Dieffenbach implied, but it did not shy away from clearly exposing the cleavages in the denomination. Entitled “Why Are We Shunned?” the article argued that rejection of a personal God was harmful to Unitarian relationships with other denominations. Unitarians had been courting the Congregationalists and the Universalists in hopes of closer collaboration and perhaps the prospect of an eventual merger, but those denominations remained leery because, Sullivan said, they “believe that Unitarianism had ceased in large measure to be a Christian church. They believe further that in another large measure it has become an instrument for the propagation of atheism, and that Unitarians at large do not care whether it has or not.”⁷¹ Sullivan pointed out that Unitarians increasingly understood belief in God to be merely a matter of personal opinion, whereas other Christian groups retained the central belief of their faith and a moral question rather than a purely intellectual one.

⁷⁰ John Haynes Holmes, *I Speak for Myself: The Autobiography of John Haynes Holmes* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959, 241-242.

⁷¹ William L. Sullivan, “Why Are We Shunned?” 1929. William Laurence Sullivan Papers, bMS 967, Box 10. Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School.

Sullivan also offered a rebuttal to the idea that the Unitarian commitment to intellectual freedom allowed Unitarians to tolerate humanist and atheistic views. “The Unitarian pulpit is absolutely closed to an indefinite number of opinions,” Sullivan observed. No Unitarian church would allow a minister that preached the sacrificial atonement of Jesus Christ for the sins of humanity, he said, nor would they permit a minister to try to convert the congregation to Catholicism. Unitarian churches often rejected or fired ministers for minor differences with their congregants in terms of preferred liturgical style; some disdained the idea of their minister wearing a pulpit gown rather than a suit, while in other congregations “the suggestion of a communion service would create a schism on the spot.” Intellectual liberty, Sullivan argued, had begun to cut only one way in Unitarianism. Unitarians had “mostly liberty to deny,” one in which their ability to reject traditional theology, doctrines, and even the existence of God was defended, but they could not admit to having anything approaching an orthodox theology. “In liberty to affirm,” Sullivan wrote, “it is among the narrowest of sects.”⁷²

Few forms of communication spread as fast as ministerial gossip. Because Sullivan felt hurt by the rejection, he made sure to mention it to his colleagues, and the controversy expanded. Dieffenbach defended himself in the pages of *The Christian Register*, and although he did not invoke Sullivan’s name, he claimed that the magazine had rejected a manuscript from a Unitarian minister who had been abusive and hurtful toward the Unitarian denomination. Dieffenbach also claimed that he had sought the approval of the AUA president and two administrative vice-presidents on whether he should publish, something he admitted was an unusual step, and he had been helpless to print it after they had expressed disapproval.⁷³ The

⁷² Sullivan, “Why Are We Shunned?”

⁷³ Albert C. Dieffenbach, “Gossip and Facts,” *The Christian Register* 108, no. 42 (October 17, 1929): 841.

President of the AUA, Louis Cornish, a friend of Sullivan's, wrote to rebuke Dieffenbach (and provided Sullivan a copy of this letter). Cornish was upset by what he perceived as Dieffenbach's attempt to pass off responsibility. Although he had briefly discussed Sullivan's article with Dieffenbach, Cornish had never urged that it be suppressed, nor did he claim any editorial oversight over *The Christian Register*, which was solely the editors' responsibility.⁷⁴ Some from the theist faction called for Dieffenbach to resign as editor, citing the need for someone who would be more accepting of their viewpoints. This did not happen, but that group used the occasion to start their own denominational periodical, *The Christian Leader*. Sullivan wrote an article about the perils of humanism that was printed in its initial issue. It appeared that Unitarianism might be about to break into two separate movements, with their own churches, periodicals and ministers.

Freedom to Believe

The anticipated schism never came.⁷⁵ Unitarian commitments to allowing individuals unhindered religious thought were too strong. Frederick May Eliot continued to use the word God, believing this symbolic word had the power to "gather more fruits of human endeavor than into any other."⁷⁶ If forced to pick a side, he was a theist, but Eliot courted friends in both camps

⁷⁴ Louis Cornish, "To the Editor, from Portland, OR," November 4, 1929. William Laurence Sullivan Papers, bMS 967, Box 10. Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School; Louis Cornish to William Sullivan, November 27, 1929. William Laurence Sullivan Papers, bMS 967, Box 10. Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School.

⁷⁵ There was a group called the American Unitarian Conference (AUC) that left the successor to the American Unitarian Association, the Unitarian Universalist Association, in 2000. The AUC organized a few Unitarian worship groups and also encouraged Christian Unitarians to join certain UUA congregations that were seen as hospitable to Christianity. It maintains a website and has a legal existence, but membership likely numbered only in the dozens at its height. See: "AUC Congregations." American Unitarian Conference. Accessed January 20, 2018, <http://www.americanunitarian.org/AUCCongregations.htm>; "Why the American Unitarian Conference Had to Be Formed." American Unitarian Conference. Accessed January 20, 2018, <http://www.americanunitarian.org/voicearticle.htm>.

⁷⁶ Frederick May Eliot, *The Reality of God* (Boston, MA: Unitarian Layman's League, 1930).

and was always willing to defend the intellectual integrity and freedom of his colleague Dietrich. In 1926, as part of the celebration of Dietrich's tenth anniversary as a minister, Eliot spoke, according at a newspaper account, "referring to Mr. Dietrich as being in the line of those prophets who have prevented Unitarianism from settling back into a comfortable orthodoxy."⁷⁷ This powerful statement domesticated humanism by constructing it as part of the Unitarian heritage of an individual's right to conscience and free inquiry. In the nineteenth century, the great Unitarian poet James Russell Lowell had famously extolled "Time makes ancient good uncouth;/ They must upward still, and onward, who would keep abreast of Truth." Dietrich and the humanists, in Eliot's sermon, become another chapter in this legacy of evolving liberal religious theology after American Unitarianism's nineteenth century exponent William Ellery Channing, Theodore Parker and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

A few years later, in 1930, Eliot gave another spirited sermon, later published and distributed as pamphlet of the Unitarian Layman's League, in which he pled for tolerance of humanist beliefs. He argued that to profess a belief in God was "the most significant of all affirmations; and it must not be made except with complete integrity of mind and heart." Humanists could not make such a profession because they feared being intellectually dishonest, and he praised their sincerity in not assenting to a belief in God simply because it seemed socially convenient, even while he still argued that he personally wanted them to accept a broader definition of God. Humanists, he asserted, showed themselves to be "a growing minority" and had the potential to enhance Unitarianism with their candor and spirited perspective. Eliot felt that Unitarians should accept that "the point of view of this minority as being at least equally valid with the acceptance of traditional beliefs"⁷⁸

⁷⁷ "Hundreds Participate in Tenth Anniversary," *Unitarian Newsletter*, December 1, 1926.

⁷⁸ Frederick May Eliot, *The Reality of God* (Boston, MA: Unitarian Layman's League, 1930).

Eliot was hardly a lone voice. At Meadville Theological School, professor Robert J. Hutcheon held a similar position, urging that humanism be tolerated. While he espoused a variation on naturalistic liberalism to his students, suggesting that the term “God” had to be redefined to speak to modern people, and noting what he saw as deep flaws in humanism, he thought that repression or heresy-hunting was the wrong course to those that doubted the existence or utility talking about of God. As he explained in an article in *The Christian Register*:

The very first duty [of Unitarians] is to exercise a vast patience.... To discover a [religious] symbol that shall take up into itself the vast wealth of our modern meanings and values is a task not only for spiritual giants but, probably for many generations. In the meantime we must be sympathetic with all sorts of spiritual experimentation so long as they are earnest and candid and free.⁷⁹

Among humanists, even the most pointed foes of theism could be moved to suggest that Unitarianism should hold both humanists and theists. Less than a year after writing about humanism as the logical replacement for theism, E. Stanton Hodgkin expressed the hope that both sides could coexist indefinitely. Hodgkin now claimed that neither humanists or theists really sought to drive the other out of the denomination; both, he said, “want to find some sort of basis on which they can live and worship and carry on common worship together.” They might not always be able to do this perfectly within congregations; individual churches might be more hospitable to one faction or the other, he noted. Yet he increasingly felt that there should be room for each kind of community. Hodgkin was a minister, and there was an implicit clericism in his idea that ministers would be the ones that choose which kind of beliefs each congregation would hold, and members would simply pick which minister they preferred and attend their church. Yet it also was very similar to Eliot’s view of Unitarianism, because both men perceived

⁷⁹ Robert J. Hucheson, “What Do You Mean by ‘God’? Part II.” *The Christian Register* 106, no. 28 (July 14, 1927): 569–71.

the core of the Unitarian tradition as enshrining freedom of conscience and allowing a multiplicity of religious beliefs under one denominational umbrella.⁸⁰

Obviously, talking about cooperation between factions did not eliminate some of the real divisions that existed with Unitarianism. Rhetoric about both sides getting along did not really address the fact that some of the humanists did see themselves as part of a project to stamp out theism, just as their theist opponents feared. Nor did those arguing for harmony grapple with the concerns of humanists that some theists could imagine only a superficial fellowship with those who did not share their commitments to God. But the strategy of not emphasizing these differences was effective. There was no single moment of reconciliation, or a single person that made the denomination stay intact, but the label of being a “Unitarian,” and a shared sense that this allowed many kinds of theological beliefs, always kept both sides in dialogue.

The leaders of the two factions also mellowed with time and resigned themselves to being Unitarian ministers alongside their longtime opponents. Sullivan remained a public figure within Unitarian circles, publishing articles directed against humanism and what he feared was the rising tide of secularism, including two in the *Atlantic Monthly* that received national notice and interest outside of the denomination.⁸¹ Yet as Sullivan approached his sixties, he was also increasingly content in his association with those people who agreed with him. As a minister at Germantown Unitarian Church in Pennsylvania, he dedicated himself to tending to his congregation, which was theologically conservative by Unitarian standards. The theist faction that Sullivan had once helped lead still saw themselves as the remnant of Christianity within Unitarianism, but they began to carve out a separate space away from the humanists, writing in

⁸⁰ E. Stanton Hodgins, “Argument for Humanism,” *The Christian Register* 107, no. 42 (October 18, 1928): 837–39.

⁸¹ William L. Sullivan, “Our Spiritual Destitution,” *Atlantic Monthly* 143 (March 1929): 373–382; William L. Sullivan, “The Anti-Religious Front,” *Atlantic Monthly* 145 (January 1930): 96–104.

their own publications like *The Christian Leader*. They would eventually become organized as an explicit subgroup within Unitarianism. This did not mean that humanism had taken over the denomination, but the bulk of Unitarians had not clearly rallied firmly behind older liberal theism either. Sullivan was awarded an honorary doctorate from Temple University for his work in the field of religion in 1934. He died unexpectedly the next year, suffering from an illness that he initially believed to be the onset of cold. One of his last acts was to arrange a supply minister to take over his Sunday duties.

One of Sullivan's lasting legacies has been a poem, "To Outgrow the Past," that was retained in various Unitarian (and later Unitarian Universalist) hymnals and service books. It is the work that perhaps best expresses Sullivan's hope for the future of the Unitarian denomination and liberal religion. Unitarians would read it aloud in worship and ask:

"To outgrow the past but not extinguish it;
To be progressive but not raw,
Free but not mad, critical but not sterile, expectant but not deluded;
To be scientific but not to live on formulas that cut us off from life"⁸²

Sullivan wanted to be more open to theological change and adaptation than the Catholic Church had allowed, but he also wanted limits. It was an echo of his constant refrain in *The Priest*, in which his protagonist possessed both a "Catholic Soul" and a "Unitarian mind," indicating that the future of religion must combine both. Sullivan admitted that adaptation to modernity was necessary for religion to survive, but he also felt it was a painful and dangerous process that should not endanger piety and worship. "Outgrow the Past" ends with Sullivan's musing about how God affects life. It is this divine power that is able to "invest the lowliest life with magnificence. / And to prepare it for coronation."⁸³ He feared a world stripped of meaning,

⁸² William L. Sullivan, "To Outgrow the Past," Unitarian Universalist Association (Website), 2015.

⁸³ Sullivan, "To Outgrow the Past."

reduced solely to the fallible strivings of human beings. Unitarianism was never a perfect fit for Sullivan's views, but it was broad enough to contain them.

Sullivan's old rival John Dietrich remained a leader in the humanist movement for the next decade. Some humanists felt too confined within the AUA and sought to spread the idea of humanism beyond denominational confines by creating a new organization, which would eventually become the American Humanist Association. Dietrich was involved in setting up this new venture and was one of the signers of the 1933 Humanist Manifesto (discussed further in chapter 5). That same year his commitment to Unitarian humanism led him to be awarded an honorary Doctor of Divinity from the Meadville Seminary. Yet Dietrich stayed a Unitarian minister, not objecting to the project of setting up a humanist group to attract outsiders, but seeing his central field of work as within Unitarianism.

Dietrich's views began to mellow as he got older. He began to explore beyond the naturalistic humanism of his early preaching. By the late 1930s Dietrich's preaching recalled Rufus Jones, expressing appreciation for mysticism and suggesting that there was a danger in overemphasizing scientific rationalism in religion. Dietrich would tell his congregation in Minneapolis that "a little more of the mystic aspiration and fervor would add tremendously to the significance of liberal religion, which is in great danger of degenerating into a cold formula of intellectual concepts."⁸⁴ He was still not proclaiming a belief in God of any sort, however. Many factors contributed to the moderating of Dietrich's views. Some of the considerations were philosophical; the Depression caused him to doubt the ability of science and reason to cure humanity's social ills. Other aspects of the shift were personal; his first wife Louise died from cancer in 1931, and Dietrich was unsure how to a humanist could handle grief. He never held a

⁸⁴ John H. Dietrich quoted in Winston, *This Circle of Earth*, 245-246.

funeral service for his wife, instead having her immediately cremated, and immediately tried to make his sons live a "normal" life. The experience may have shown Dietrich that humanism needed to be leavened by some of the poetic comforts of religion. Dietrich's second wife, writer Margaret Carleton Winston, was around twenty years younger than him and much more open to spirituality than her husband. When the two married in 1933 she insisted they read from Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet*.⁸⁵ Winston was supportive of her husband's humanist ministry, but also urged him to consider a broader range of religious views. He retired from his ministry in 1938 and the couple moved to Berkeley, California.

By the end of his life Dietrich completely rejected his earlier ideas of a purely naturalistic humanism, seeing in that philosophy a crude and naive underestimation of the value of more traditional religion. In a 1950 Easter sermon that he delivered as a guest preacher at the Unitarian Church in Berkeley, Dietrich gave the first indication of these changing beliefs about God when he combined an older humanist worship service, focused on the renewal of plant life in springtime, with references to a theistic-sounding "Infinite spirit of Life" which was revealed by such a renewal.⁸⁶ Three years later, writing to humanist leader Edwin Wilson, Dietrich explained, "I have come to feel [humanism] is a dated philosophy-- a philosophy too narrow in its conception of the great cosmic scheme, about which we know little, and concerning which we should be less dogmatic and arrogant."⁸⁷ Dietrich explained to his old ally Wilson that "we should not have drawn such a hard and fast distinction between theism and humanism, making them contradictory." While there could be no place for "orthodox theology or supernaturalism"

⁸⁵ Winston, *This Circle of Earth*, 215-231.

⁸⁶ Richard Frothingham, "John H. Dietrich: From Humanism to Theism," *The Unitarian Universalist Christian* 28. The sermon was "Renewal of Life" and delivered on April 9, 1950.

⁸⁷ John H. Dietrich to Edwin Wilson, May 12, 1953. Correspondence, 1933-1957, 1968. John H. Dietrich Papers, Minnesota Historical Society.

in the modern era, there was also “a type of theism which does not stand in opposition to humanism, and I have come to accept that type.” Dietrich felt that defining this kind of theism, which freely confessed its ignorance of the nature of God, was elusive and hard to pin down precisely, but nevertheless meaningful, and it provided a way to connect with the “inescapable presence of . . . all-enveloping power” that was involved in “every moment” of human life”.⁸⁸

True religion was no longer human fellowship and social action for Dietrich; what the world needed now was the contact of humans and the flowering of their relationship with spirit.

Defending his change of mind, he wrote, “Now call me theist, call me a renegade, perhaps a theistic-humanist [sic], call me what you like, but I can assure you that this broader conception of human life and its relation to the all-embracing and all-sustaining universe, makes life much more valuable and satisfactory to them—an attitude which I would have sneered at in the days of the [Humanist] manifesto.”⁸⁹

When Wilson replied, he surprised Dietrich by agreeing with many of his points. Despite being one of the vocal humanists, he claimed to have “no quarrel with those who use the term God for the natural process that is the source and matrix of human personality.” Wilson disingenuously claimed that it was purely the fault of theistic Unitarian critics that belief in “God” had ever been at issue between humanists and their critics, stating, “I think it too bad that the line was made that of God or no-God by Sullivan, Dodson, etc. When we make it natural versus supernatural and hold that the natural is as rich and complete as the rejected bifurcation it is on quite a different basis.”⁹⁰ Sullivan and Dodson, however, would have both vigorously

⁸⁸ John H. Dietrich to Edwin Wilson, May 12, 1953. Correspondence, 1933-1957, 1968. John H. Dietrich Papers, Minnesota Historical Society.

⁸⁹ John H. Dietrich to Edwin Wilson, May 12, 1953. Correspondence, 1933-1957, 1968. John H. Dietrich Papers, Minnesota Historical Society.

⁹⁰ Edwin H. Wilson to John H. Dietrich, August 18, 1953. Correspondence, 1933-1957, 1968. John H. Dietrich Papers, Minnesota Historical Society.

denied they held supernatural views. They had seen the debate as being driven by humanist insistence that the term “God” was outdated; in their perception it was not they who had drawn the “line.”

Despite his retirement, Dietrich allowed excerpts of his writing on his change of mind to be published in *The Humanist*, the main periodical of the American Humanist Association.

Dieffenbach wrote to Dietrich after the article appeared that he too had undergone a change of heart and now believed in something that he felt could be called “God.” As a Humanist he had been too interested in “intellectual satisfaction,” he wrote, and ignored the value of religion.⁹¹ In later correspondence, Dieffenbach assured his old friend that their shared lifelong labors for humanism had been worthwhile, explaining to Dietrich that “you did contribute to the clarification of religious thought, and the elimination of things that are not true. After all, you were—as you are—concerned with genuine religious values and virtues in a time which called for a crusading spirit.” Dietrich might feel duplicitous for now espousing positions he had once decried, but Dieffenbach urged him to see it as simply the result of having been such a forceful crusader. His new views were not a “recantation,” but simply an acknowledgement that he had come to a fuller truth.⁹²

Dieffenbach recounted to Dietrich how he had found personal spiritual fulfillment in his old age by going on weeklong retreats on an island off the coast of Maine with other former ministers a few times a year as part of a group called the Brothers of the Way. “It is a kind of monasticism,” Dieffenbach explained. The men would take turns reading devotional literature to each other for an hour each day from their cabin’s library, and when it was Dieffenbach’s turn to

⁹¹ Albert C. Dieffenbach to John H. Dietrich, October 7, 1953. Correspondence, 1933-1957, 1968. John H. Dietrich Papers, Minnesota Historical Society.

⁹² Albert C. Dieffenbach to John H. Dietrich, October 7, 1953. Correspondence, 1933-1957, 1968. John H. Dietrich Papers, Minnesota Historical Society.

read to the group, he had shared with his fellows what he felt were the choicest parts of Rufus Jones' writings.⁹³ Mystical liberalism in the end was perhaps not poles apart from the goals of humanistic naturalism.

Despite Dieffenbach's consolation, Dietrich was hard on himself. In a letter to a humanist admirer he confessed he no longer believed in what he had taught in many of his old writings, and explained where he had gone wrong; "I realize now how my utter reliance upon science and reason and my contempt for intuitive insights and intangible values which are the very essence of art and religion, was a great mistake; and the way in which I cut mankind off of all cosmic relationship, denying or ignoring every influence outside of humanity itself was very-shortsighted and arrogant." He had prized logic and discounted emotion, and valued order at the expense of religious mystery. In his old age Dietrich became a theist, explaining to the admirer that he had a belief in "a spiritual power in the universe." He now admitted that he did believe in God.

In an unpublished manuscript that he was preparing at the time of his death, Dietrich marshaled the intellectual canon of liberal religion to support his views of a non-anthropomorphic God, citing Paul Tillich, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Matthew Arnold, Thomas Paine and Walt Whitman, among a host of others. Ultimately, he admitted that the thinker underlying his recent thought was William James, and particularly the arguments that James had expressed in "Will to Believe." Dietrich did not think he could prove God and found himself just as discontented as he had been in decades past with logical proofs of theism, but he did agree with James that there were positive gains to be made in life by choosing

⁹³ Albert C. Dieffenbach to John H. Dietrich, October 7, 1953. Correspondence, 1933-1957, 1968. John H. Dietrich Papers, Minnesota Historical Society.

to believe rather than disbelieving. And he also had the growing conviction that human beings needed “a cosmic backing for the moral life” and “That what is deepest in man cannot be evoked without some sort of orientation towards the ultimate meaning and value of reality.” Whether or not God was real, and Dietrich was hopeful God existed, he now felt that individuals needed a connection with God to reach their full potential. While he was upset at his own past hubris, he felt proud his views had evolved, declaring “If I thought exactly as I did forty years ago, it would perhaps be a sign that I have not given those ideas enough attention.”⁹⁴ Dietrich knew well Emerson's line that “a foolish consistency is a hobgoblin of little minds” and took pride that he could change his opinions, even in advanced age.

After decades of debate, the understanding of God held by many of the leading humanists—Dietrich, Dieffenbach, and Wilson —closely resembled that of Sullivan and their old theist foes. The factions did not believe in a supernatural, interventionist God; both believed the term “God” could be used to describe order of the universe, and that such religious language might be important in worship. The theist faction had lost the fight to make Unitarians to use “God” language, but many of the Unitarian Humanists had ultimately embraced that language as useful anyway.

When Dietrich died he had completed 8,500 words of a manuscript entitled “Thoughts on God,” which was never published. It was poignant, deeply personal and thoughtful, addressing how his views had changed over the years. In it Dietrich declared that he had erred by being “naive enough to fall victim of the *Zeitgeist*” of his age, which had enshrined the natural sciences as the sole source of information. He felt that his ideas had drawn too much from the Draper-White conflict thesis, the belief that religion was obsolete, and been blind to the limitations of the

⁹⁴ John H. Dietrich, “Thoughts On God (An Unfinished Manuscript),” 1950s. Misc. Writings, 1910-1987. John H. Dietrich Papers, Minnesota Historical Society.

scientific method. He still held a great deal of respect for science, but he thought it hubristic to assume that science could, or should, provide a set of moral values or give human beings a sense of purpose.

Dietrich is still regarded within the denomination as being (alongside Curtis Reese) the leading architect of Unitarian humanism. He is portrayed as a heroic liberal fighting against Sullivan's demands for orthodoxy. His later rejection of humanism is frequently brushed aside. Such a dismissal of Dietrich's latter life is unfortunate, however, because one of the most admirable qualities of the Unitarianism that Dietrich so devotedly upheld was that it permitted people to reconsider and revise their religious views. When Dietrich did choose to believe in something that he felt might be called "God," he did so without the thought that he was being directly compelled either way by the official pronouncements of his faith. His life's work had been to make it so that this choice was now a personal one.

Constant Work

Avoiding theological divisions becoming controversial enough to start a schism was something that had to be constantly guarded against, even once Sullivan and Dietrich retired. It became easier to avoid conflict during the next generation because the integration of humanist-leaning perspectives into Unitarianism occurred principally not through overt sermons and articles, but spread through the subtler vehicle of children's religious education.

Starting in 1937, the AUA hired Sophia Fahs to be editor for their children's educational literature. Fahs was deeply tied into the world of liberal religion. Prior to working for the AUA, she had earned a Bachelor's of Divinity from Union Theological Seminary, a rare accomplishment for a woman at the time. While living in New York, she served as the principal of the Union School of Religion, an experimental progressive religious education program

attached to the seminary, and had developed the Sunday school program at Harry Emerson Fosdick's Riverside Church. Fahs advocated a hands-off approach when it came to teaching children about religion, declaring "Until a child has some experience which awakens in him a bit of this wondering after the mystery of life, it seems to me that the world 'God' is best left out of the picture."⁹⁵

Fahs served as editor of the New Beacon Series, a line of educational books for young children published by Beacon Press, the AUA's press. The most prominent of these series was about Martin and Judy, two white suburban friends, and their everyday lives, engaging in activities like visiting a duck pond or waiting for it to rain. The introduction to the books, written by Fahs, explained to parents that the series tried to exclude consideration of a "personal God," lest young children be led to "inevitably picture a man-god who acts from personal motives of anger or love." The introduction went on to argue that if children were mistakenly left to conflate natural forces such as rain, floods or tornadoes with God, then they might grow to hate God for being cruel; "The Creator God is too great to be interpreted by a four-year-old."⁹⁶ Whereas Dietrich had sought to argue in favor of humanism, Fahs couched many of the same points as being neutral education.

Unitarian religious education curriculum would come to embrace the idea of not teaching children any particular conception of God, or even that God existed. Fahs's 1955 chapter book *The Old Story of Salvation* taught older children and teenagers that Protestantism needed to be

⁹⁵ Fahs quoted in Edith F. Hunter, *Sophia Lyon Fahs: A Biography* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1966), 178; M. Susan Harlow, "Sophia Lyon Fahs: Religious Modernist and Progressive Educator," in *Faith of Our Foremothers*, by Barbara Anne Keely (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 13–28; Lucinda A. Nolan, "Seeing What Is Not There Yet; Sophia Lyon Fahs, Entelechy and the Religious Education Association," *Religious Education* 99, no. 3 (June 2004): 247–71.

⁹⁶ Sophia Lyon Fahs, "A Word to Parents and Teachers," in *Martin and Judy In Their Little Two Houses*, by Verna Hills (Boston, MA: The Beacon Press, 1939), vi-vii.

reinvented for a new era, with new prayers, rituals and symbols. During the same era the Division of Education of the Council on Liberal Churches (a collaboration of Unitarians and Universalists before their merger) began to publish pamphlets for parents extolling God-optional approaches to religious education. One of these publications was a reprint of a 1932 article by Fahs entitled “Should Peggy and Peter Pray?” which argued that it was often damaging to children’s moral character to have them engage in petitionary prayer or prayers of thanksgiving. Fahs saw this as an urgent crisis that would cause children not to understand the cruelty of the natural world or their need to rely on their fellow human beings, declaring; “It is almost pathetic to see a socially interested child fall for the suggestion of a Santa Claus God ready to scatter gifts for the asking.”⁹⁷ Another pamphlet for parents was written by a rabbi, Stuart Rosenberg. Entitled “Parents Should Stop Exploiting God” it urged parents to let children develop their own notions of the divine as adults: “We need not worry about the need to paint for our little ones a verbal picture of God. God will be experienced through actions that speak louder than words.”⁹⁸ In the future, most Unitarians that were raised in the faith would not even have to dispense with a

⁹⁷Sophia Lyon Fahs, *The Old Story of Salvation* (Boston, MA: Starr King Press, 1955). ; Sophia Lyon Fahs, “Should Peggy and Peter Pray?” (Division of Education, Council of Liberal Churches, 1960), Unitarian Universalist Association Religious Education Curriculum File, 1940–1969, BMS 1388-5, Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School; Sophia Fahs, “Should Peggy and Peter Pray?,” *Religious Education* 27 (September 1932): 596–605.

⁹⁸ Stuart E. Rosenberg, “Parents Should Quit Exploiting God” (Division of Education, Council of Liberal Churches, 1960?), Unitarian Universalist Association Religious Education Curriculum File, 1940–1969, BMS 1388-4, Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School. This pamphlet was adapted from an article that originally appeared in MacLean’s magazine. It’s author, Rosenberg, was a graduate of Jewish Theological Seminary and controversial rabbi in Toronto. He had published in *The Reconstructionist*. See: Stuart E. Rosenberg, “For the Sake of Argument: Parents Should Quit Exploiting God,” *Maclean’s*, August 29, 1959; Michael Brown, “Platform and Prophecy: The Rise and Fall of Rabbi Stuart E. Rosenberg as Foreshadowed in His Early Toronto Sermons on Leadership,” *Jewish History* 23, no. 2 (2009): 195–217.

“childlike” notion of God, as they were taught either no notion of the divine, or a loosely defined pantheism.

The theist faction within Unitarianism still existed, but it increasingly gave way to a smaller explicitly Christian faction. Commitment to allowing individual freedom of religious conscience required that no group be seen as too powerful or risk dominating the AUA. The AUA president and the denominational leadership often had the unenviable task of trying to keep all factions happy, and it was rarely easy.

Frederick May Eliot, Dietrich's old colleague from Minneapolis, rose to the AUA presidency in 1937, just as Dietrich was retiring. Eliot was relatively skilled at juggling the agendas of the major interest groups that made up the denomination. During Eliot's tenure, the specter of a reprisal of the humanist-theist conflict briefly seemed possible. At the end of the Second World War, a group dedicated to furthering Christian perspectives within the denomination, Unitarian Christian Advance, was formed, containing many of the most theologically conservative theists. Shortly afterward, Eliot received a letter from Ruth Lyman, a layperson and a leader in a local chapter of the alliance. Lyman accused the AUA of disproportionately providing financial aid to humanists and plotting against Unitarian Christians. Over the course of several letters that she sent Eliot, she reached such a level of outrage over this perceived slight that she announced that she would call together other leaders in the Unitarian Christian Advance and leave the denomination.⁹⁹

While there seemed little immediate chance that one laywoman could trigger an exodus from the AUA, Eliot took no risks. He used what persuasive powers he could to make sure that no

⁹⁹ Ruth W. Lyman to Frederick May Eliot, October 11, 1944, Frederick May Elliot File bMS 378, box 19, Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School.

one troubled the fragile unity of his denomination. In his letters to Lyman he worked to reassure her that he was not championing humanism within Unitarianism. Instead, he declared, “I am much more deeply in sympathy with your views concerning Unitarian Christianity than you imagine.” He promised her that he was ready to defend the right of individuals to hold Christian beliefs within Unitarianism if the question ever arose. But Eliot also made clear that he would not favor Christianity at the expense of humanism, or vice-versa. Instead his vision was for a kind of Unitarianism that embraced many different belief systems. While Lyman had argued that because the humanists and Christian Unitarians each formed separate wings of the denomination they would be purer, and more productive, apart, Eliot would not accept this conclusion. Instead, he wrote, “I glory in the fact that our denomination has not only two wings but... a whole collection of wings, and what I am chiefly concerned for is the preservation of the freedom of choice and association with the inclusive fellowship of the Unitarian movement.”¹⁰⁰

Eliot celebrated the theological pluralism of the movement. His conciliatory efforts worked, and no schisms occurred. The norm for Unitarians going forward would end up being less scientifically informed than the humanism that Dietrich had foreseen, but it increasingly had either no place for God or extremely impersonal, pantheistic notions of the deity. The denomination had survived making God optional.

¹⁰⁰ Frederick May Eliot to Mrs. Lyman,” October 6, 1944. Frederick May Elliot File bMS 378, box 19, Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School; Frederick May Eliot to Mrs. Lyman, October 13, 1944. Frederick May Elliot File bMS 378, box 19, Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School.

Chapter Five: The Boundary with Godless Religion

“The name of Charles Francis Potter needs no introduction,” declared the *New York Times* in 1929. “It is a name that is today at once a symbol and a slogan of the liberal religion [of which] he is an apostle.”¹ Readers of the *Times* knew Potter because the former Unitarian-turned Universalist minister was perhaps the city’s most prominent critic of Christianity, and his provocative sermons had been regularly featured in the paper’s pages. Mason Olds, in his study of Dietrich, Reese, and Potter in *Religious Humanism in America*, entitles his chapter on Potter “The Rebel of Religious Humanism,” and the classification of Potter as a rebel is generally apt. He could be pointed, inflammatory and mocking.² Potter was outspoken and blunt, the kind of man who could casually declare before an audience of two thousand people that no one should love or fear as “ignorant, malicious, grotesque a God as the Jehovah of the Old Testament.”³ He enjoyed argument, and in the world of 1920s liberal religion, Potter was close to being what Christopher Hitchens, the most confrontational of the New Atheists, would prove to be in the early twenty first century.

The same year that the *Times* article appeared, Potter would be forced to leave his position as minister of the Church of the Divine Paternity, a Universalist church in New York City, and go on to found the First Humanist Society of New York, a humanist religious community exclusively connected with the growing humanist movement. Potter had been a part

¹ “The Leaders of Religion Through the Centuries,” *New York Times*, June 30, 1929.

² Wesley Mason Olds, *Religious Humanism in America* (Washington D.C.: University Press of America, 1973), 170-171. This chapter by Olds is perhaps the best single overview of Potter’s philosophy. This article focuses on perceptions of Potter rather than his philosophy; this is due in part to the fact that most of his views were articulated after the foundation of the First Humanist Society. For this dissertation, the only things cited from after that period are either comments about the past or work that appeared so quickly after its foundation they would have been in progress before Potter left the Universalists.

³ Charles Francis Potter, quoted in John Roach Straton and Charles Francis Potter, “The Battle Over the Bible,” in *Fundamentalist versus Modernist : The Debates between John Roach Straton and Charles Francis Potter*, ed. Joel A Carpenter (New York: Garland Pub., 1988), 91. Potter was debating the inerrancy of the Bible during the first Straton-Potter debate when he made this statement.

of the Unitarian humanist movement championed by John Dietrich and Curtis Reese, but along with several others he had come to think that Humanism and Unitarianism should exist separately. They worked to form organizations such as the American Humanist Association, which carried the message of Humanism outside the denomination. Scholar Wallace P. Rusterholtz gives Potter the principle credit for “divorcing Humanism from Unitarianism.”⁴ Potter and the other humanists with whom he was connected decided that they did not want to share membership in a religious community with those that still believed and talked about God, and they saw Unitarianism as too religiously conservative because it still contained a large population of theists. Rather than being God-optional, they wanted a Godless religion.

Potter’s approach demonstrates the complicated relationship between God-optional religion, and its close counterpart, Godless religion. As Unitarians, Quakers and Reconstructionist Jews started to allow latitude on what their members believed about God, each of these communities faced criticism from the theological left, both internal and external, that they should have moved to eliminate traditional beliefs about God and use of the word God among their membership. Advocates of Godless religion rallied around the label of humanist, and many took part in the American Humanist Association, a group initially created in part by Unitarian humanists who thought that the movement within their denomination had not gone far enough and exercised too little control of the denomination. But Humanism was not uniformly hostile to God-optional religion; many of Humanism’s most vocal advocates had long careers in God-optional groups and they were reluctant to break with them. Potter, despite his apparent rejection of Unitarianism, for example, would continue to regard himself as a Unitarian minister until he died. This chapter examines the often blurry and permeable boundary between God-

⁴ Wallace P. Rusterholtz, *American Heretics and Saints* (Boston, MA: Manthorne and Burack Inc, 1938), 302.

optional religions and the Godless religion of groups like the American Humanist Association. At points, clergy in God-optional groups, and even leaders like Mordecai Kaplan, joined the American Humanist Association, seeing enough in common with the humanists' hostility to traditional theism that they were willing to overlook the exclusive claims of other humanists that the organization should exclude those who still claimed belief in some sort of God. Humanism also became a label adapted by constituencies in existing religious communities, and there were smaller communities that labeled themselves as humanist Quakers, or humanist Jews, which saw themselves as part of the larger humanist movement. Both clergy and laity could easily cross from one side to the other, and sometimes they awkwardly straddled both. Potter's rupture with God-optional religion, as one example, hid the real continuity.

Finding a New Faith

When Potter narrated his own life, he of course chose to emphasize the most dramatic version of his developing humanism, and claimed that he had been hounded out of Unitarianism and Universalism as a heretic. Inside Potter's 1930 book, *Humanism: A New Religion*, in which he expands on his humanist philosophy, the blurb describing the author states:

Last spring, Mr. Potter's belief, as enunciated from his pulpit in the Church of the Divine Paternity, came into conflict with the views of church executives and at that time he announced he would form an independent religious society. The First Humanist Society was formed as a result.⁵

Potter connected his ouster from the Fourth Universalist Society, also known as the Church of the Divine Paternity, and the formation of his independent humanist group. It is true that barely seventeen months after becoming the minister to the Church of the Divine Paternity, Potter found himself compelled to leave his post. Potter cast his resignation as a mere formality, and the press echoed Potter's assertion that the trustees of the church did not support him because of his liberal

⁵ Charles Francis Potter, *Humanism, a New Religion* (Simon and Schuster, 1930), 133.

theology.⁶ Was this simply a conservative congregation appointing a progressive minister and then being shocked by his theology? Despite Potter's assertions, his dismissal resulted from differences of presentation and personality, as from Potter's own decision to abandon efforts to integrate his humanist faith into existing denominational structures. Potter was controversial and good at generating publicity, something that proved to be a great liability for a minister but that became an essential attribute in promoting his new humanist faith. An examination of Potter's career and time at the Church of the Divine Paternity makes clear that creating a faith and being a leader in one require vastly different skills.

Potter was never one to moderate his views. He often saw himself locked in a mortal battle against fundamentalism and superstition. Potter's vehement and sometimes confrontational attitude may have been a reaction to his upbringing as a Baptist and later training as a Baptist minister.⁷ Potter actually served two Baptist parishes before resigning from his ministry in 1913 because of his liberal theological views. He then became a Unitarian.⁸ Overall, this background is not dissimilar from that of either Reese or Dietrich (described in chapter one and chapter four), both of whom left more conservative denominations to become Unitarians around the same time.

Potter had been first aware of Unitarians because of the angry criticism of his Baptist parishioners who branded him a "Unitarian" as an epithet.⁹ Potter was not as interested in joining the Unitarian faith and was not as invested in it as Reese or Dietrich had been; his concern at the time was leaving the Baptists. Potter was particularly affected by his Baptist heritage; he later

⁶ "Dr. Potter Resigns as Church Pastor," *New York Times*, February 25, 1929.

⁷ Charles Francis Potter, *The Preacher and I, an Autobiography* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1951), 9-30, 32-60.

⁸ Potter, *The Preacher and I*, 97-99.

⁹ Mason Olds, *American Religious Humanism*, Revised Edition (Hamden, CT: HUHumanists Association, 2006), 55, 101; Potter, *The Preacher and I, an Autobiography*, 96-97.

claimed that he “felt guilty” for having preached orthodox doctrines.¹⁰ Shortly after Potter changed denominations, he took up the Unitarian ministry in Edmonton, Alberta.¹¹ On returning to the United States, Potter served in two churches in Massachusetts. By all appearances, he acted as a committed Unitarian, even briefly editing the denominational periodical, *The Christian Register*, when Alfred Dieffenbach went on vacation.¹²

In 1919, Potter moved to New York City to head the Unitarian Unity Congregational Society, and there he proved to be a religious firebrand. While Potter was busy making his reputation, however, he was not yet a humanist, or taking part in debates that would actively shape that belief system’s future. In the Midwest, Dietrich and Reese were struggling to integrate Humanism into Unitarianism, but because Potter never took part in these debates, he had far less of an investment in the idea of Humanism existing within Unitarianism, or in the notion that it should exist alongside theistic viewpoints in a faith. In his autobiography Potter does not even mention humanism’s prominence within the Unitarian faith.

Although Potter was not a humanist yet, he was proving to be noticeably extreme in his religious views. In a sermon given in 1925, Potter denounced the idea of an interventionist God, examining two cases of failed prayers. He recounted how a Catholic woman was murdered while holding a crucifix. The women’s priest, Potter said, wrongly condemned the city administration for lax policing and poor lighting rather than God. In a rage, Potter declared: “Here the most infallible church in the world blamed the temporal police for a failure of their magic. It doesn’t work anymore.” He then told the story of a little girl who burned to death because her mother set

¹⁰ Potter, *The Preacher and I, an Autobiography*, 138.

¹¹ Potter, *The Preacher and I, an Autobiography*, 108.

¹² Potter, *The Preacher and I, an Autobiography*, 128-130.

out prayer candles for another ill child. The message Potter told his listeners was that, “The old God is gone.... Those who are called Atheists today will be hailed as prophets of a new religion by our grandchildren.” Potter declared that he did not believe in a “God of blood and flesh,” although his qualification that he did believe in one of “personnel unity, the sum of life, but not limited by the forms of life now in existence” must have offered some slight comfort to those in his congregation who wanted a place for God. This was Potter at his most accommodating, still causing controversy by doing things like condemning the fact that anyone took “Jesus of Nazareth, a man” as their God, but leaving some room for traditional beliefs.¹³

Most times he was not as kind. Potter blamed what he saw as superstitions for society’s ills; he argued that “Fundamentalism” gave rise to “Flapperism” among the young, for example. He claimed that this was because “Flapperism is the reaction of their insulted intelligences” after having been “fed fairy tales.” But Potter had hope for the future because “it is a wholesome sign that Santa Claus, the Stork, the devil, hell, Heaven, the magical Jesus, the infallible Bible and other attempts to dodge the truth have been relegated to the long limbo of boogeyland by the fearless fact finders of today.”¹⁴ In another instance, Potter argued during a special sermon that Lincoln was not saved, so “according to the teachings of the Orthodox churches Abraham Lincoln (the ‘unsaved’) is now in hell.”¹⁵ Theologically Potter’s points would not have seemed extraordinary to his Unitarian co-religionists, but his rhetoric set him apart.

In some ways Potter’s tendency to publicly provoke both his audience and the wider world actually made his methods closer to revivalists of the era than those of other liberal

¹³ “Atheist a Quitter Says Dr. Potter,” *New York Times*, June 8, 1925.

¹⁴ “Potter Predicts a Greater Religion,” *New York Times*, December 31, 1923.

¹⁵ Potter, *The Preacher and I, an Autobiography*, 195.

ministers. Liberals like Henry Emerson Fosdick could deliver occasional barbed sermons attacking fundamentalists, but these tended to be heavily intellectual in tone.¹⁶ Potter was not anti-intellectual, but his use of caustic humor and his constant attacks on “fundamentalists” were comparable to some revivalists’ focus on “sinners,” and meant he had a different appeal. Even if he did not possess the revivalist’s flair for dramatic presentation and the use of music, Potter’s ability to get coverage in papers, his knowledge of press releases and his use of wire services to spread his message had much in common with the multimedia techniques of someone like Aimee Semple McPherson or radio evangelist Charles E. Fuller.¹⁷ As Potter observed, “most Modernist Ministers, especially Unitarians, regarded it as a social error to get one’s name in public print,” but this was not a perception that he shared.¹⁸ This is not to say that Modernists were above promoting their own views, but certainly Potter’s blunt and often confrontational style, along with constant self-promotion in the media, was more in line with theological conservatives.

Potter’s success in gaining media attention resulted in part from making remarks that were perceived as inflammatory. The *New York Times* reported his suggestion to his congregation that there should be a new “all-American Bible to replace the inspirational Hebrew teachings [of the Hebrew Scriptures].” Potter declared that the new text should include not only notables such as Lincoln and Washington, but also Thomas Paine, a noted religious skeptic, who in Potter’s view deserved a place as a prophet.¹⁹

¹⁶ Henry Emerson Fosdick, “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” 1922, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5070/>.

¹⁷ William F. Schulz, *Making the Manifesto: The Birth of Religious Humanism* (Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 2004), 65-66; Matthew Avery Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Jon Butler, *Religion in American Life: A Short History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 336.

¹⁸ Potter, *The Preacher and I, an Autobiography*, 143.

¹⁹ “Plans for a New Bible of and for America,” *New York Times*, February 28, 1924.

On another occasion Potter had a statue that had been rejected by the New York Academy of Design installed at his church. Created by Carl E. Ackley, a staff member of the Museum of Natural History in New York, it depicted a man emerging from a gorilla. Potter declared that the statue's unveiling would be the first blow in what he called "an unprecedented but entirely justified step... [the] opening move in a vigorous campaign against fundamentalists." Potter felt he had to respond to attacks on evolution and declared that for "evolution day" he would hold regular talks and sermons on the subject.²⁰ He quickly found himself under fire from Baptist Preacher John Roach Straton, who suggested that the statue was evidence of "the propaganda of a bestial philosophy."²¹

Straton, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in New York, would become Potter's chief nemesis during this time. For both men, the animosity was personal. For Straton, Potter was a lost Baptist sheep that he "prayed nightly to return to the fold," while for Potter the conflict meant a satisfying repudiation of his Baptist roots.²² Potter confessed in his autobiography that "every printed paragraph of [Straton's] sermons which I read in the Monday papers 'riled' me, and I wanted to shout from the housetops: 'No! No! This man is wrong, terribly wrong and I can prove it!'"²³ While there is no record of Potter ever deciding to take the doctrinal battle to the rooftops, it certainly reverberated throughout New York.

In June of 1923, Potter began a series of sermons with the express purpose of attacking fundamentalism. With titles such as "Dangerous Mr. Bryan," "Education versus Fundamentalism," and even "The Tragedy of Fundamentalism," these were overtly political

²⁰ "Akeley Bronze Ape to Stand in Church," *New York Times*, April 9, 1924.

²¹ John Roach Straton quoted in "Akeley Bronze Ape to Stand in Church."

²² "Akeley Bronze Ape to Stand in Church.," Olds, *Religious Humanism in America*, 163.

²³ Potter, *The Preacher and I, an Autobiography*, 138.

statements.²⁴ For Potter, this was a crusade, and his fundamentalist foes were an absolute evil. Writing over twenty-five years later, Potter would describe how, when Straton and two other Baptist preachers, Thomas T. Shields of Toronto and Frank Norris of Fort Worth, were starting a series of mass meetings to respond to the modernists, William Jennings Bryan arrived in New York “charging into the city as the Fourth Horseman, if not of the Apocalypse, then certainly of Apocalypticism.” Potter described their gatherings as “an incredible orgy of Orthodoxy gone berserk.”²⁵

When Potter’s challenges failed to elicit the desired response from Straton, he took more drastic steps. He challenged Straton to a series of debates on religious questions. These were to be public and to be judged. To assure that Straton would be forced to debate, Potter sent copies of his challenge to the major newspapers in New York.²⁶ Straton likely did not need this kind of encouragement, as he had been seeking a Modernist to debate against, and both Harry Emerson Fosdick and the President of Brown University William Faunce had declined his invitations. Potter was the perfect candidate to engage because, as Straton put it, “he calls a spade a spade, and is honest about his beliefs, or, perhaps I should say, his unbeliefs.”²⁷

The debates themselves were merciless. Each debate packed theaters (three of the four were held at Carnegie Hall) and they were also broadcast over the radio. At one point in the first debate, Potter compared the actions of the ancient Israelites in the Old Testament to German war

²⁴ Potter, *The Preacher and I, an Autobiography*, 142.

²⁵ Potter, *The Preacher and I, an Autobiography*, 144.

²⁶ Potter, *The Preacher and I, an Autobiography*, 148-149.

²⁷ John Roach Straton quoted in John Roach Straton and Charles Francis Potter, *Fundamentalist versus Modernist : The Debates between John Roach Straton and Charles Francis Potter*, ed. Joel A Carpenter (New York: Garland Pub., 1988), VI-VII.

atrocities during the First World War.²⁸ The judges awarded Potter victory in the first debate, and he claimed that as a result of his success the media insisted on referring to him as “doctor.” He kept this new title and allowed himself to be referred to as Dr. Potter afterwards.²⁹ Of the five proposed debates, however, only four were held, with Potter winning just half of them.³⁰

It is perhaps useful to draw a comparison between Potter and his aggressive and pointed debates with fundamentalists, and John Dietrich’s theological debates with Unitarian Christian William Lawrence Sullivan. David B. Parke, in his account of early twentieth century Unitarianism, views these encounters as so similar that he juxtaposes them side-by-side in his account of humanism’s spread through Unitarianism, despite the fact that Potter was not publicly a humanist when the Straton-Potter debates took place.³¹ According to Unitarian Universalist scholar John A. Buehrens, Dietrich’s debates with Sullivan resulted not in conflict but in “rights of individual conscience [being] affirmed and a respectful ‘unity and diversity’ maintained.”³² While this may suggest less animosity than really existed, it is true that Dietrich’s disputes were certainly more subdued than Potter’s very public exploits. The internal Unitarian dispute had the

²⁸ Charles Francis Potter quoted in John Roach Straton and Charles Francis Potter, *Fundamentalist versus Modernist*, I, IX; “Potter, Modernist Wins Bible Debate,” *New Journal and Guide* (1916-2003) (Norfolk, Va., United States, December 29, 1923).

²⁹ Potter, *The Preacher and I, an Autobiography*, 180.

³⁰ Olds, *Religious Humanism in America*. 162-163; Straton and Potter, “The Battle Over the Bible.” 92; John Roach Straton and Charles Francis Potter, “Evolution versus Creation,” in *Fundamentalist versus Modernist : The Debates between John Roach Straton and Charles Francis Potter*, ed. Joel A Carpenter (New York: Garland Pub., 1988), 111; John Roach Straton and Charles Francis Potter, “The Virgin Birth- Fact or Fiction?,” in *Fundamentalist versus Modernist : The Debates between John Roach Straton and Charles Francis Potter*, ed. Joel A Carpenter (New York: Garland Pub., 1988), 96; John Roach Straton and Charles Francis Potter, “Was Christ Both God and Man,” in *Fundamentalist versus Modernist : The Debates between John Roach Straton and Charles Francis Potter*, ed. Joel A Carpenter (New York: Garland Pub., 1988), 101. Potter won the debate on Biblical inerrancy by a vote of two to one. Straton won unanimously in the debates on evolution and Jesus being both “God and man.” Potter won by negative presumption in the debate on the virgin birth after the judges were split on the vote.

³¹ David B. Parke, “A Wave at Crest,” in *A Stream of Light: A Sesquicentennial History of American Unitarianism*, ed. Conrad Wright (Boston, MA: Skinner House, 1975), 111.

³² John A. Buehrens, *Universalists and Unitarians in America: A People’s History* (Boston, MA: Skinner House, 2011), 135.

characteristic of a family tiff, taking place mostly behind closed doors at denominational conferences and through denominational periodicals. Further, Dietrich's main target was not fundamentalism but concepts of what he would term "half-way liberalism," which failed to "break entirely with the old and comprehend the new."³³ Potter sought opponents with less theological common ground and the debates were far less cordial. Unlike Dietrich, Potter could accept no compromise.

In 1925 Potter would leave his pulpit to raise money for Antioch College, and he claimed at this juncture that education was his real ministry. While away from preaching, however, Potter grew more radical in his faith. Exactly when Potter began to understand that he was a humanist is a difficult question. William F. Schulz, in his history of the Humanist Manifesto, dates it to an article Potter produced for Antioch's journal, *Blaze*.³⁴ Later reprinted in *The Christian Register*, the article is less adventurous in its claims than might have been expected of Potter. It merely points out that Humanism and theism are not antithetical belief systems, and heavily quotes John Dietrich's views that people should focus on humanity rather than abstract notions of salvation.³⁵

Potter ultimately could not resist throwing in one barb at religion, however, undermining his own point about the compatibility of humanism and theism. He recalled an anecdote that he thought was insightful: "A humanist preacher was recently questioned by a theist who desired to know where to turn for comfort and consolation in the religion of humanism. The humanist replied, rather bluntly but with tremendous effect,- 'Why not try to be a man for a while.'"³⁶ The tale drew a trope common among freethinkers since at least the nineteenth century that theism

³³ Olds, *Religious Humanism in America*. 37-48; John Dietrich, "The Folly of Half-Way Liberalism," in *Ten Sermons*, ed. Mason Olds (Yellow Springs, Ohio: Fellowship of Religious Humanists, 1989), 56.

³⁴ Schulz, *Making the Manifesto*, 36.

³⁵ Charles Francis Potter, "Humanism-Theism," *The Christian Register* 105 (April 26, 1926): 396,408.

³⁶ Potter, "Humanism-Theism," 396,400 .

should be equated with femininity and skeptical rationality with masculinity.³⁷ Potter's story was almost certainly invented, as there were too few other humanist preachers for accounts of their exploits to widely circulate without names attached, but it made a point that Potter wanted to get across to his congregation, that a real man did not need an afterlife or a God to give them comfort because a real man was intellectually tough. This was much the same reason that John Dietrich rejected pastoral care as something that should not be undertaken by a humanist minister; its concern for emotional comfort and feelings was unmanly. Humanism, Potter implied, was the religion of patriarchy, and he believed this to be among its most positive features.

Though by implication he seemed to regard himself in sympathy with humanists, Potter never took the bold step of openly identifying himself as one. While he may have been cautious about labels, Potter still loved religious argument, something that reached its pinnacle when he took a key role in the Scopes Trial as an expert for the defense. Potter felt responsibility for the trial because he believed that the townspeople of Dayton, Tennessee had derived the idea after reading about the Potter-Straton debates in their newspapers.³⁸ He likely overestimated how well known the debates were in Tennessee.

Potter traveled to Dayton with the expectation that he might consult with Clarence Darrow and the defense team and also act as an expert witness. However, Potter proved too radical to be useful to the defense team. Because he refused to affirm that the Bible and evolution were compatible, which would have echoed the defense argument that Scopes had not

³⁷ The equation of femininity with religion, and masculinity with the secular, skepticism and freethought was widespread see: Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Village Atheists: How America's Unbelievers Made Their Way In a Godly Nation* (Princeton University Press, 2016), 127-135; Joan Wallach Scott, *Sex and Secularism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 31, 43-47, 68.

³⁸ Olds, *Religious Humanism in America*, 164.

violated Tennessee law, Potter's contributions were minimal.³⁹ While in Dayton, Potter nonetheless tried to provoke Fundamentalists, declaring that modernists should "take ten of the hundred reasons for doubting the Bible's literal truth and drop them from airplanes if necessary on cities of the South."⁴⁰ He was also reported as calling the townspeople of Dayton "freaks," though he later claimed this was a misunderstanding. He was, he said, only referring to the spectators watching the proceedings.⁴¹

In his account of the trial, journalist H.L. Mencken, usually very sympathetic to the defense, accused Potter of "desperately trying to horn into the trial."⁴² The writer openly poked fun at the failures of Potter and Leon Milton Birkhead, another Unitarian Minister who was attempting to assist the defense. According to Mencken, the pair prowled "around the town looking for a chance to discharge their 'hellish heresies.'" Nor were they having much success. Potter had a hearing with the local Methodists, but he apparently managed to upset the congregation so much that the parson who had allowed him to speak was forced to resign. Mencken wryly noted that even if Potter had succeeded, it would have made little impact because "The Methodists, as I have previously reported, are regarded almost as infidels in Rhea County."⁴³ Mencken may have agreed with Potter far more than the fundamentalists, but the few times Mencken bothered to notice him, Potter's excessive zeal to promote his own religious views made him seem clownish.

³⁹ Edward J. Larson, *Summer of the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate over Science and Religion* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 116-118.

⁴⁰ Charles Francis Potter quoted in Edward J. Larson, *Summer for the Gods*, 117.

⁴¹ "Lays Scopes Trial to Publicity Thirst," *New York Times*, August 5, 1925; Charles Francis Potter, "Letter to the Editor: Freaks Not People of Dayton," *New York Times*, August 8, 1925.

⁴² H.L. Mencken quoted in Larson, *Summer for the Gods*, 117.

⁴³ H.L. Mencken, "Law and Freedom, Mencken Discovers, Yield Place to Holy Writ in Rhea County," *The Baltimore Evening Sun* (July 15, 1925).

Charles Potter and the Church of the Divine Paternity

After a “sabbatical,” as he called his period of unemployment, Potter was invited by American Unitarian Association President Louis Cornish to become minister of the Universalist Church of the Divine Paternity. Cornish was able to make this strange offer even though the Church was Universalist in part because of the Church’s desperation; its pulpit had been vacant for two years. The Trustees of the Church had turned for help to their former Minister Frank Oliver Hall, who had decided that they should seek a qualified Unitarian.⁴⁴

Hall had been minister of the church from 1903 until 1919, when he took a position at the Universalist-run Crane Divinity School at Tufts University. Hall had not left of his own volition; during World War I he had come under intense pressure from the congregation due to his pacifism, something Potter and others believed had finally led to his departure. In the same period Hall’s wife died, however, which may have been a contributing factor to his career change.⁴⁵ Despite his departure, Hall continued to have an intimate involvement in the affairs of the Church of the Divine Paternity, serving as temporary minister before Potter’s arrival and as Pastor Emeritus during his tenure, a position that would increasingly put him into conflict with Potter.⁴⁶

Hall was not an advocate of God-optional religion or humanism, but a liberal evangelical and a moderate advocate of the social gospel. He inveighed against notions of eternal

⁴⁴ Potter, *The Preacher and I, an Autobiography*, 320-323.

⁴⁵ Phyllis Stock Morton, *Universalism in New York City: A History of the Fourth Universalist Society* (Phyllis Stock Morton, 1999), 22-23. “Pacifism May Cost Dr. Hall His Office,” *New York Times*, February 20, 1917. Potter, *The Preacher and I, an Autobiography*, 335. It is clear that at the very least Hall’s pacifism led to his removal from his post as Chaplain with the Empire State Society of the Sons of the American Revolution. The reaction within his congregation is less well documented.

⁴⁶ C. Neal Barney et al., “Parish Report,” December 17, 1925, bMS 446/2 (4), Harvard-Andover Library; C. Neal Barney et al., “Report of the Committee to Recommend a Pastor,” November 16, 1927, bMS 446/2 (4), Harvard-Andover Library.

punishment and biblical infallibility, but he argued that the Bible provided a guide to help create the Kingdom of God. In his sermons, Hall defended supernatural elements of Christian doctrine, saying that the Easter narrative and immortality were proven, so his parishioners had no reason to doubt he was committed to preaching about Christ and Christianity.⁴⁷ What would have caused him to suggest a firebrand like Potter become minister?

Hall had been an advocate for increasing ties between Unitarians and Universalists, a thought echoed by many in both denominations. There were high hopes when Potter's ministry began that he could aid in the process of cooperation between the denominations by serving as a minister with fellowship in both groups. The *New York Times* took note of this aspect of Potter's appointment, declaring "it is considered significant, in the light of the present tendency towards the federation of liberal Churches, that what is considered one of the most prominent of the Universalist Churches in the country has called to its pulpit a Unitarian."⁴⁸

In his autobiography, Potter gave a less prosaic explanation for Hall's willingness to vouch for him. In Potter's telling, Hall had been ousted from his pastorate and had never really resigned himself to being forced out. According to Potter, Hall schemed to put Potter in the pulpit knowing that his humanism would upset the congregation and that the church's trustees would eventually reject him, and ultimately invite their former minister back. The Church of the Divine Paternity had ousted Hall because his pacifism was too radical, but they would welcome him

⁴⁷ "Hall Finds Easter Proven By Errors," *New York Times*, April 6, 1931.; Frank Oliver Hall, "Burning Tares. Garnering Wheat" (Sermon at the Church of the Divine Paternity, December 11, 1917), bMS 446/14 (18), Harvard-Andover Library; Frank Oliver Hall, "The Bible: A Guide to Life, Rather Than an Infallible Inspiration" (Sermon at the Church of the Divine Paternity, April 1916), bMS 446/14 (18), Harvard-Andover Library; Frank Oliver Hall, "The Simplicity That Is in Christ" (Sermon at the Church of the Divine Paternity, March 14, 1915), bMS 446/14 (18), Harvard-Andover Library.

⁴⁸ "Universalists' Call Accepted by Potter," *New York Times*, November 28, 1927.

Sadly the absence of documentation makes it unclear why exactly Cornish believed Potter would be well suited the Church of the Divine Paternity.

back as the safe alternative to Potter.⁴⁹ Was Potter right? Had Hall really set up him up for failure in some kind of Machiavellian intrigue? Sadly, not enough documentation from the Church of the Divine Paternity exists to prove or disprove Potter's thesis. Hall's strong commitment to a merger of Unitarianism and Universalism, something furthered by Potter's appointment, would suggest against it, but Potter may have been right that Hall did have a vested interest in getting back to "his" pulpit. Hall would serve as minister of the church for a full decade after Potter left. Whatever Hall's reasoning and actions, the lion's share of Potter's problems was largely of his own making.

The people in the Church of the Divine Paternity appear to have hired Potter mostly on Hall's word; no one else knew much about him. Potter reported that one long-time parishioner only "knew" (incorrectly) that he was from the Midwest.⁵⁰ The report of the Church committee that decided to call Potter to the ministry gave only the barest outline of his career and relied on Cornish and Hall's recommendations.⁵¹ The church was going in blind, a few congregants seemed to have followed Potter's debates with Straton, and they would be very surprised by their new minister.

Potter did make the pragmatic move of trying to establish his orthodoxy to his congregation by almost immediately attacking Catholicism. In his first sermon after taking his new post, Potter blasted the Pope for having "temporal ambitions" and he specifically denounced presidential candidate Al Smith, telling the congregation that "I'm not telling you not to vote for Alfred E. Smith, but if you do, do it with your eyes open."⁵² Potter may have been hoping this anti-

⁴⁹ Potter, *The Preacher and I, an Autobiography*, 335. Potter also credits his wife for helping him come up with this theory.

⁵⁰ Potter, *The Preacher and I, an Autobiography*, 323.

⁵¹ Barney et al., "Report of the Committee to Recommend a Pastor."

⁵² "His Church Installs Rev. C.F. Potter," *New York Times*, January 16, 1928.

Catholic tirade would endear him to his new congregation, though there is no documentation of their reaction.

In his new role as minister, Potter kept up his public feud with Straton. The fight once again erupted into the pages of the *New York Times*, a kind of publicity that Potter's congregants probably had never expected their minister to receive when they had hired him. Potter announced that he had sent Straton a book on evolution that he hoped would convince him of the theory's soundness. Needless to say, it did not have the intended effect.⁵³

Although transcripts do not survive of his sermons, there is ample evidence of Potter's thinking about religion from a book he was working on during this period, *The Story of World Religions*. Designed to be a counterpart to Will Durant's *Story of Philosophy*, the book offered many provocative positions. Potter praised other faiths and argued that Christianity contained many elements of "primitive religion." He asserted that "these vestigial relics indicate the evolution of religion of man as clearly as his wisdom teeth and vermiform appendix reveal the evolution of the body, and their removal is sometimes necessary to his spiritual health."⁵⁴ He compared Moses's experience of theophany to a child's imaginary friend, depicted ancient Israelite child sacrifice as commonplace, and suggested that the future will "forever dispose of the myth that the Man of Galilee was a god who came to earth... bringing an absolutely new revelation to mankind."⁵⁵ It is quite likely that some of these ideas found their way into Potter's sermons. To Potter's congregation they would have seemed quite a departure from their former minister's theological views.

⁵³ "Hopes to Convert Straton," *New York Times*, May 28, 1928.

⁵⁴ Charles Francis Potter, *The story of religion : as told in the lives of its leaders; with special reference to atavisms, common elements, and parallel customs, in the religions of the world* (New York: Garden City Pub. Co., 1929), XVI.

⁵⁵ Potter, *The Preacher and I, an Autobiography*, 50, 125-126, 231.

The lack of public acceptance of the kind of views Potter was espousing was indicated by the *New York Times*. The review of Potter's new book declared it to be erudite, but the reviewer jested about the extreme nature of Potter's religious views, writing "our only hesitation here is over Dr. Potter himself. Is he really a liberal in religion? Or is he a kind of unacknowledged ally of Dr. Straton, seeking to ensnare the unwary in the tolls of fundamentalism?" The *Times* suggested that Potter was quite vocal about what was at its core a small disagreement, noting "Sometimes we are tempted to ask whether the difference between the liberal and conservative in religion is not, in part, a matter of words." The *Times* also pointed out that both Potter and St. Paul spoke of an unknown force, implying that Potter missed the commonalities of faith in favor of his harsher rhetoric.⁵⁶

Even Potter began to notice that his views were proving to be something of a liability among his congregation. Potter's wife reported an interaction with an elderly petitioner who expressed surprise and anger that Potter's theological views were not more in line with Edwin Chapin's views; Chapin had been minister at the Church of the Divine Paternity from 1848 to 1880. Another congregant disparagingly told her, not knowing her relation to Potter, "you know, I think that fellow believes in evolution!" Potter's solution to this crisis among his congregants was not to talk honestly to them about his views or to moderate himself; instead he hoped to attract enough new parishioners that he could make a case for having revitalized the church, which he claimed was "hibernating if not moribund." He hoped to simultaneously use these new members to dilute the political power of those opposed to him. As he put it, "I took for granted that any Universalist church was liberal- liberal enough for me to start at least. I knew that if the existing few members of any church were open-minded enough for me to authorize my going

⁵⁶ "The Leaders of Religion Through the Centuries."

ahead with my methods for a few months I could bring in enough new ones to support me in making the church a really liberal and successful institution.”⁵⁷

This attitude may have explained some of the hostility Potter faced when making requests of the trustees. Potter’s suggestion for \$150 dollars a week to broadcast sermons on the radio was denied.⁵⁸ His attempt to place ads in the Saturday Papers for upcoming sermons, an advertising method he had used during his time at the West Side Unitarian Church, was also rebuffed by the trustees. They decried such measures as a waste of money and some even (accurately) accused Potter of trying to advertise himself.⁵⁹

A parish report blasted Potter for requesting so much money. It stated that Potter actually wanted several thousand more dollars for advertising, raising this budget significantly above the existing budget of \$1,300 that the Church had allocated for that purpose. He also was said to have requested an enlargement to the church’s kitchen, the building of a stage so that more people could come for functions, and “other changes that would involve an expenditure of at least \$25,000.” After having effectively suggested Potter was out of line, the report concluded that these measures were “probably unwise” and expressed a consensus among the trustees that they should not be supported.⁶⁰ When considered in light of Potter’s generous \$10,000 annual salary and the limited budget of the church (slightly above \$120,000) during the period, there was a certain amount of reasonableness in this response.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Potter, *The Preacher and I, an Autobiography*, 323-325.

⁵⁸ “Board of Trustees Meeting Notes,” April 30, 1928, bMS 446/4 (5), Harvard-Andover Library.

⁵⁹ Potter, *The Preacher and I, an Autobiography*, 325.

⁶⁰ “Parish Report Exhibit A,” March 20, 1929, bMS 446/2 (4), Harvard-Andover Library.

⁶¹ “Treasurers Report for Fiscal Year Ending January 31, 1929,” 1929, bMS 446/2 (4), Harvard-Andover Library; Louis Harris Ames et al., “Parish Report Exhibit A,” March 24, 1930, bMS 446/2 (4), Harvard-Andover Library. In comparison in 1920 a full professor earned just \$2,628 yearly. Hall himself would earn just \$2,500 a year when he succeeded Potter as minister. See: Ralph G. Hurlin, “Educational Research and Statistics: The Salaries of College Teachers in 1920,” *School and Society* XII, no. 305 (October 30, 1920): 412–414; Louis Harris Ames et al., “Parish Meeting,” March 24, 1930, bMS 446/2 (4), Harvard-Andover Library.

The congregation's treatment of the next pastor, who would be the returning John Hall, reveals that these conflicts were really issues of character. When Hall resumed his ministry, the congregation provided him with more leeway than they had Potter. Almost immediately after his return, the congregation accepted a request from Hall for more money to advertise. While they had denied Potter the same thing, they were now willing to spend \$5,500 on broadcasting over the radio to entice more members. The records of the meeting give a sense of the strong feelings of the congregation, noting "it is deemed expedient that this method of spreading the Universalist interpretation of the gospel and of the making of the church known to the public be commenced at this time, when so eminent and gifted an exponent as Dr. Hall is occupying the pulpit."⁶² Potter simply never won their affection in a similar way. A similar issue occurred with regard to heating equipment. Potter had wanted to bring more young people into the church with a series of discussion meetings and socials, something he hoped to do in the room used for Sunday School. However, the room was unheated most of the week, and the trustees denied Potter permission to use the facilities any day except Saturday in the afternoon when the furnace was activated. Naturally this time slot would have proved unworkable for young people and stymied Potter's recruiting, preventing him from having more sympathetic people on his side in future church disputes.⁶³ A year after Potter left, the trustees decided they would enlarge the heating facilities in the Sunday school room, making it more congenial for events. Potter clearly had managed to alienate them enough that they would not even do things that would have benefited the entire church.⁶⁴

⁶² William F. Earp, "Call for Special Meeting," February 11, 1931, Fourth Universalist Society bMS 446/2 (4), Andover-Harvard Theological Library.

⁶³ Potter, *The Preacher and I, an Autobiography*. 324-325.

⁶⁴ "Parish Report Exhibit A."

Breaking Point

Potter knew that he would not be able to continue at the Church of the Divine Paternity for very long. He spent time preparing to found a new religious society; it seems likely by this point that he knew it would be humanist in nature. Potter even received a message from a spiritualist medium, supposedly channeling his recently deceased Universalist colleague, Adelbert Walker, telling him to move forward. While Potter dismissed this particular message (but not all spiritualism) as a scam likely intended to get spiritualism more of a place in his new faith, the message still steadied him on his course.⁶⁵

Potter would submit his resignation on February 14, 1929. He did not list his reasons and said he would explain them in person to the trustees at their annual meeting. On March 20th that meeting was held. Potter asked Hall to remain neutral, to which Hall agreed, but Hall then opted to give a talk to the trustees against Potter anyway. Potter would later accuse him of using “devious and unfraternal but successful methods” to become minister again.⁶⁶

In his annual report, Potter made one last plea to stay on, stating how he was a loyal minister in fellowship with both the Unitarian and Universalist churches, and one who used accepted modern methods. He ended by telling them, “It is my faith that there is a great future possible for this church if it has the faith to go forward on progressive lines.” The church trustees felt Potter’s progressive faith was precisely their concern and voted 57 to 46 to accept his

⁶⁵ Potter, *The Preacher and I, an Autobiography*, 330-331. Potter was generally a believer in spiritualism. This was something that made a number of other humanist thinkers very uncomfortable.

⁶⁶ Potter, *The Preacher and I, an Autobiography*, 334-335. 324. Hall for his part would minimize his mentions of Potter professionally, in a history of the Church of the Divine Paternity Hall devoted less than a sentence to Potter’s tenure there. See: Frank Oliver Hall, “Historical Sketches of the 4th Universalist Church 2 of 4,” *The Christian Leader*, November 12, 1938.

resignation.⁶⁷ Potter was somewhat surprised at the percentage in his favor, later remarking that if he had made more of an effort he could have swayed enough votes to stay. It is not clear that this was indeed the case, however. The reason for the close vote may have actually been a disagreement on the choice between retaining Potter for a few more months as a temporary minister (to which they did finally agree) or letting him go immediately.⁶⁸

The *New York Times*, ever eager to inform readers about Potter's affairs, noted the chilling effect that Potter's removal would have on relations between Unitarians and Universalists. They pointed out that many Unitarians, as evidenced by their stance in the *Unitarian Register*, favored the merger of the denominations as an enlargement of liberal religion, while Universalists, speaking through their periodical *The Christian Leader*, feared that joining the Unitarians "would be moving away from the Christian tradition and orthodox Christianity."⁶⁹ The fact that Potter, who was perceived as a Unitarian, was removed by his Universalist congregation for his unorthodoxy would seem to confirm Universalist fears that a merger would destroy their faith.

Years after the fact, Potter was cheeky about his experience at the Fourth Universalist Society, even going as far as to make fun of the Church's name. Writing in 1942 to the head of the Universalist Association, Robert Cummins, he explained, "My only connection with Universalism is the fact that I was once (1927-1929) minister of the Church of the Divine Paternity. When I left, after a trying period, Don Seitz, who had known the church for thirty years, consoled me that he had some doubts about the divineness of its paternity, so I didn't mind

⁶⁷ "Potter Resignation Accepted by Flock," *New York Times*, March 21, 1929; Ames et al., "Parish Meeting."

⁶⁸ Potter, *The Preacher and I, an Autobiography*, 334. D.H. Webster, "Parish Meeting," March 21, 1928, bMS 446/2 (4), Harvard-Andover Library.

⁶⁹ "Dr. Potter Resigns as Church Pastor."

too much.”⁷⁰ He would recycle the same joke and crack several others about the name in his autobiography.⁷¹

All jokes aside, Potter had found that he could not fit within established denominations. He had tried Unitarianism and Universalism. He had run into problems with church finances, theological conservatives, and even what he felt to be betrayal in the case of Hall. But it was his independent streak, that innate desire for publicity and attention, which harmed him most in the denominational structures. It was also why he would be successful as an independent humanist.

Humanism, A New Religion

Potter was for the most part right, as the very characteristics that had been liabilities proved to be assets in the First Humanist Society of New York when Potter opened it in late 1929. He would become the public face of Humanism for many Americans. The *New York Times* notably would assume that people like John Dietrich were Potter’s followers, a misunderstanding that no doubt delighted him.⁷² In his new society, Potter benefitted from generating controversy. He seemed almost ecstatic to report that his new faith was being criticized as the “scourge of Christendom” by the President of Union Theological Seminary, Rev. Henry Sloane Coffin.⁷³ He could be as theologically provocative as he wanted to be, even towards modernists, a newfound ability he used almost immediately by saying modernists who did not believe in an afterlife had

⁷⁰ Charles Francis Potter to Robert Cummins, April 8, 1942, Cummins, Robert bMS 420/1 (10), Andover-Harvard Theological Library.

⁷¹ Potter, *The Preacher and I, an Autobiography*, 327.

⁷² Charles Francis Potter, “Letter to the Editor: Dr. Dietrich a Pioneer,” *New York Times*, September 27, 1932.

⁷³ “Dr. Potter Embarks on a New Religion,” *New York Times*, September 28, 1929.

no business believing in the Christian God.⁷⁴ Potter thrived as a gadfly, and feeling that he had left liberal religion behind, he had no reason to pay great respect to its institutions or personages.

The actual service at First Humanist in New York was fairly conventional, and it did not differ substantially from those of humanist Unitarians like Curtis Reese or John Dietrich, except perhaps for Potter's anti-theistic rhetoric and his mentions of the superiority of humanism to other religious views. The church programs included inspirational quotes from the poet Rabindranath Tagore, generally popular with liberal religionists, and also quoted John Dewey's claim that "Humanism means to me an expansion, not a contraction of human life, an expansion in which nature and the science of nature are made willing servants of the human good."⁷⁵ The congregation met on Sundays and had a service with "an address," essentially a renamed sermon, from Potter. While the service had music solos, one distinctive aspect of Potter's congregation was that the program contained no hymns. His Humanist Society managed to attract prominent supporters including John Dewey, Will Durant, Helen Keller and James Leuba.⁷⁶

That worship resembled Unitarianism did not mean that Potter's vision of humanism was contentless. Disturbingly, the issue that Potter most vigorously championed as a specifically humanist cause was the legalization of euthanasia. Potter was a eugenicist, and when he advocated for euthanasia he meant it largely in the same sense that the term was employed in Nazi Germany: it included the ability of guardians to choose to kill their handicapped or chronically ill wards, parents to kill their disabled children, and the state's ability to dispose of

⁷⁴ Potter, *Humanism, a New Religion*, 2.

⁷⁵ "The First Humanist Society of New York Program," November 16, 1930. Unitarian Universalist Association Inactive Ministerial File, bMS 1446, Charles Francis Potter, Box 170. Andover-Harvard Theological Library.

⁷⁶ Edwin H. Wilson cited in Schulz, *Making the Manifesto*, 37; Nicolas Walter, *Humanism: Finding Meaning in the Word* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1998), 80.

those deemed mentally and physically unfit. From First Humanist in New York, Potter founded the Euthanasia Society of America in 1938, and unlike many other American eugenicists who advocated killing the "unfit," his enthusiasm for the cause was not diminished by the Second World War or public horror at the impact of Nazi atrocities. Potter suggested that the state should execute the physically disabled, handicapped infants and the "insane" by placing them in a "lethal chamber," presumably envisioning something similar to the T4 Euthanasia Program employed by the Nazi state. Eliminating the unfit, Potter argued, would be good for society because they were a drain on societal resources. He pointed out that New York State spent \$30 million on asylums, money that he felt could be saved if the state simply killed those patients. During the Second World War, he argued that euthanizing severely wounded soldiers would be a service both to them, because their lives were not worth living, and to American taxpayers. Potter did advocate for the more moderate cause of allowing terminally ill people to choose to end their own lives, but in private he admitted that legalizing these cases was also intended as a wedge to get people to support more extreme kinds of involuntary euthanasia.⁷⁷

Potter's support for these policies was not incidental to his religious views. Historian of medicine Ian Dowbiggin has written that "Potter saw euthanasia as a quintessential humanist cause."⁷⁸ Support for eugenics was common among liberal religious practitioners generally;

⁷⁷ "Medicine: Potter & Euthanasia." *Time*, January 31, 1938, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,759045,00.html>; Neil M. Gorsuch, *The Future of Assisted Suicide and Euthanasia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 35-36; Shai J. Lavi, *The Modern Art of Dying: A History of Euthanasia in the United States* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 99-102, 117-121; Ian Robert Dowbiggin, *A Merciful End: The Euthanasia Movement in Modern America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003), 73-85, 125-126; "Mercy Death Law Urged by Pastor For Tortured incurables, Idiots: Religious Fear, Based on Error of interpretation, Blamed for General Opposition, Says Statement Seeking Legislation," *The Atlanta Constitution*. April 19, 1937; Mark W. Harris, *Elite: Uncovering Classism in Unitarian Universalist History* (Boston, MA: Skinner House, 2011), 92-95; The United Press, "Pastor Starts Move for Legal Mercy Killings: Declares Insane, Incurables Should Be Put to Death Painlessly.," *The Washington Post* (1923-1954) (Washington, D.C., United States, April 19, 1937).

⁷⁸ Dowbiggin, *A Merciful End*, 83.

before the Second World War it was understood as a progressive reform cause. Both Rufus Jones and Harry Emerson Fosdick, for example, sat on the committee for cooperation with clergymen of the American Eugenics Society.⁷⁹ But Potter was far more extreme than most liberal religionists or adherents of God-optional faith, who did not typically back killing as a part of their vision. Potter took particular pride in the fact that he was not held back by Christian morality that restrained other faith leaders. Instead, his humanist ethics were essentially utilitarian, and he derided the idea of valuing the individual's life above the social good as an atavistic holdover from the idea that there was soul, a God and an afterlife. Humanism, after all, was the replacement of faith in God with faith in human beings, and a belief in the use of science and reason to achieve human betterment. Potter felt that eugenics, taken to extremes by culling the unfit, was essential to improving the human species, and he believed it had the imprimatur of science.

The creation of Potter's humanist congregation happened at roughly the same moment that Unitarian clergy and academics began to envision a humanist movement that existed outside the bounds of the Unitarian denomination, one that would not be tied to a group that still was made up of a theistic majority. These humanists were explicitly religious even as their religion was a Godless one. In 1927 A. Eustace Haydon, a philosophy professor at the University of Chicago and a former Baptist minister, was pivotal in forming the Humanist Fellowship at the university, which drew mostly from college students and sympathetic students at the Divinity

⁷⁹ Henry S. Huntington to Rufus Jones, November 25, Rufus Matthew Jones papers, Ms. coll. 1130, box 28, Quaker and Special Collections, Haverford College.

Jones made a few public statements in support of eugenics, but he does not seem to have been heavily invested in the cause. As of this writing Quaker studies scholar David H. Watt had begun work on a project about Rufus Jones' support for eugenics, so more information may be forthcoming.

school. The Humanist Fellowship published *New Humanism*, a bulletin that eventually became *The Humanist* magazine, the major periodical of the independent humanist movement.⁸⁰

Outside of the confines of the Unitarian humanist and theist divide, what it meant to be a humanist could be vague. It certainly indicated hostility towards supernaturalism, but did it preclude using the word "God"? Many of these humanists thought it did and saw this as the key difference between them and the Unitarians, but nontheism was not universally accepted as a requirement to be a humanist. Further complicating matters was the fact that philosopher F.C.S. Schiller had begun to use the term Humanism as a synonym for the philosophical Pragmatism of William James and John Dewey.⁸¹ Many of the American humanists, like their God-optional counterparts, were Pragmatists and so the meaning of "Pragmatism" and "Humanism" could shade into each other. Perhaps the biggest complication was that most of the humanists still held positions as Unitarian clergy, and the majority, unlike Potter, still served in Unitarian pulpits, even as they struggled to create a new religious organization outside of Unitarian confines.

In 1933 this group sought to define and promote their new movement by authoring the Humanist Manifesto. The Manifesto stated that contemporary conditions required the establishment of a new religion which "may appear to many people as a complete break with the past." It condemned supernaturalism, the belief that the universe had a beginning, the idea of humans having souls, and in one of its boldest points ventured that "the time has passed for theism, deism, modernism, and the several varieties of 'new thought'." Politically the document was progressive (it was called a Manifesto for a reason); it insisted on the need for a "socialized

⁸⁰ Diane Davis Villemaire, *E.A. Burt, Historian and Philosopher: A Study of the Author of The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Physical Science* (New York: Springer Science & Business Media, 2002), 83-84.

⁸¹ Walter, *Humanism*, 52. Schiller, like Potter was a supporter of eugenics, and he saw killing the unfit as one part of his humanist vision for improving the human species.

and cooperative economic order" that would be superior to capitalism.⁸² It sounded like a bold step away from the broad tent of Unitarianism and the God-optional vision that was emerging among the far left of liberal religion.

The reality, however, was that most of those that signed this document, despite the radical rhetoric, were actually anchored in established God-optional groups. Led by University of Michigan philosophy professor Roy Wood Sellars, the four-person committee that helped him draft the manifesto was populated almost entirely by Unitarian clergy; Raymond Bennett Bragg was both a minister and secretary of the Western Unitarian Conference, Curtis Reese was a Unitarian minister, Edwin H. Wilson another minister, and only Haydon was not a part of the Unitarian ministry. Later, others were consulted on the document, including John Dietrich and Alfred C. Dieffenbach. Potter signed the manifesto, and also gave advice, mostly ignored, on how to release it to the media.⁸³ Of those that signed the manifesto, sixteen of thirty-four were Unitarian ministers.⁸⁴

Potter would keep abreast of Unitarian affairs and he nursed hopes of pushing the denomination further towards humanism. Almost immediately after founding the First Humanist Society in New York, Potter began sending in reports about his new congregation's progress to 25 Beacon Street, the central offices of the American Unitarian Association. Writing Louis Cornish, the president of the AUA, he explained, "You should have such a report on file, for the Society, although not officially Unitarian, is led by one who is still a Unitarian minister, and

⁸² "Humanist Manifesto I," American Humanist Association, 1933, <https://americanhumanist.org/what-is-humanism/manifesto1/>.

⁸³ Schulz, *Making the Manifesto*, 75-76. Potter's suggestions for having a press release and submitting the notification of the manifesto to all the wire services would have made it much more widely known. His point that the language in it was too academic is also a valid point.

⁸⁴ Schulz, *Making the Manifesto*, 71. William F. Schulz excludes Potter from this count, so says that only fifteen Unitarians ministers signed, but it is clear that he was in ministerial fellowship with the AUA even though he was not serving a Unitarian congregation.

resembles in many respects several Unitarian churches.”⁸⁵ When Frederick May Eliot became president of the AUA, Potter wrote him a letter of congratulations, saying that he hoped that Eliot would be more tractable than his predecessors and act as a potential ally in the humanist movement. Potter also explained to Eliot “that as far as I am concerned, the New York humanists are friendly.”⁸⁶ Potter's ingratiating language was self-serving; he wanted the benefits of being a Unitarian minister without the obligation of serving the denomination or ministering to a Unitarian church, but his desire to remain connected to Unitarianism and liberal religion was genuine.

For the last several years of his life Potter ended up in dire financial distress and was supported by the AUA, which cared for him out of a sense of obligation to a minister who had never technically relinquished his ministerial status with the denomination. Potter faced terminal cancer, and his final months were spent in considerable pain. His three adult sons had very little money to offer their father, and Potter's wife Clara Cook had few resources of her own, so the few hundred dollars dispatched from 25 Beacon Street by Leon C. Fay, the minister in charge of the denomination's ministerial affairs, were the only means of support for the Potters.⁸⁷ After

⁸⁵ Charles Francis Potter to Louis C. Cornish, June 23, 1930, Unitarian Universalist Association Inactive Ministerial File, bMS 1446, Charles Francis Potter, Box 170, Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School.

⁸⁶ Charles Francis Potter to Frederick May Eliot, February 16, 1937, Frederick May Elliot File bMS 378, box 5, Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School.

⁸⁷ Dale DeWitt to Leon C. Fay, October 4, 1962, Unitarian Universalist Association Inactive Ministerial File, bMS 1446, Charles Francis Potter, Box 170, Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School; Frederic G. Melcher to Leon C. Fay, October 8, 1962, Unitarian Universalist Association Inactive Ministerial File, bMS 1446, Charles Francis Potter, Box 170, Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School; Clara Cook Potter to Leon C. Fay, October 15, 1962, Unitarian Universalist Association Inactive Ministerial File, bMS 1446, Charles Francis Potter, Box 170, Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School; Leon C. Fay to Frederic G. Melcher, October 12, 1960, Unitarian Universalist Association Inactive Ministerial File, bMS 1446, Charles Francis Potter, Box 170, Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School.

Potter's death, and a funeral performed by a local Unitarian minister, the Unitarian Universalist Association (the successor to the AUA) continued to send financial assistance to Clara Cook.⁸⁸ Potter had spent his career trying to create a Humanism separate from Unitarianism, but at the end of his life his circumstances forced him to rely upon his Unitarian connections for support, even if they did not entirely conform to his scrupulous standards of rational religion. Unitarians had maintained that sharing theology was not the most essential aspect of fellowship, and when he was in a true state of desperation, Potter had agreed.

Potter's efforts to continue as both a Unitarian minister and a humanist was mirrored by others in the humanist movement. In 1935 the group that had coalesced around the *Manifesto* and *The New Humanist* would organize into the American Humanist Association (AHA). Almost all the key leaders in the AHA continued to be Unitarian clergy. By the late 1940s the AHA tried to expand, assuming that supplanting existing churches was a key way to do this, which some of the Unitarian clergy involved in the organization perceived as a threat to the AUA. They worried that the AHA and the AUA would compete over the religious left, as they were pursuing the same demographics. The departure of Edwin H. Wilson from his position as minister to the First Unitarian Church in Salt Lake City to work full time organizing for the AHA troubled them, and it seemed that Humanism and Unitarianism might finally be at loggerheads. Ministers like Lon Ray Call and George C. Davis, who had been active supporters of the AHA, resigned and contacted AUA president Frederick M. Eliot to assure him of their personal loyalty in the event

⁸⁸ Clara Cook Potter to Leon C. Fay, October 15, 1962, Unitarian Universalist Association Inactive Ministerial File, bMS 1446, Charles Francis Potter, Box 170, Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School; Leon C. Fay to Clara Cook Potter, October 9, 1962, Unitarian Universalist Association Inactive Ministerial File, bMS 1446, Charles Francis Potter, Box 170, Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School.

of a religious conflict between the organizations.⁸⁹ Wilson pursued a conciliatory course, noting that because his loyalty was to Unitarianism, he would remain a Unitarian minister as long as they allowed him to do so. Wilson suggested that the field of evangelism was wide enough for both the AHA and the AUA to draw new members, and that humanists served a special role because some people might not want to affiliate with an organization like the AUA that also contained theists. There might be those in the AHA that desired a breach, Wilson admitted, but he was not one of them; he was willing to put up with "regressive movements on the right, like Unitarian Christians" as long as humanists could also find a home in Unitarianism.⁹⁰ The leaders AHA could not bring themselves to part with their fellowship with the Unitarians even as they dreamed of a religion fully purged of theism.

Their successors would try to cut the connection with God-optional religion more thoroughly, and by the 1960s and 1970s many members of the AHA had begun to understand themselves as "secular humanists," conceiving of humanism and religion as opposing categories.⁹¹ They were never able to achieve the desired partition between the Unitarians and AHA; in 1962 the Fellowship of Religious Humanists (which would later change its name to the Unitarian Universalist Humanist Association) was founded to advocate for humanists inside Unitarianism. That organization became a powerful presence within the Unitarian denomination, independently joining the International Humanist and Ethical Union and closely collaborating

⁸⁹ Lon Ray Call to Frederick M. Eliot, April 25, 1949. Frederick May Eliot File bMS 378, box 24, Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School; Edwin H. Wilson to Edward Darling, May 10, 1949. Frederick May Eliot File bMS 378, box 24, Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School.

⁹⁰ George G. Davis to Curtis W. Reese, May 3, 1949, Frederick May Eliot File bMS 378, box 24, Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School.

⁹¹ Walter, *Humanism*, 111-114.

with the AHA. Unitarian clergy also continued to exert an outsized influence on the AHA's beliefs, eleven of them ultimately signed the third Humanist Manifesto in 2003.⁹²

Reconstructionist Judaism as Jewish Humanism?

Reconstructionist Judaism, like Unitarianism, often had close ties and overlapping membership with the humanist movement, and in the postwar period some Reconstructionist leaders began using humanism as a description of their own religious views. In 1953 Rabbi Eugene Kohn, the "Holy Ghostwriter" of a supposed Reconstructionist trinity of leaders, and who served as the longtime editor of *The Reconstructionist*, wrote *Religious Humanism: A Jewish Interpretation*. Published by the Reconstructionist Press, the movement's publications arm, the book was principally an introduction and defense of the Reconstructionist movement as it had been expressed by Kaplan. In a lengthy section on "The God Idea Reinterpreted," Kohn offered a popular digest of the ideas of his mentor, quoting liberally in an attempt to find a rational way to believe in God in the modern world by redefining the term. He argued that Jews should believe in a personal God but not a God who was a person.⁹³ The back cover of the book, but not the text itself, used the words "Religious Humanism" and "reconstruction" almost interchangeably to describe Kohn's (and by extension Kaplan's) goals for the future of Judaism.

Mordecai M. Kaplan eventually became a member of the AHA, cementing a connection between Reconstructionism and the humanist movement. In a 1965 reflection published in *The*

⁹²"HUUmanists History and Mission." UU Humanist Association (Website), <http://huumanists.org/about/history-and-mission>; William Murry, "One Hundred Years of Unitarian Universalist Humanism." In *Humanist Voices in Unitarian Universalism*, edited by Kendyl L. R. Gibbons and William Murry, (Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 2017), 8.

⁹³ Eugene Kohn, *Religious Humanism: A Jewish Interpretation* (New York: Reconstructionist Press, 1953), 42. Kohn agreed Kaplan's argument that "To believe in God is to reckon with life's creative forces and potentialities as forming an organic unity, and giving meaning to life by virtue of that unity." From: Mordecai Kaplan quoted in Kohn. *Religious Humanism*, 30. The quote is originally from Mordecai M. Kaplan, *The Future of the American Jew* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1948), 192.

Humanist, a magazine published by the AHA, Kaplan explained that he had joined the organization because "humanism, particularly the religious version of it, provided me with an orientation that gave purpose and meaning to Jewish existence." Such direction was especially needed in the modern world, in which traditional metaphysics no longer seemed plausible and science appeared to offer the most relevant answers to life's questions. Kaplan praised humanistic ideas which posited human fulfillment as more important than "belief in [God] or the idea of God." Yet Kaplan also insisted that Humanism was not hostile to religion or more sophisticated notions of the divine, but only to traditional and supernaturalist conceptions of these things. For a humanist, Kaplan felt, God should be understood as a cosmic process or the idea of human fulfillment.⁹⁴ Kaplan's logic would seem to have made Reconstructionist Judaism simply a distinctly Jewish manifestation of Humanism. In his 1970 book *A Religion of Ethical Nationhood* Kaplan continued to identify himself as a humanist.⁹⁵

Three years later Kaplan became one of 261 signatories of Humanist Manifesto II, aligning himself further with the goals of the AHA. The second Humanist Manifesto was drafted by philosophy professor Paul Kurtz and Unitarian minister Edwin Wilson, and was intended as an update to the first manifesto. It made clear that traditional religion and the concept of an afterlife were outdated. The manifesto described humanists as "nontheists," and criticized those humanists that choose to take the liberal religious route of reinterpreting existing religious ideas as engaging in half-measures. One of most quoted statements was the bold proclamation, "no deity will save us, we must save ourselves."⁹⁶ It was perhaps a surprising document for Kaplan to

⁹⁴ Mordecai M. Kaplan, "Models of Man," *The Humanist* XXV, no. 6 (December 1965): 261.

⁹⁵ Mel Scult, *The Radical American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014), 115.

⁹⁶ "Humanist Manifesto II." American Humanist Association, <https://americanhumanist.org/what-is-humanism/manifesto2/>.

sign; after all, he had been arguing for decades for the reformulation of the "God-idea," rather than the need to dispense with it altogether, as Humanist Manifesto II had urged. Yet even though he might not have aligned entirely with their views, Kaplan increasingly saw himself as part of a humanist tradition, just as he still saw himself as a part of the Jewish tradition even while having disagreements with other Jews.

Reconstructionism, however, was inadequately focused on Humanism for another Jewish leader, Sherwin T. Wine, who would go on to found another branch of Judaism. Wine was raised in a Conservative Jewish household, but after getting a bachelor's and master's in philosophy at the University of Michigan he opted to go to Hebrew Union College and become a Reform rabbi. After serving as a chaplain in Korea, Wine returned to the United States and eventually formed a congregation with about 145 families in the suburbs of Detroit called Birmingham Temple. At Birmingham Temple Wine explained that the term "God" had no clear definition. He told his followers that he considered himself an "agnostic," a word he created that indicated that he thought the question of God's existence was pointless because the existence of God was not definable or empirically provable. The congregation dropped the use of the word "God" during worship services, and declared itself to be a humanistic congregation, though they tried to maintain their affiliation with Reform Judaism. This caused a considerable controversy within the Reform movement, as Wine's refusal to mention God went against the ethical monotheism that was supposedly at the core of tradition. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Roland Gittelsohn, a Boston rabbi who chaired Reform Judaism's Commission on Jewish Education, told the paper that "[the] idea of a rabbi who does not believe in God shocks even some Jewish laymen who themselves are not sure that they believe in God." Gittelsohn suggested that such

people needed to have "the security of knowing that their rabbi has faith in something certain."⁹⁷

Wine would eventually give up on Reform Judaism and found his own organization, the Society for Humanistic Judaism in 1969. Like Kaplan, Wine would sign Humanist Manifesto II in 1973, indicating that he too saw Jewish humanism as one part of a wider humanist movement.

Wine would claim that his reasons for not aligning himself with Reconstructionist Judaism was that he found it too traditional liturgically, but his biggest problem seemed to be that many Reconstructionists still used the word "God." In *Judaism Beyond God*, Wine declared that "In the end, [Reconstructionism] was the same old Conservative package; act traditional and think humanist; use all the words of faith and humility and make them mean reason and dignity." He was angry about how the Reconstructionist prayer book had congregants address God in worship. After all, he asked, "How can any reasonable person talk to creative energy?" As in the split between the American Humanists and Unitarians, Wine did not want to share religious fellowship with those who still wanted to retain the use of the word God or who believed in the concept. Wine also took personal issue with Kaplan, accusing him of having a "humorless edge," and trying too hard to be consistent and systematic in his thought.⁹⁸

Kaplan's public stance on his younger, outspoken rabbinical colleague was one of sympathetic bemusement. Writing to give his views at the request of the *Jewish Post and Opinion*, Kaplan expressed his admiration for Wine, and explained that they shared a commitment to finding an intellectually plausible way to help others live out their Judaism. Yet

⁹⁷ Roland Gittelsohn quoted in Irving Spiegel, "Jewish 'Ignostic' Stirs Convention; Dropping of 'God' in Service Deplored and Condoned," *The New York Times*. June 20, 1965, <https://www.nytimes.com/1965/06/20/archives/jewish-ignostic-stirs-convention-dropping-of-god-in-service.html>. ; "Masons Bar Congregations Whose Rabbi Rejects God." *The New York Times*, February 6, 1965, <https://www.nytimes.com/1965/02/06/archives/masons-bar-congregations-whose-rabbi-rejects-god.html>; John Andrews, *The Economist Book of Isms* (London, England: Profile Books, 2010), 93.

⁹⁸ Sherwin Wine, *Judaism Beyond God* (Jersey City, NJ: KTAV Publishing House, Inc., 1995), 63.

Kaplan could not resist throwing in a mild rhetorical jab at the fact that Wine was so hostile to ever using the word God. Kaplan pointed out that Wine had retained and redefined other aspects of traditional language; Kaplan urged that “he should pursue his course consistently, and do with the concept of ‘God’ what he does with the concept of ‘Rabbi’ which he insists on retaining, despite the fact that the only thing in common between his use of that title and the use of it by an Orthodox Rabbi is that it denotes Jews who render spiritual service to the Jewish people.”⁹⁹ Kaplan was also perhaps gently mocking his own youthful efforts at modernizing Judaism, when he had done the inverse from what Wine was doing. During his early years at the SAJ he had retained the use of the word God but abandoned the title of rabbi in favor of that of “leader” (borrowed from the Ethical Culture movement). Kaplan was also likely aware that just as Wine did not fully accept Kaplan as an authentic humanist, there were members of the AHA who would not accept Wine. These humanists had increasingly begun to think of Humanism as a philosophy rather than a kind of religion, as it had been proposed a generation earlier. Because they saw Judaism as a religion, Humanistic Judaism seemed a contradiction, akin to declaring oneself an atheistic theist.¹⁰⁰ After Potter's era, it became harder to be both in a God-optional faith and to be a humanist.

Arthur Morgan and the Limits of Quaker Humanism

Quakers were the most theologically conservative of the God-optional groups and the most deeply rooted in tradition. For someone like Rufus Jones to completely eliminate God would have been anathema to the core of his being. As a result, Quakers were much more reluctant to join with the humanists than were the other groups.

⁹⁹ Mordecai M. Kaplan, “The Editors Chair- Letters,” *National Jewish Post and Opinion*, May 21, 1965, Indianapolis Edition.

¹⁰⁰ Walter, *Humanism*, 15.

One Quaker was asked to sign the Humanist Manifesto in 1933 and declined. Arthur E. Morgan (mentioned in chapter 2), was an outspoken advocate for Quakerism drawing from the wisdom of non-Christian traditions. The past head of the Tennessee Valley Authority and the president of the progressive liberal arts college, Antioch, Morgan had been a prominent Unitarian layman, even at one point serving as the moderator of the American Unitarian Association before he married his Quaker wife and decided to join the Religious Society of Friends. He would serve as clerk of Yellow Springs, Ohio, Monthly Meeting. While Morgan considered himself to be in sympathy with the humanists, he viewed his Quaker loyalties as a conflict with some of the manifesto's exhortations.

The Humanism expressed in the manifesto, Morgan felt, ignored the value, power and poetry of religion. He recalled that he had recently heard "a prominent Humanist talking to a college student. I thought what a pity for them to be under the influence of a man who expects so little from life. He seemed like one whistling to keep up his courage through a graveyard or on the way to the gallows." Humanism was cold, clinical, and it did not draw from the kind overpowering love that influenced St. Paul, and invoking his Quaker belonging, Morgan observed that "George Fox, John Woolman and others, notwithstanding untenable beliefs, had a quality of life of great necessity and value, which this manifesto may not deny but which it fails to adequately recognize." While he praised humanism's focus on social welfare, he felt that the manner in which it was expressed in the manifesto threatened to strip away a sense of purpose from life.¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ Edwin H. Wilson, *The Genesis of a Humanist Manifesto* (Amherst, NY: Humanist Press, 1995), 47-52; Donald Szantho Harrington. "The Life of Arthur Morgan." Harvard Square Library, 1975. <http://www.harvardsquarelibrary.org/biographies/arthur-e-morgan-2/>.

Morgan freely acknowledged that many of the weaknesses he saw in humanism were probably present in his own religious thinking, but he nevertheless felt that he could give better witness to the power he perceived in religion by not signing the manifesto. He applauded the signers for having the courage to express their convictions, and wished them well, but he refused to walk that path with them. While he had few objections to the principles of humanism, and he was as quick to reject supernaturalism or an interventionist God as any humanist, he could not abide the movement's focus on reason and rationality. Such an insistence allowed no space for religious transcendence, he stated, as he explained to a friend, "Humanism's all right, it's the humanists!"¹⁰² Morgan's criticisms fell on deaf ears; over a generation after the manifesto's publication, William F. Schulz, writing an insider history of the humanist movement, judged Morgan's warning to have been too "long and rambling."¹⁰³ Despite Morgan's rejection of the Humanist Manifesto, however, he has met equally harsh criticism from theologically orthodox Quaker quarters. Vail T. Palmer declares that Morgan's non-theistic vision of a religious Quakerism is the "final dead end of the Hicksite deviation" from what Palmer regards as an authentic understanding of Quakerism.¹⁰⁴

A handful of other Quakers were more receptive to the Humanist message. In 1939 a small group in California calling itself the Humanist Society of Friends formed. As scholar of Quakerism Dan Christy Randazzo has noted, the Humanist Society of Friends printed material from prominent Quakers, including Rufus Jones, in their newsletter, *The Humanist Friend*.¹⁰⁵ A

¹⁰² Wilson, *The Genesis of a Humanist Manifesto*, 52.

¹⁰³ William F. Schulz, *Making the Manifesto: The Birth of Religious Humanism* (Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 2004), 69.

¹⁰⁴ Palmer, T. Vail. *A Long Road: How Quakers Made Sense of God and the Bible* (Newberg, OR: Barclay Press, 2017), 34.

¹⁰⁵ Dan Christy Randazzo, "Quakers and Non-Theism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Quakerism*, edited by Stephen W. Angell and Pink Dandelion (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 280.

pamphlet produced by the group, billed as the “Official Statement of the Principles of the Humanist Society of Friends,” brought together a Quaker text, Jesse H. Holmes’s public letter “To the Scientifically Minded,” with copies of the Humanist Manifesto and a statement on social justice, the Social Creed of the Federal Council of Churches.¹⁰⁶ The Humanist Society of Friends did not affiliate with any larger Quaker body, however, eventually affiliating with the AHA instead. Over time it became far more connected with Humanism than the Religious Society of Friends, and, as Radazzo documents, in 2003 the organization dropped any connection with Quakerism and simply became known as The Humanist Society.

Humanism was never as attractive to Quaker leaders as it was to Unitarians and Reconstructionist Jews, yet it is revealing that the Humanist Society of Friends used the writings of Quakers like Holmes and Jones to support their views. Though neither figure was involved with the AHA, their ideas could be put to use in the humanist cause anyway. Even when Quakers did not freely traverse between humanism and their denomination, as other groups did, their beliefs could still show up in humanist contexts.

Personality and Loyalty

The difference between God-optional denominations and the increasingly Godless realm of Humanism was partly ideological. For the most part humanists associated with the AHA did not want to share resources, communities, educational institutions or even worship services with theists. They wanted religious language purged of the word God. There were specific points of contention. For example, humanists prized rationality as a key value and made little room for transcendence, in contrast to most God-optional groups, which prized the connection between

¹⁰⁶ “Official Statement of the Principles of the Humanist Society of Friends.” Humanist Society of Friends, n.d. American Unitarian Association Records-In-Print 1829-1961, Box 14017-2, Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School.

humanity and the transcendent. Potter's intense belief in euthanasia would likely have faced more scrutiny among Unitarians than it did in Humanist circles, where he could justify it with appeals to scientific rationality.

Yet choosing to become a Humanist was up to individuals. Potter's desire for fame, to be known as a religious pioneer and a maverick thinker, led him to leave Unitarianism and Universalism, rather than to simply preach Humanism from a Unitarian pulpit. Despite his efforts to portray himself as a martyr, he would have been able to have had a long career in the right Unitarian church if he had chosen to do so. For Arthur E. Morgan, his convictions led him in the other direction; he admitted he could not intellectually explain his opposition to Humanism, but he felt that it missed *something* that he felt religion still seemed to capture. Ideas mattered, theology mattered, but people and personality defined where the fault lines between Humanism and God-optional religion lay.

Those fault lines became blurry as people debated and traversed them. Kaplan could claim to be a humanist, a Rabbi and Jewish, while Wine, could claim to be all of these same things and insist that Kaplan did not qualify as a humanist (Wine never begrudged Kaplan his status as a rabbi or as a Jew). The philosopher John Grey has perceptively observed that the difference between a “Godless world” and one “suffused with divinity” in reality “may be less than you think.”¹⁰⁷ The example of American Humanism and Humanistic Judaism shows us that the line between Godless religion and God-optional religion was equally slight. Wherever their personal whims and caprices led, rational religion was permeable enough that adherents could hold membership in both God-optional and Godless religious communities, sometimes switching between the two at different points in their lives, more often they belonged to both communities

¹⁰⁷ John Gray, *Seven Types of Atheism* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2018), 158.

simultaneously. Godless religion grew out of God-optional religion, and needs to be understood as a distinct movement. Godless religion also often remained tied to the God-optional tradition, just as God-optional religion was connected to more traditional faiths.

Chapter Six: Fruits Not Roots

The tale of Henry Cadbury's appeal has become cliché in Quaker circles. Cadbury, as chairman of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), was supposed to go to Oslo to accept the 1947 Nobel Peace Prize on behalf of the Religious Society of Friends, given to them for their relief work in Europe. To appear before the world to accept the honor would require formal attire, but befitting the Quaker tradition of plain dress Cadbury simply did not own such clothing. To remedy the situation, he borrowed a tuxedo from the clothing donation center of the AFSC, wore it to the reception and then promptly returned it so that it could be used by a needy recipient in Europe. The version of the story that appears in *Friendly Anecdotes*, a self-reverential book published by Harper Brothers in 1950 that was full of similar Quaker stories, goes on to project the good that the suit would do after it left Cadbury's possession. The author mused that "the suit will travel in a clothing bale, probably to Hungary, where its unsuspecting wearer—perhaps a musician—will little guess that the coat of his dress suit once played a part in the music of world peace!"¹ There is little more to the account, a true story but not a very eventful one. Cadbury borrowed a suit and accepted an award. The frequent repetition of the story, retold in writings and speeches within the Religious Society of Friends, evidences its important role in constructing modern Quaker identity.

The story is a humblebrag, a way to praise Cadbury for his austerity and unassuming demeanor, connecting his comportment with Quaker values of consumption. As a Harvard professor (a fact noted twice within the 3 pages that *Friendly Anecdotes* devotes to the story), Cadbury might be expected to live more opulently. The story also debunks the notion that Quakers are parochial; no one hearing it would think they have the rural unworldliness of many

¹ Irvin C. Poley and Ruth Berlenden Poley, *Friendly Anecdotes* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1950), 27-29.

of their brethren in other Peace Churches. In the story, Cadbury almost casually travels to Oslo from Boston after a quick trip to Philadelphia. Most critically, the audience learns that Quakers won a Nobel Peace prize and have been celebrated for their humanitarian relief work.

By mid-twentieth century, Quakers prized and promoted their morality as their greatest asset, presenting their willingness to aid others as their single greatest credential. While there had been a concerted effort by Quakers at participating in social reform prior to the twentieth century, after World War I social service became key to the denomination's identity among liberal Friends. These Quakers devoted a huge amount of energy and financial resources to the work of the AFSC and various projects by Yearly Meetings for social betterment, and during the Second World War and early Cold War this dovetailed with their advocacy of pacifism. Instead of theological doctrines, Quakerism came to be primarily identified by the public and within the denomination with their works and practice. That development was not accidental. Quaker leaders and members understood that little united Quakers around one coherent identity and purpose. Service and helping others provided that unity.

The Quaker story was by no means unique. This chapter argues that as theological views became more diverse within God-optional denominations, they were unable to build community and solidarity around shared beliefs; when individuals held different beliefs, theological diversity became a potential source of internal conflict rather than a shared affirmation. As a result they increasingly had to find new ways to unite their members around something more than denominational identity formed by dogma and precepts. Beyond reducing internal tensions, however, these developments suggested an even more pressing matter; as one Unitarian minister put it in the pages of *The Christian Register*, "Why should one go to church if religion is a peculiarly personal matter, and amounts (as we have interpreted it) to a little more than enhaloed

common sense?”² If religious communities did not exist principally to worship God together, in a shared manner, what were they for? New commitments would have to be found around which members could rally.

Quakers, Reconstructionist Jews and Unitarians each had a surprising amount of success in substituting other kinds of commitments for a shared theology. All three groups began to emphasize that it was not the specifics of religious belief that mattered. The results of religious belonging for members were what was important.

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James wrote about how belief should be judged not by its origins but rather by the effects that it worked on individuals’ lives. Paraphrasing the New Testament, “By their fruits ye shall know them” and invoking the authority of American theologian Jonathan Edwards, who had written that Christian practice was the most concrete evidence of faith, James argued that modern people too needed to be attentive to the “fruits” of religion and what it accomplished, rather than pry too closely into the “roots,” i.e., the materialist explanations of what caused religious experiences.³ This agricultural and Biblical metaphor served an apologetic function for James, who was a consistent ally of liberal religion. In his argument, religion could be desirable if it made people behave in ways that were personally or socially useful; consequently, the truth or falsity of particular religious beliefs were unimportant considerations. What did it matter to religion if Paul on the road to Damascus had epilepsy and not an ecstatic religious experience, when weighed against the importance of his personal transformation? For clearly theistic mainline and liberal religious groups, this thinking was welcome. James made clear that he was not going to use emerging social science to justify

² Josiah R. Barlett, “Is Unitarianism Parasitic on the Christian Tradition?” *The Christian Register* 120, no. 7 (April 1, 1945): 130.

³ William James, “Varieties of Religious Experience.” In *William James Writings, 1902-1910* (New York: Library of America, 1987), 26.

nonbelief. James gave religion a protected sphere, and even seemed to imply that the inquiry into the “roots” of what caused faith or debates over whether religious claims had any empirical validity were crude and crass, beneath the dignity of the scholar. He joked with his audience and reader, “you should all be ready now to judge religious life by its results exclusively, and I shall assume the bugaboo of morbid origins will scandalize your piety no more.”⁴ The denominations that had embraced radical theology did not have the same concerns that mainline and other religious liberals voiced about social and natural science falsifying traditional religious claims. Instead, they increasingly tried to adapt to the fact that they thought many of these claims could be false. What the focus on transformed lives gave them was a warrant to exist.

Religion could now be about something other than belief; in effect, God-optional groups had to find something to replace God. This was not a new idea. In *Culture and the Death of God*, Terry Eagleton argues that as the influence of the idea of God waned after the Enlightenment, a search for “surrogate forms of transcendence,” or “stop-gaps” began to fill the place that the deity had occupied in society and in individual’s lives. Eagleton contends that art, literature, and culture filled this role for many intellectuals in nineteenth-century Europe and the United States.⁵ Eagleton’s account is not focused on religious groups, although many obviously faced a more acute problem than other segments of society. Culture would not be an easy substitute for theism. Religious associations would need to reassert the centrality of God or discover some other means to cement religious identity. The trick was finding what that “something” was.

For Quakers, emphasizing the fruits of religion took the form of focusing on social justice work, principally leading relief efforts in Europe and in the United States during the Great

⁴ William James, “Varieties of Religious Experience.” In *William James Writings, 1902-1910* (New York: Library of America, 1987), 28.

⁵ Terry Eagleton, *Culture and the Death of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), xiii-xi.

Depression, as well as campaigning for racial justice and for peace. It was the Social Gospel taken to an extreme. The World Wars and conflict with the Soviet Union were particularly important for Quakers as they increasingly emphasized their denomination's commitment to pacifism.

Unitarians thought the same kinds of commitments mattered, and they looked directly at the Quaker example of service to emulate it. Members of the denomination saw this as the most viable strategy for the increasingly diverse community to survive, but ultimately Unitarianism emphasized a different path. They instead espoused an idea of religious seeking, promoting notions of denominational diversity and skepticism about truth claims as uniting factors. While all these groups permitted a broad array of theologies, Unitarians argued that their special emphasis on freedom of thought made them different and unique, maintaining that this was their distinctive religious gift to the world.

Reconstructionist Jews were also interested in such work for social justice, but the central activist commitment that united them was support for Zionism and the creation of a Jewish homeland in Israel. After Israeli independence, supporting the new state became a key objective. Reconstructionists were not religious Zionists in a conventional sense, as the idea that the land of Israel was promised to the Jewish people conflicted with their rejection of any notion of Jewish special status as a chosen people. Very few of them believed in a supernatural God capable of making any kind of commitment. Instead they created a kind of religiously infused cultural Zionism that was also critical to sustaining their religious movement in the United States.

Quakers

Quakers have often been overeager to read modern liberal Quaker humanitarian and political activism back to the denomination's foundation. It was true that since the seventeenth century,

Quakers maintained a belief in the spiritual equality of women, observed a testimony against war and provided a system of poor relief for their own members. Yet if they were opposed to injustice it was largely for theological reasons. As a closed sectarian community, endogamous and bound by shared dress and ritual practices, they saw themselves as an alternative to the political and social order, with a discipline that served as a hedge against outsiders.⁶ Until the late nineteenth century even Hicksite Quakers, the liberal branch of the denomination, had far more in common with early Mormonism or the Amish than they did with Progressivism. Although Quakers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries became involved in abolitionism, and in some international relief work in Europe, such as during the Irish Famine and the Franco-Prussian war, these activities never received the same kind of emphasis that political causes and service efforts would in the twentieth century. Most social action was a personal undertaking, or the work of a few people, not a denominational commitment.

The Quaker concentration on humanitarian service should be understood as an outgrowth of trends that had long been developing in liberal theology. As early as the late eighteenth century Immanuel Kant viewed religion and belief in God as primarily being about ethical duty. In the United States especially, action, particularly social reform, became a higher priority for the most radical religious voices than theological reflection. In the mid-nineteenth century, opposition to slavery became such a monolithic focus that other considerations often seemed moot; Quakers like John Greenleaf Whittier and Lucretia Mott, and Unitarian radicals like Theodore Parker and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, were not unconcerned with religious ideas, but their time as writers and organizers was most often spent on building coalitions in support of abolitionism. As religious studies scholar Molly Oshatz has documented, many liberal religious

⁶ Sarah Crabtree, *Holy Nation: The Transatlantic Quaker Ministry in an Age of Revolution*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

ideas, particularly arguments about how scripture should be interpreted metaphorically, became popularized in the United State during polemical debates against slaveholding Christians.⁷ In the twentieth century, social reform continued to occupy an important place as theology, through the emerging field of social ethics, sought for Christians to improve the lives of the poor and marginalized and began to recognize that oppressive social structures played a key role in inequality. Social ethics received considerable scholarly study in the most prestigious liberal seminaries, and liberal denominations embraced the social gospel movement.⁸ These theological shifts had, however, deemphasized theology and traditional ideas of God; they had not replaced them. In texts like Walter Rauschenbusch's *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, more conventional religious ideas were employed to support the need for social action. God-optional religious groups would take the more drastic step of deemphasizing theology almost entirely.

For Quakers, the watershed moment when humanitarian causes became essential to their religious faith occurred in the midst of the First World War, with the founding of the American Friends Service Committee. As the United States entered the conflict, Quakers from FGC, FYM, and the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting (Orthodox) met and hammered out the details of the new organization. The AFSC did not have a singular purpose, but a key reason for creating the group was Quakers' hopes that providing service work could unite theologically divergent strands of Quakerism—the spectrum of liberals, mainliners and evangelicals—while simultaneously providing a venue for young Quaker men of draft age who were conscientious objectors to fulfill alternative service obligations. It was a purely Quaker version of the larger ecumenical

⁷ Molly Oshatz, *Slavery and Sin: The Fight against Slavery and the Rise of Liberal Protestantism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁸ Gary Dorrien, *Social Ethics in the Making: Interpreting an American Tradition* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell), 2011; Christopher H. Evans, *The Social Gospel in American Religion: A History* (New York: NYU Press, 2017).

movement, and like its broader counterpart it would not be successful in the long term, as it primarily appealed to the already theologically liberal constituency of FGC. The majority of FYM and religiously conservative evangelical Quakers, who together comprised over 70 percent of American Quakerism, would reject the organization.

Rufus Jones was made the honorary chairperson of the AFSC, and his brother-in-law Cadbury was one of its co-founders. Operating under the oversight of the Red Cross, the Friends Reconstruction Units created by the AFSC trained several hundred Quaker humanitarian workers and sent them to France during the war.⁹ After the conflict there was a brief debate among the AFSC's leadership about whether to retain the new organization, or to retire it as it would no longer be needed for either war reconstruction or as a substitute for military service. The choice to keep the AFSC was a fateful one. It was a victory of liberal Quakers, and eventually the God-optional wing of the denomination. These liberals had little love for missions work, as they did not think there was any theological need to convert others whose own religion was perfectly valid, but they wanted a way to display the depths of their devotion both domestically and internationally that would involve a similar kind of all-encompassing commitment. Keeping the organization meant that the kind of work that the AFSC did came to be seen as central to Quaker identity.

Elizabeth Cazden has argued that after the war the FGC and liberal Quakerism sought to expand their appeal beyond the bounds of "birthright," or born, Quakers. New members, they believed, would be attracted to progressive causes. Meetings were frequently set up in college

⁹ Hugh Barbour, and J. William Frost, *The Quakers* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Meeting Press, 1988), 250-253; Gregory Barnes, *A Centennial History of the American Friends Service Committee*, kindle edition (Philadelphia, PA: FriendsPress, 2016), chapter 1. The precise number of Quaker workers in France fluctuated and included a sizable number of British Friends. In 1918 there were around 300 American Quakers present in France, out of 500 Quakers total.

towns, drawing educated professionals, undergraduates, graduate students and faculty, who were just as likely to be attracted to the idea of selfless service to others and political radicalism as they were to the mysticism of Rufus Jones or the liberal naturalism of Jesse Holmes. Committing to service work and peace, to doing good, rarely required members to sacrifice any of their existing ideological or metaphysical commitments.¹⁰ What Quakers thought about God was now less important, and far less frequently discussed, than what one thought on issues such as racial reconciliation or disarmament. By the 1920s, only a few years after its founding, the service work of the AFSC had become the key way that Quakers justified the continued existence of their denomination.

Ironically, given its original purpose of uniting the branches of Quakerism, the humanitarian efforts of Quakers became the central reason to resist ecumenical pressures to merge into larger, mainline Protestant denominations. It also served as an incentive for members to stay rather than becoming religiously unaffiliated. The voices of weighty and influential Quakers backed this interpretation, and because liberal Quakerism rejected the idea of paid clergy these academic and organizational leaders were the most visible figures in the denomination. Speaking to an audience of young adults in New York who were participants in the Young Friends Movement, Cadbury directly addressed the question of whether Quakers were right to be separated from other Christians. Cadbury concluded Quaker distinctiveness was acceptable, because by being separate Quakers could test new methods of service. He compared the entire denomination to an agricultural experimentation station, but instead of planting new varieties of seeds or strains of wheat, Quakers were perfecting new ways of expressing Christian love. Cadbury went on to tell

¹⁰ Elizabeth Cazden, "The Modernist Reinvention of Quakerism: The Independent Meetings in New England, 1920-1950" (M.A. Thesis. Andover Newton Theological School, 1997); Allan W. Austin, *Quaker Brotherhood: Interracial Activism and the American Friends Service Committee, 1917-1950* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 21.

the young adults present, “The existence of Friends without activity for 250 years was justified by the work they did in feeding German children after the war. If we could, 250 years from now, do another job similar to this, it would be justification for our existence in the meantime, though it were not to be our maximum output.”¹¹ This was a powerful new understanding of Quakerism. The entire history of the denomination from the time of its founding by George Fox was less vital, according to Cadbury, than the post-World War relief work of the AFSC.

The head of the AFSC, Wilbur K. Thomas, publicly agreed with Cadbury and insisted in the pages of the *Friends' Intelligencer* that “The difference between the Society of Friends and other religious denominations is this insistence upon the applicability of Jesus’ teachings to human relationships. Christianity to them is a religion of service.”¹² In a later talk he used a metaphor almost identical to Cadbury's, as he argued that Quakers should seek to be “an experiment station in religion” to lead other Christian groups by their example of international peacemaking, racial reconciliation, and work on economic injustice. Quakers were not important because of their theology, or even their piety, but because of the good works they did. For both men, as well as for many others in the denomination, making their religious beliefs center on service to humanity was a way to cope with the fact that they no longer believed most of the traditional ideas about God or the Bible that their parents had embraced. Speaking before a large audience at Friends General Conference, Thomas conceded that “thinking people” of the 1920s thought that science and religion were in contention. The reality, he insisted, was that science was not a threat to “true

¹¹ Henry J. Cadbury, “The Survival of Quakerism,” edited by Harriet L. Hoyle, *The Friends' Intelligencer* 83, no. 26 (June 26, 1926): 511–12.

¹² Wilbur K. Thomas, “An Opportunity Is a Responsibility,” *Friends' Intelligencer* 83, no. 52 (December 25, 1926): 1085.

religion," because true religion was centered on service, while the content of religious beliefs and theology was malleable.¹³

These views found their way to the Quaker "laity" because they were taught to them through various educational endeavors. A farmer from Oskaloosa, Iowa wrote in the *Friends Intelligencer*, about the experience of attending the Haverford College Summer School, a project backed by Rufus Jones and others in liberal Quakerism to provide a setting that would give average people a sort of shortened version of a seminary education to equip them for religious leadership. In his article this farmer spent a single sentence reflecting on the fact that he had enjoyed listening to talks on mysticism, theology and philosophy, but he devoted far more attention to explaining how "the application of thought to labor, Chinese, Mexican and racial problems is enough to demonstrate the sincerity of Friends' faith."¹⁴ The conclusions he reached about theology were not something he felt worth sharing in this public forum, but the political and social activism he had learned was. The Woolman School, founded in Pennsylvania in 1917, was an educational institute intended to offer the same sort of course as the Summer School movement in a more permanent setting. Promotions for the Woolman School boasted the institution was "concerned with making Quakerism real." While the curriculum did not exclude discussions of Christian theology, Quaker history or philosophy, the school's administrators thought the main way to accomplish their objective was to have students live cooperatively, study and "work at the vexed questions of racial, national and economic adjustment." Students would take courses that applied religious discussion to contemporary problems, such as "the Social Teachings of Jesus." Much of the curriculum was secular; students attended classes on

¹³ Wilbur K. Thomas, "And Greater Things Than These Shall Ye Do," *Friends' Intelligencer* 85, no. 35 (September 1, 1928): 689–91.

¹⁴ Lawrence W. Auld, "From an Iowa Farmer," *The Friends' Intelligencer* 84, no. 31 (July 23, 1927): 611–12.

“Education as a Factor in Producing a Better World Order” and “Economic Factors in Human Relationships.” Urging racial harmony and pointing towards a more socialistic economic order were more important subjects than Bible study. The school also prided itself on the international composition of the student body that was also religiously, racially and economically diverse, and included many non-Quakers. Although it was ostensibly supposed to fill the place of a seminary, the Woolman School more closely resembled an activist educational institution like Highlander Folk School or Brookwood Labor College than it did older models of theological education.¹⁵

Quaker men and women were regularly exposed to Quaker humanitarian work. In their Monthly and Yearly Meetings individual Quakers often worked on small Peace Committees, trying to carry out this service mission on a local level. The AFSC was also successful at making liberal Quakers feel a personal investment in the organization. Many people worked for the organization for a short term, as the AFSC began to host regular work camps which required only a small time commitment from members to work on service projects. While the work done during these trips was undoubtedly beneficial to the communities they were trying to assist, it was equally important that participants developed a sense of shared Quaker identity and sense of solidarity with the work of the AFSC.

These endeavors allowed individual Quakers to take great pride in the growing reach and scope of the AFSC as British and American Quakers developed an impressive international and domestic presence to render aid and lobby for peace. Scholar of religion Guy Aiken has drawn attention to the AFSC’s international and domestic programs, pointing out that the German food aid program was an immense undertaking to feed five million German children between 1920 and 1924, a full quarter of the all children in the country. Aiken notes that at the same time the

¹⁵ Caroline G. Norment, “Working Out a Technique of Group Life,” *Friends’ Intelligencer* 83, no. 19 (Fifth Month 1926): 367–70.

AFSC was also trying to support the welfare of miners in Appalachia, providing food and necessities to them while they were striking. Perhaps paradoxically, the AFSC leadership's politics were often conservative for the period, as those in charge of the organization frequently did not sympathize with organized labor's desire to strike.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the AFSC remained committed to providing life-sustaining support. Another scholar of American religion, Allan W. Austin, has drawn attention to the AFSC's work for racial justice. The organization had a Race Relations Section that organized for civil rights and held an annual Institute for Race Relations in the 1930s to bring intellectuals and organizers together. In World War II the AFSC worked to oppose Japanese internment and to resettle refugees of Jewish descent from Europe.¹⁷ The AFSC also set up an international structure for diplomatic work for peace, establishing what were sometimes dubbed "Quaker embassies," centers staffed by Quaker employees, in hotspots throughout the world, including Berlin, Calcutta, Geneva, Paris, Shanghai, Warsaw, Bangladesh and Tokyo. The goal of these outposts of Quakerism was not evangelization but assistance in resolving political tensions. The Berlin center, for example, aided non-Aryans and Jews to leave Germany after Kristallnacht. In addition to this work, the AFSC's Peace Section also tried to create two "ambassador" positions for Europe and Asia, which would be held by prominent Quakers who would travel while resolving disputes and solving crises. By the end of the Second

¹⁶ Guy Aiken, "Social Christianity and the American Friends Service Committee's Pacifist Humanitarianism in Germany and Appalachia, 1919-1941," University of Virginia Dissertation, 2017; Guy Aiken, "AFSC, Neutrality, & Justice," In *An Early Assessment U.S. Quakerism In the 20th Century*, ed. Chuck Fager (Durham, NC: Kimo Press, 2017), 35-45.

¹⁷ Allan W. Austin, *Quaker Brotherhood: Interracial Activism and the American Friends Service Committee, 1917-1950* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2012).

World War, the AFSC effort was massive, with operations on every continent except the Antarctic and approximately 225 employees with a much larger cadre of volunteers.¹⁸

During the same period Quakers created another organization, the Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL), in order to carry out political lobbying that the AFSC was prohibited from doing by its tax status. As Greg Hinshaw, a scholar of Quakerism and contemporary denominational official, has noted, the work of AFSC and other activists meant that the public perception of Quakerism became bound up with such labors. Even though those in FYM and an emerging body of Evangelical Friends were far more numerous, the fruits of Quaker activism, a largely liberal Quaker project, was seen as defining the entire body by outsiders.

Humanitarian service was one key fruit of Quakerism. The other was an emphasis on peace and nonviolence. This had a longer pedigree in Quaker circles, as since at least 1660 Quakers had maintained a testimony against war. In George Fox's Journal, the cornerstone that amounted to an informal denominational cannon, Friends read that Fox had rejected the use of outward weapons, declined a military commission under the English Commonwealth and explained to Cromwell's government that he "lived in the virtue of that life and power that took away the occasion for all wars." There were several intellectual foundations for this position. Early Quakers saw themselves as taking Jesus's commands to "love your enemies" seriously in a way that the established church traditions did not, and Fox and many other early Quakers believed that human beings were perfectible, so the elimination of violent urges was possible. American Quakers consistently maintained that their members should not fight in armed conflicts, though

¹⁸ Robert O. Byrd, *Quaker Ways in Foreign Policy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1960), 153-157; "Quaker International Centres." Quakers in the World, <http://www.quakersintheworld.org/quakers-in-action/232/Quaker-International-Centre>.

often individual members disregarded the group's official position. By the end of the nineteenth century, the testimony against war evolved into what would later be called the Peace Testimony. Accordingly, Quakers would avoid participation in war and actively advocate for the prevention of war and conflict.

Though Quakers largely spurned formal theology they increasingly developed a detailed philosophy on peace and nonviolence, one that was not based directly on Biblical citations or precedents. Being a pacifist group and espousing peace become a key part of Quaker identity, something that for many defined what it meant to be part of the religion far more than any belief about God or the nature of the universe. One key figure in developing the intellectual framework for twentieth century Quaker pacifism was Richard Gregg. Though Gregg was not himself a Quaker (he was reluctant to join any religious organization) his pacifism meant that he was often mistaken for one, and his writing became authoritative to many Friends.¹⁹ Gregg, in his 1935 *The Power of Non-Violence*, a manual for nonviolent direct action, broadened the scope of Quaker nonviolence. Gregg believed in a God, conceived of Jesus as a pivotal example of nonviolent action and saw the utilization of strategic nonviolence and the elimination of war as a way to implement a better world, which he continued to call "the Kingdom of God," but there was little specifically Christian or Quaker about his vision. Writing the foreword to the book, Rufus Jones remarked "the reader will soon discover that [the New Testament] is only one of the author's many effective religious documents. He draws on the literary sources of all the great religions of the world. The book has something to say to Hindus and Mohammedans and

¹⁹ Joseph Kip Kosek, *Acts of Conscience: Christian Nonviolence and Modern American Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 88-89, 96-111, 123-126 144.

Buddhists and Jews as well as Christians.”²⁰ With Jones’ critically important imprimatur Gregg’s pluralistic pacifism became synonymous with the view of the Religious Society of Friends.

Worried that a future war would result in a draft of their members, Quakers took the lead in organizing various pacifist groups into one coherent political front. In 1922 they held the first meeting of the Conference of Pacifist Churches with representatives from the Mennonites, Brethren, Schwenkfelders and other denominations. In 1935 representatives from the Quakers, Mennonites and Brethren gathered in Newton, Kansas, to create a conference of what they dubbed the “Historic Peace Churches.” This new designation covered only these denominations, and asserted a special relationship to the problem of pacifism and the state, based on particular denominational heritages of nonviolence.²¹ Participants believed that this unique role of historic peace churches would provide the grounds for compromise with the state. By the end of the 1930s, the Historic Peace Churches began to send envoys to meet with the federal government to work out what would happen to them in the next war. A group that included Quaker leader Rufus Jones, for instance, attempted to enlist the support of President Franklin Roosevelt to ensure that

²⁰ Rufus M. Jones, foreword in *The Power of Non-Violence*, by Richard B. Gregg (Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India: Navajivan Press, 1938), vi-viii. The expanded 1959 edition of *The Power of Nonviolence* went even further into radical theology. While still suggesting that nonviolence should be rooted in a belief in God, as it was for Gandhi, Gregg made clear that a belief in God did not mean that a personal being existed. Instead he explained, “People who do not believe in God or dislike references to what they call the supernatural should know that Gandhi said that God is another name for Truth.” Gregg went on to suggest that different religions might use different terms for “God” or “no name at all”. See Richard B. Gregg, *The Power of Nonviolence*. Second Revised Edition (New York: Schocken Books, 1959), 157.

²¹ Melvin Gingerich, *Service for Peace: A History of Mennonite Civilian Public Service* (Akron, PA: The Mennonite Central Committee, 1949), 25-27. Quaker concerns about political marginalization also spurred members to become involved in conventional electoral politics. The election of Herbert Hoover in 1928 was widely perceived as a triumph for the denomination. Quakers thought that having such a popular and competent man as president would banish the idea that Quakers were religious or political outsiders because of their beliefs, and some Quakers openly shared their hopes that the new Quaker president would fill his cabinet with Quakers. Despite these dreams, over the course of his only term Hoover’s unpopularity grew, and this optimistic strategy ultimately failed. See: Isaac Barnes May, “Quakers, Herbert Hoover and the 1928 Election.” In *An Early Assessment U.S. Quakerism In the 20th Century*, edited by Chuck Fager (Durham, NC: Kimo Press, 2017) 204-216.

members of the Historic Peace Churches were given draft exemptions. Mennonite Brethren leader Peter Hiebert and Mennonite Professor Emmett LeRoy Harshbarger met with the Secretary of War with the same agenda. At the same time E. Raymond Wilson, the head of the Friends Committee on National Legislation, lobbied on behalf of the Quakers to influence the U.S. government to allow conscientious objection.²² Having tried unsuccessfully to secure government recognition for their aims, these pacifist groups now resorted to begging it for mercy. As the Second World War began, the three historic peace churches worked with the Federal Council of Churches to create the National Armed Service Board of Religious Objectors (NSBRO). Staffed by peace church members and headed by Quaker Paul Comly French, the organization was given a quasi-official status by the federal government. When the government ordered the creation of the Civilian Public Service system to intern conscientious objectors and put them to work, the government turned to the historic peace churches to run most of the CPS camps.²³ CPS service would provide a shared experience for a generation of Quaker leaders, and made pacifism and service work an even more critical part of Quaker identity.

The vision of Quakers as peace-loving humanitarian activists was an attractive one, and was sometimes the primary reason that people joined the denomination in the first place. Mildred Scott Olmsted, for example, was raised a Baptist but attended a Quaker school. After finishing college at Smith, she was employed by the AFSC doing relief work in Europe in the wake of World War I. Olmsted became a leader within Jane Addams' organization, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, where she worked closely with Quakers who were also engaged in humanitarian activism for peace. Inspired by this example and the work that

²² Gingerich, *Service for Peace: A History of Mennonite Civilian Public Service*, 44-45.

²³ Mulford Q. Sibley and Philip E. Jacob, *Conscription of Conscience: The American State and the Conscientious Objector, 1940-1947* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1952).

Quakers did, Olmsted joined the Religious Society of Friends and served as clerk of her monthly Meeting. But she was not sure what she believed about God, or even if she believed in God. Her husband, who also became a convinced Quaker, found the mysticism of Rufus Jones and the practice of silent worship deeply meaningful, but Olmsted never admitted to being moved by these things. For Olmsted, Quakerism was primarily valuable because it represented a membership in an activist community.²⁴

Whether a religion could survive over the long term by focusing mostly on doing good rather than based on shared beliefs was a source of debate among religious liberals. Giving a sermon at Swarthmore Friends Meeting, Kirsopp Lake, an Anglican New Testament Professor at Harvard Divinity School, suggested that the focus on social action could lead to a lessening of religious devotion. As he explained it, the church was “rapidly becoming a center for social and philanthropic activities. These things are good, but they are a change from the day when the sessions of worship were the chief contribution of the church to life.” He wondered if “they are a satisfactory substitute, for after all religion has another, a different and a personal side.”²⁵ Lake, who was a theist and more traditional than many Quakers, clearly feared that the decline of conventional beliefs meant the loss of what had been most valuable in Christian life.

His colleague at Harvard Divinity, Henry Cadbury, raised the same question, asking in an address, “Is such a religion personally satisfying, and is it socially valuable?” He decided the first question was largely irrelevant; one could not simply choose to believe in a religion because it was easy or enjoyable. That did not make it true, he said, suggesting that he felt his views were at least within “the limits of cool judgement and common sense.” To the second question,

²⁴ Margaret Hope Bacon, *One Woman's Passion for Peace and Freedom: The Life of Mildred Scott Olmsted* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1992), 235.

²⁵ Kirsopp Lake, “What Is Religion?” *Friends' Intelligencer* 84, no. 49 (November 12, 1927): 911–12.

whether such a religion was valuable to society, he answered enthusiastically yes.²⁶ Cadbury, one of the leading Quaker exponents of service work, confessed to his students that he had no clear religious beliefs outside of a devotion to living an upright life and helping others, noting that the mysticism of Rufus Jones, Quaker worship or the beauty of the Bible did not fill that role for him.

After the Second World War, many liberal Friends would come to the same conclusion as Cadbury, leaving God as an unknowable question and dedicating themselves to practical social service. Humanitarian work became so associated with Quakers that by the 1950s, an English Friend, writing in an edited volume about Quaker approaches to contemporary problems, started his contribution by offering a gentle correction that “In spite of the common assumption, the Society of Friends is not essentially a relief organization or a social service agency.”²⁷ He apparently felt uncertain that his intended audience—who presumably would have already read about a third of the way through a book about Quakers—understood that the Religious Society of Friends was a religious group.

Yet the emphasis on service would also shift in tone. As scholar of religion Robert Wuthnow has observed, the post-war expansion of the government into new realms, particularly its involvement in funding higher education and social welfare programs, meant that American religious groups saw the state assume many of the tasks that they had previously seen as their moral responsibility. Whereas it had once been the task of the AFSC to provide relief to striking miners, to prevent them and their families from starving, these kinds of tasks were now up to federal and state governments. While liberal Quakers and the AFSC did not withdraw from

²⁶ Henry Joel Cadbury, “My Personal Religion.” Universalist Friends, 1936.
<http://universalistfriends.org/UF035.html>.

²⁷ Roger C. Wilson, “Relief and Reconstruction,” in *The Quaker Approach*, by John Kavanaugh, (Edinburgh, Great Britain: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1953), 25-42.

humanitarian work, they began to focus on more overtly political kinds of campaigns, aiming for social change rather than just relief. Work for peace, and against war, became even more prioritized, civil rights efforts assumed greater prominence, and the denomination more overtly gravitated towards the political left.

The 1955 pamphlet *Speak Truth to Power: A Quaker Search for an Alternative to Violence*, perhaps the single most important religious work within Quakerism published in the latter half of the twentieth century, was almost entirely devoted to politics and social action. Written by an AFSC working group of fourteen Quaker authors that included peace activist Norman J. Whitney, A.J. Muste, the former head of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and civil rights activist Bayard Rustin, the work was intended to lay out a nonviolent approach to the Cold War for a non-Quaker audience.²⁸ The authors outlined how diplomacy, cooperation and nonviolent action, rather than force, could avert conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. The pamphlet was widely distributed, and the phrase, “speaking truth to power,” probably invented for the pamphlet by Bayard Rustin, left behind its original context and became a part of popular culture.

The pamphlet explicitly positions theological discussion as unimportant, declaring that while there were numerous statements from religious groups and in “theological circles” about the value of non-violence, they were not worth lengthy discussion; rather, “The urgent need is not to preach religious truth, but to show how it is possible and why it is reasonable to give practical expression to it in the great conflict that now divides the world.”²⁹ The writers did briefly mention God, explaining how human beings were made in the image of God and hence should

²⁸ Sarah Azaransky, *This Worldwide Struggle: Religion and the International Roots of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 180-184; “Speak Truth to Power: A Quaker Search for Alternatives to Violence” (American Friends Service Committee, 1955).

²⁹ “Speak Truth to Power,” iv–v.

practice nonviolence and compassion towards each other, but it made no explicit claims about the nature of the deity or how God should be worshiped. The point was that Quakerism was expressed in action through concern for others rather than in theological propositions.

By the 1960s, when Quakers tried to explain themselves to outsiders, they often emphasized the various forms of social witness the group had engaged in, rather than their current theological beliefs. In Margaret Hope Bacon's *The Quiet Rebels*, a 1969 history of American Quakerism for a popular audience, Bacon's account of more recent events focused primarily on activism, with chapters with titles such as "Pioneers in social change" and "Quakers in the World," this last one dealing with the actions of the AFSC. Bacon's own career was a product of the turn to humanitarian service within the denomination. Before becoming a prolific author of histories, biographies and fiction focused on Quakerism she had been a longtime staff member of the AFSC.

While Bacon's history mentioned the various religious customs that Quakers had held in the nineteenth century, such as wearing plain dress and speaking in plain speech, and their beliefs, almost all of this was confined to the distant past of the group. The book had two sections of illustrations. The first depicted drawings of George Fox, William Penn, Elias Hicks and other worthy Quakers of the distant past, and the modern section showed photos of peace work such as "Feeding German children," "Quakers rally for peace outside Independence Hall in Philadelphia," and "Caring for civilians wounded in Vietnam."³⁰ A reader would not have been remiss to detect that the book depicted two eras of Quakerism, an older theistic and plain-dressed one, and a modern Quakerism that was about working for social betterment. The older Quakerism was an origin story, a source of identity and strength for the new Quakerism, but it

³⁰ Margaret Hope Bacon, *The Quiet Rebels; the Story of the Quakers in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1969), 76-77, 184-185.

was not a source of plausible religious guidance. This message was by no means hidden or even subtle. Cadbury wrote the book's introduction and declared that "The impact of the book is on religion as revealed in life and action, not on its formulation." Theology no longer mattered. Bacon acknowledged that "some readers may share the complaint, 'why don't Quakers preach what they practice?'" but suggested that it was to the book's benefit that "the author is willing to let. . . Quaker lives speak."³¹ Fruits could stand on their own as a justification for the continued relevance of Quakerism.

The emphasis on humanitarian work and social justice continues to be a defining trait of liberal Quakerism, though the connection between the denomination and the AFSC became strained starting in the 1970s. Quakers have been myth-makers, inventing a tradition that posits these traits as always the central part of their identity. In the online shop for Quakergear.com ("Outfitting the strong silent type since 1643" jokes the website), one of the posters for sale is a motivational poster of Margaret Fell, one of the early leaders of the movement and often referred to as the "Mother of Quakerism." The poster has a slogan that purports to be a quote from her: "Theology divides, service unites."³² The quote is misattributed, as Fell never said it. It dates from the late nineteenth century and was popularized by the social gospel movement. Yet to those Friends who hang the poster this is either not known or does not matter; service has retroactively become foundational to Quakerism.

Unitarianism

³¹ Henry J. Cadbury, forward to *The Quiet Rebels; the Story of the Quakers in America*, by Margaret Hope Bacon (New York: Basic Books, 1969), vi.

³² "Margaret Fell Quote Art," Quaker Gear, <https://www.quakergear.com/product/margaret-fell-quote-art-black/>.

Unitarians needed to find a path to denominational unity as much as liberal Quakers did, and they would adopt largely the same solutions. Though the humanist and theist debates had reached their peak in the 1930s, they persisted afterwards as discernible factions, which periodically threatened to cause division within the Unitarian denomination. Most Unitarians, both clergy and laity, by this period did not gravitate strongly towards either side of the humanist or theist controversy, sitting in a theologically ill-defined middle position. As Harry C. Meserve, the new editor of *The Christian Register*, explained, the majority of ministers rejected labels, inclining towards a “humanist or near-humanist position” in their views of God, but held an appreciation of liturgy and prayer that expressed at least a rhetorical commitment to theism.³³ Yet there were still a few fierce partisans on both sides, who sometimes mused about the possibility of purging the other side from the Unitarian fold. In 1949, a faction of theists unsuccessfully tried to marginalize the humanists in the denomination by inserting the phrase “under God” into the bylaws of the American Unitarian Association, appending it after the phrase “individual freedom and belief.” While such efforts would have had no direct tangible effects (no ministers or laity would have been disciplined for their humanist theology if the change had passed) it still represented a rhetorical stand against Humanism and was clear evidence of the simmering tensions within the denomination.³⁴ Unitarianism had to turn to service to provide a way to bridge their theological division, lest the denomination splinter.

Their solution was similar to that of the Quakers. They embraced humanitarian service and political activism as key religious values, trying to bring together these disparate factions around one of the few topics neither side disagreed with. Unitarians did not adopt pacifism as a marker

³³ Harry C. Meserve, “Theism and Humanism,” *The Christian Register* 128, no. 1 (January 1949): 25, 29.

³⁴ Harry C. Meserve, “Let Us Have a Great Controversy,” *The Christian Register* 128, no. 1 (January 1949): 8–10.

of identity in the way Quakers did, but they did find a distinctive denominational trait of their own to emphasize: the idea that constant searching for religious truth was a core part of Unitarianism. By agreeing that Unitarianism was about the “brotherhood of man” and seeking for religious truth, the denomination could maintain a theological balance without being overpowered by either side.

Many Unitarian ministers tried to espouse a sort of centrism that regarded both humanism and theism as too extreme. Writing in the late 1940s, a Boston Minister Edwin C. Broome, Jr. described the situation as a state of constant “tension” between humanists and theists, who Broome saw as synonymous with the theological left and right wings of the denomination. Such a tension was healthy, he maintained, a natural side effect of the liberty of thought and conscience that Unitarianism offered its members; but it had to be closely monitored, to avoid becoming perilous “contention,” threatening denominational unity.³⁵ Dana McLean Greeley, a minister and secretary of the AUA who would later become that organization’s president, as well as the first president of its successor, the Unitarian Universalist Association, held to a similar line of argument. The headline of an article in *The Christian Register* announced that Greeley “rejects new-fangled rightist and leftist movements in Unitarianism,” by which it meant that he did not consider himself either a humanist or a theist, choosing to label himself “an old-fashioned Unitarian” who was “somewhere in between” the two poles. There was, of course, an obvious intellectual hurdle to this kind of centrism, something that neither Greeley nor Broome faced head on, which was the fact that it was unclear what the moderate position might be between the humanist view (which held that Unitarianism should be about human beings) and the theist view

³⁵ Edwin C. Broome, Jr., “The Tension Among Us,” *The Christian Register* 126, no. 11 (December 1947): 478–79. Even after Reform began to express sympathy with Zionist goals, Kaplan was skeptical about the depth of that movements commitment to the cause. See: Mordecai M. Kaplan, “The Next Step in the Reform Movement,” *Hebrew Union College Quarterly* XXXVI, no. 4 (December 1949): 3–4.

(that Unitarianism should be about the worship of God). Did religion require God or not? Greeley effectively dodged this question as he affirmed a faith in the “Infinite Power of Life,” that he claimed was different from the “neo-Calvinist” God of the theists. He pivoted to talking about what he called the “pragmatic value of religion,” an argument about the fruits of Unitarianism. A moderate Unitarian faith, he said, helped “shape a better civilization, where righteousness and peace shall be at home.”³⁶ For this consensus position, the truth was somewhere in the middle, but theology was not important.

During the period when Unitarianism was decentralized, most parts of the denomination after World War I had come to similar conclusions: namely, that service should be one of the key parts of religion. Even Unitarian Humanists could agree with the sentiment. The Humanism that Unitarian minister Curtis Reese (whose break with the Baptist ministry is addressed in Chapter 1) presented to his congregants was single-minded in its concern for improving the social welfare of society. For Reese, Humanism required building the “Commonwealth of Man,” and when he described what that phrase meant, he indicated that it was synonymous with contemporary political progressivism. As he put it in his 1926 book *Humanism*, “the indispensable minimum requirements are: (1) Universal education (2) social guarantees and (3) world organization.”³⁷ At the end of the book Reese gave a list of “Humanist policies” that he urged churches to follow; the list bore more than a passing resemblance to the Social Creed of the Federal Council of Churches. It included demands for the abolition of child labor, restrictions on the working hours of women and “aged men,” social security, support for birth control and collective bargaining rights for organized labor. Reese also was an early supporter of civil rights for African-

³⁶ Greeley, Dana McLean Greeley, “Frankly Old-Fashioned,” *The Christian Register* 128, no. 3 (May 1949): 20–21.

³⁷ Curtis W. Reese, *Humanism* (Chicago, IL: Open Court Publishing Company, 1926), 10–11.

Americans and declared that “democracy is but a dream so long as any person on account of their race or color is denied any right or freed from any duty generally allowed or required of another race or color.”³⁸ A few years later, in a follow up to this last work, *Humanist Religion*, Reese repeated many of the same points, but also extolled liberal democracy against the looming threat of capitalist excess, fascism and communism.³⁹

Reese tried to put these ideals into practice through his congregation, the Abraham Lincoln Centre. Founded by pioneering Unitarian minister Jenkin Lloyd Jones at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Abraham Lincoln Centre was part of a movement of institutional churches, which sought to be centers as much for community and social service as for religious worship. The model that Jones had envisioned for the Abraham Lincoln Centre was consciously inspired by Jane Addams’ Hull House and the settlement movement, but the Abraham Lincoln Centre tried to perform settlement house work while also providing distinctly theologically radical religious services. The Articles of Association of the Centre were printed on the church bulletin that members and visitors picked up to tell them the week’s events. It declared, “The object for which [the Centre] is formed is the advancement of the physical, intellectual, social, civic, moral, and religious interests of humanity, irrespective of age, sex, creed, race, condition or political opinion and in furtherance thereof the maintenance of the institutions of learning and philanthropy.” The Lincoln Centre managed to be visibly God-optional, and to portray its religious stance as just one minor part of a much broader program.⁴⁰ For Reese this commitment to activism was simply Humanism put into practice. As he explained, he felt that what separated

³⁸ Reese, *Humanism*, 74-78.

³⁹ Curtis W. Reese, *Humanist Religion* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1931), 56-70.

⁴⁰ Curtis W. Reese, “Bulletin of the Abraham Lincoln Centre,” October 1931. Unitarian Universalist Association Inactive Ministerial File, bMS 1446, Curtis Reese File, Box 178. Harvard-Andover Library. Both contemporary and scholarly accounts sometimes refer to the church using the Americanized spelling as the Abraham Lincoln Center, but the British spelling of “centre” seems to have been the official one.

Humanism from theism was that Humanism was simply the experimental, scientific method applied to human betterment.⁴¹ Other humanists took a similar tack. John Haynes Holmes observed in his autobiography, “Theology, like philosophy, was a fascinating subject but by no means the essential [one] it was cracked up to be. As the years have passed in my busy life I have found that the theological and Biblical books in my library have steadily drifted to the top shelves where they lie practically undisturbed, while books on psychology, sociology, political economy, literature, history, war and peace, lie on a level where they can be grasped and used.”⁴² Holmes was not idly boasting when he indicated that his involvement in worldly affairs kept him from addressing theology; he was well-known outside Unitarianism as an activist thanks to his role as a co-founder of the American Civil Liberties Union and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

The denomination itself pushed the idea that service was pivotal to Unitarian identity, with much the same fervor that evangelical groups might have pushed evangelism. The AUA established a department of social relations in 1927, with Skidmore College political science Professor Robert C. Dexter as the head. With AUA backing, Dexter raised money for striking millworkers’ families and authored a report on the cotton industry.⁴³ By the late 1930s, Unitarians consciously decided to emulate the Quaker emphasis on relief and service work, seeing in the Quaker model a way to embody the progressive religious vision they felt their denomination was called to fulfill. In 1938 Robert Dexter, a sociologist and employee of the AUA, coordinated with the AFSC and AUA to dispatch Unitarian workers to Czechoslovakia to

⁴¹ Curtis W. Reese, *Humanist Religion* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1931), 93-95.

⁴² John Haynes Holmes, *I Speak for Myself: The Autobiography of John Haynes Holmes* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), 50.

⁴³ David B. Parke, “A Wave at the Crest,” In *A Stream of Light*, edited by Conrad Wright (Boston, MA: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1975), 122.

aid refugees attempting to flee the Nazi sphere of influence. The two Unitarians sent abroad, Martha and Waitstill Sharp, worked alongside six Quakers. Based on that work, in 1940 the President of the AUA Frederick May Eliot helped to create the Unitarian Service Committee (USC). The activities of the USC at first closely resembled those of the AFSC, and even the name of the USC suggested that it was simply a Unitarian take on the existing Quaker organization. Because the USC overseas staff and their closest associates consisted of only sixteen people, they often had to cooperate with other aid organizations, and were particularly reliant on the Quakers. One of the core USC staff, Noel Field, was a Quaker. During the Second World War, the Sharps, operating from Portugal and Vichy France, helped to rescue several thousand people escaping from the Nazis, including personally assisting in the daring rescue of Jewish author Lion Feuchtwanger. After the war they were honored as “Righteous Among the Nations” at Yad Vashem.⁴⁴

Much as it had for the Quakers, this work infused the entire denomination with a sense of purpose. *The Christian Register*, now edited by Llewellyn Jones, who had succeeded Albert Dieffenbach, gave its readers ample coverage of the Sharps’ work, chronicling them as if they were celebrities when they briefly returned from Europe in 1941. The denomination rolled out the proverbial red carpet, booking the couple for days of talks and receptions, first at local churches and then at larger venues. The couple spoke at the Wellesley Hills Church, Massachusetts, then the next day went to a reception with denominational leaders at 25 Beacon Street, the illustrious headquarters of the AUA, located down the street from the Massachusetts statehouse. Jones’s coverage of the couple and the USC included a quote by a man whose

⁴⁴ John A. Buehrens, *Universalists and Unitarians in America: A People’s History* (Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 2011), 158; Susan Elisabeth Subak, *Rescue & Flight: American Relief Workers Who Defied the Nazis* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), xxi-xxix, 50-52. Several people affiliated with the USC assisted the Office of Strategic Services, and could be said to have been American spies.

children had been able to flee occupied France thanks to the Sharps' colleague, Unitarian minister Charles R. Joy. The man Joy aided declared, "I am deeply grateful to the Unitarian Service Committee. This doesn't make me believe in miracles—it only strengthens my faith in them. If I needed more faith, I have it now."⁴⁵ The point, that the work of the Sharps and the USC was a "miracle," was an important one for a Unitarian audience. In a faith that increasingly had little agreement about the existence of supernatural miracles, they could at least unite around venerating human service as filling the same religious role.

The central symbol that would come to represent Unitarianism, the flaming chalice, the denomination's version of the cross or Star of David, was originally the logo of the USC. The distinctive design was created by Hans Deutsch, a Austrian Jewish artist, at Joy's request in 1941. What the chalice meant was not agreed upon universally; Joy was heavily aligned with the theist side of the denomination and identified himself as a Christian, and he saw a Christian motif in the image, pointing out that while it was not the artist's intention, the design was faintly reminiscent of a cross. For Joy, the chalice had Greek and Roman influences and primarily invoked the idea Christian "sacrificial love" that he felt the Unitarian Service Committee's work embodied.⁴⁶ Deutsch had conceived of the USC's work in different terms, as religion realized purely through service. He wrote to Joy: "I am not what you may actually call a believer. But if your kind of life is the profession of your faith... then religion, ceasing to be magic and mysticism, becomes confession to practical philosophy and— what is more— to active, really

⁴⁵ "Mrs. Sharp Back in America," *The Christian Register* 120, no. 1 (January 1, 1941): 8–9.

⁴⁶ Subak, *Rescue & Flight*, 82; Dan Hotchkiss, "Charles Joy and the Flaming Chalice Symbol," *The Journal of Unitarian Universalist History* XXVI (1999): 114–19.

Several years prior Joy had been a rival of Frederick May Elliot's for the presidency of the AUA. Joy had accused Eliot of being a humanist and unrepresentative of Unitarians. After his defeat, few ministerial options were open to Joy, which is one of the reasons why he took the job with the USC. When Joy referred to the Christian elements of the chalice he may have been thinking of how the symbol was tied to the eucharist, even though Unitarians did not typically have communion services.

useful social work. And this religion— with or without a heading— is one to which even a 'godless' fellow like myself can say wholeheartedly, 'Yes!'"⁴⁷ Both men may have attached different kinds of religious labels to the USC and the chalice that represented it. Joy saw it as theistic and Christian while Deutsch did not, but both also understood the chalice to represent an ideal realized through helping others. The entire denomination would eventually adopt the chalice as a logo, and by the 1960s actual chalices began to be included in Unitarian churches. Chalice lightings became perhaps the most common liturgical ritual practiced by the denomination. Whenever the history of the chalice was discussed, its connection to humanitarian service was always prominently mentioned.

For a few Unitarians, the USC and its work was not just a symbol; it became a focus of congregational worship services. In 1941 New Jersey minister, Arthur Powell Davies, for example, read a news article about the organization to his congregation as his "scripture lesson" one Sunday.⁴⁸ Four years later, Josiah R. Bartlett, a young Unitarian minister from Ohio who identified as a Christian and was on the theologically conservative end of the denomination, wrote about hosting a church supper of bread and water in support of the USC to raise donations. After the supper, Bartlett later noted to *The Christian Register*, he experienced a deep sense of solidarity in helping others by supporting the USC. The gathering, he claimed, gave him a religious experience beyond the power of his words to describe. Bartlett went on to declare, "That meal was a real communion, and its meaning depended on no superstition or theology!"⁴⁹ Unitarians rarely had communion services, but Bartlett linked support for the USC

⁴⁷ Hans Deutsch quoted in Warren Ross, *The Premise and the Promise: The Story of the Unitarian Universalist Association* (Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 2001), 88-89.

⁴⁸ "From Register to Lectern," *The Christian Register* 120, no. 3 (February 1, 1941): 59.

The article was also from *The Christian Register*, though it is not clear what article on the Sharps he read.

⁴⁹ Josiah R. Bartlett, "Is Unitarianism Parasitic on the Christian Tradition?" *The Christian Register* 120, no. 7 (April 1, 1945): 131.

with sacramentality, seeing such work as a way to conduct what he saw as genuinely Christian worship without compromising Unitarian rationalism or values. Bartlett asserted that such service work, part of what he called the efforts for the “redemption of man,” were the chief purpose of Unitarianism.⁵⁰

The Unitarian laity seems to have accepted the prominent place that this kind of activism began to take in the denomination. The USC campaigned to generate awareness in the denomination, giving away buttons to anyone who donated a dollar or more. Denominational leaders followed this cue. Writing in the *Christian Register* at the start of 1942, as the United States entered the World War, Frederick May Eliot described aspects of the Unitarian faith as being akin to a series of candles lighting the sanctuary of Unitarian churches. The first of these was the “candle of humanitarian service, which has always shone with a steady and reassuring flame upon the altar of our faith.” Eliot described how this “candle” was embodied by the work of the Unitarian Service Committee, the creation of which had given the tradition of such service a “new meaning and wider scope.” Humanitarian service and the work of the USC was perhaps the most specifically Unitarian of any of the attributes that Eliot described, while others such as “human fellowship” and “the candle of hope” would have been interchangeable with most other American religious institutions.⁵¹ After the war, this focus on humanitarian work continued. In a 1947 sermon at the General Conference of the AUA, Eliot outlined his vision for a postwar unified super-church of religious liberals, a counterpart to the Roman Catholic Church, and proposed mergers of mainline Protestantism that would bring together liberal mainliners, Quakers, Jews and Ethical Culturists. The only activity Eliot mentioned for this new “United

⁵⁰ Bartlett, “Is Unitarianism Parasitic on the Christian Tradition?,” 129-132.

⁵¹ Fredrick May Eliot, “Bring in the Candles,” In *A Documentary History of Unitarian Universalism*, edited by Dan McKanan (Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 2017), 119–20.

Liberal Church “ would be “to give united and sacrificial support to a world-wide program of humanitarian service... on the basis of the magnificent record of the Unitarian Service Committee, and in full cooperation with all other agencies that share our humanitarian purpose.”⁵² Saving others and improving the world could easily serve as the central project of religion, and critically, it would give people a reason to attend church by providing an optimistic sense that belonging to their religious community was a social good.

It is useful to compare Unitarian and Quaker service efforts, not with an eye to seeing which was more successful, but because it reveals that the scope and emphasis of the work actually had little connection with its reception in the denomination. While the contributions of the USC, and the work of the Sharps in particular, should not be slighted, it is important to note that the actual efforts of the USC were quite small, employing fewer than a dozen people. Most Unitarians were unlikely to directly interact with the USC’s work, or know anyone involved with it. The AFSC in comparison was an international organization composed of several hundred employees during the World War, and there were hundreds more Quaker conscientious objectors interned in Civilian Public Service camps during the conflict. The majority of liberal Quakers were quite likely to have some personal connections with either the CPS or the AFSC at some point in their lives. These organizations were only slightly less ubiquitous than military service was for outsiders during the same period; almost all of the denominational leadership in the ensuing generation would consist of men who had been sent to the CPS camps rather than serve in the military. Yet the AFSC and CPS were only marginally more promoted and mentioned in Quaker denominational periodicals during the war than was the work of the USC among Unitarians. The statements about the value of humanitarian service from Quaker and Unitarian leaders were

⁵² Fredrick May Eliot, “The Message and Mission of Liberal Religion.” In *A Documentary History of Unitarian Universalism*, edited by Dan McKanan, 151–53.

highly similar even if the level of resources and commitment involved in these activities varied. In the postwar period, the Unitarian emphasis on service was widely embraced, but the USC itself ceased to be the sterling example for the denomination that it had been. As the Cold War began there were concerns that the USC was sympathetic to Soviet Union. While this was a period of hysteria and reaction, in which false allegations were common, there is reason to believe that the USC probably did include employees that were working for Soviet interests. Noel Field, the Quaker who worked for the committee, was employed by both the American OSS and Soviet intelligence, although the USSR held his real sympathies and he tried to provide them with information. Field would ultimately defect to the Soviet Union, where he was tortured because his loyalty was seen as suspect. He ultimately served as a witness in the Stalinist show trials. Another USC employee was Herta “Jo” Tempi, a member of the German Communist party, who was carrying on an affair with Charles Joy. When a faction of Unitarians hostile to the Communist sympathies of the USC was found out, Joy was fired from his position with the organization. There was some evidence that Field at least had prioritized Communists to be recipients of aid from the USC.⁵³

A group of Unitarian ministers calling themselves the National Committee of Free Unitarians was organized in 1947 with the goal of rooting Communism out of the denomination. The Free Unitarians emerged from a group that had initially met at the Harvard Club of Boston, a

⁵³ Alan Seaburg, “Charles Rhind Joy,” *Dictionary of Unitarian & Universalist Biography*, September 16, 2012, <http://uudb.org/articles/charlesrhindjoy.html>; Maria Schmidt, “Noel Field--The American Communist at the Center of Stalin’s East European Purge: From the Hungarian Archives,” *American Communist History* 3, no. 2 (December 2004): 215–45; Kati Marton, *True Believer: Stalin’s Last American Spy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2016); George H. Hodos, *Show Trials: Stalinist Purges in Eastern Europe, 1948-1954* (New York: Praeger, 1987), 25–32.

Interestingly the 1946 accusation that the USC was under Communist influence passed from Francis Henson of the International Rescue Committee, to Reinhold Niebuhr, who directed it John Haynes Holmes. Holmes’ intervention led to Joy being followed, and his affair with Tempi being discovered. Niebuhr’s connection to denominational anti-communist efforts has been little documented, and represents a different role from him than his usual presence as a anti-Communist intellectual.

location that suggested the elite pedigree of the membership. Some among them were political conservatives, motivated by many of the same animus that would drive the Second Red Scare, but there were also anti-Stalinist liberals. Although the Free Unitarians were probably more inclined towards theism, they still counted a number of humanists among their number. They saw one of their immediate tasks, even more urgent than reforming the USC, as the removal of the editor of *The Christian Register*, Stephen Fritchman, from his post. A former Methodist and religion editor of the *New York Herald Tribune*, Fritchman had become a Unitarian minister in 1930 and had risen high in the denomination. Even though he was probably closest to the humanist wing of the denomination, his principal interest was in leftist politics rather than theological debates. The Free Unitarians suspected Fritchman of being a Communist and using the denomination's periodical to promote a pro-Soviet viewpoint.⁵⁴

According to Charles Eddis, later a Unitarian minister and actively involved in the Fritchman case, several things caused the Free Unitarians to suspect Fritchman. Prior to the Second World War, Fritchman had been in favor of U.S. neutrality exactly as long as the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact lasted keeping peace between the Nazis and the USSR. When the Germans invaded the Soviet Union, his view switched overnight and he demanded American intervention to aid the Soviets. As director of American Unitarian Youth, he had the organization take part in propaganda activities in the Eastern bloc. Later, when he was editor of the denominational

⁵⁴ This section on Fritchman draws particular on a study of the controversy done by Joshua Leach. Leach concluded that *The Christian Register* did have a pro-Soviet perspective under Fritchman's leadership, but these views were not significantly different from those of many politically liberal periodicals during the Popular Front period. See: Joshua Leach, "'The Logic of Atrocious Means': Communism, Pacifism, and the Crisis of Conscience in Liberal Religion, 1941-1950," MDiv Thesis, Harvard University, 2015.

periodical, he excluded almost all writing that criticized the Soviet Union, and prevented even liberal critics of Stalinism from contributing.⁵⁵

While uproar about Communists in Unitarianism is an important episode in its own right, what was perhaps most critical for the development of Unitarianism as a God-optional religion was that debates over communism began to connect humanitarian service, religious liberalism and being a Unitarian into one coherent narrative. The Free Unitarians and their allies expressed their skepticism about how those they suspected of Communism focused mainly on politics at the expense of religious concerns . While the Free Unitarians did not argue that Unitarian clergy should abandon social causes, they worried openly that ministers like Fritchman had removed spiritual content and made the denomination a predominantly political platform. In response, ministers and prominent lay critics of Free Unitarians on the political left, such as Curtis Reese, the renowned Unitarian minister James Luther Adams and Leslie Pennington, a Unitarian minister and the father-in-law of novelist John Updike, saw the movement as anti-communist hysteria and signed a public letter accusing the group of trying to discard service and political involvement in the name of anti-communism. They declared that service work was the “essence of Unitarianism.” The letter went on to explain that “Concern for social service and for political and economic justice is the sign of love to God and love to man.” What is telling was such service was not merely “a sign” of devotion to God and humanity, but was “the sign,” the single most important one that could exist.⁵⁶ Fritchman would take a similar tack with his anticommunist foes. In an open letter to Frederick May Eliot, the president of the AUA, he fumed, “The purpose of the National Committee of Free Unitarians is nothing less than the

⁵⁵ Charles W. Eddis, *Stephen Fritchman: The American Unitarians and Communism* (Lulu.com, 2011), 23-29.

⁵⁶ Statement about National Committee of Free Unitarians quoted in Charles W. Eddis, *Stephen Fritchman: The American Unitarians and Communism* (Lulu.com, 2011), 56-57.

assassination of the Unitarian church as it has existed historically, for there is no Unitarianism without unceasing humanitarian service supplementing personal idealism and public worship.”⁵⁷ Fritchman’s argument that Unitarianism could not exist without humanitarian service was novel, as it had been a denominational priority for less than a decade.

Fritchman’s later account of events in his autobiography portrays him as being a victim of a McCarthyite smear. He equated efforts to remove him from the editorship of *The Christian Register* with efforts to harm the USC. As he put it, “Our whole common cause, most notably the refreshing of the Unitarian faith in a new day, and the phenomenal achievements of the Unitarian Service Committee, with its humanitarian programs around the world, were all at stake, not simply one man’s job.”⁵⁸

Those in favor of removing Fritchman from the post of editor of the denomination’s official paper were not actually opposed to humanitarian service.⁵⁹ The ensuing controversy saw both sides insisting on the value of social action as a key part of Unitarianism, even while they debated the proper place of political radicalism and Communism within the AUA. In the 1950s and 1960s, Unitarianism would become ever more focused on social action as the primary form of communal togetherness, an identity that continues to the present.

Many jokes that circulated within Unitarian Universalism poked fun at the fact that commitments to social betterment had replaced their focus on traditional theology. According to one of these jokes, a member of a UU congregation collides with a Catholic in a fatal car

⁵⁷ Stephen H. Fritchman quoted in Charles W. Eddis, *Stephen Fritchman: The American Unitarians and Communism* (Lulu.com, 2011), 78.

⁵⁸ Stephen H. Fritchman, *Heretic: A Partisan Autobiography* (Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 1977), 94.

⁵⁹ For example, one of the most outspoken voices against Fritchman was Homer Jack, a Unitarian minister who would become well known for his role in helping to found the Congress for Racial Equality and the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy. Jack was hardly an advocate of the view that religious leaders ought to shun public life.

accident, and their respective clergy arrive on the scene as they are dying. The priest gives last rites and asks his parishioner, “Do you believe in God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son, and the Holy Ghost?” The punchline has the UU minister ask his dying congregant “Do you believe in open inquiry, social justice and world community?” Another joke suggests “you might be a UU if you think the Holy Trinity is reduce, reuse, recycle.”⁶⁰ These jokes might draw a mirthful chuckle if a minister deployed them on a bleary-eyed congregation during a Sunday morning sermon, and they demonstrate Unitarian views about the place of service work versus religious commitments.

Reconstructionism and Zionism

While Quakerism and Unitarianism focused on serving others as the core of their identity, Reconstructionism took a different tack. While service to the world was still important, the core identity in Reconstructionism was bound up in being Jewish, and for many Reconstructionists the clearest way to be Jewish without engaging in traditional religious practices that presupposed a supernatural God was to support Zionism. Kaplan made his position clear from the earliest articles that outlined Reconstructionism as a philosophy within Judaism, asserting, “We are Zionists. We not only share the aspiration to see Israel restored to his homeland, but also subscribe to the principle that such aspiration is synonymous with the revival of Judaism.”⁶¹ Creating a Jewish nation-state fulfilled Kaplan’s vision of Judaism not only being a religion but also being a civilization. In Reconstructionist thought, for Jews to continue to exist in diaspora in

⁶⁰ Amanda Udis-Kessler, “Laughing Matter: What UU Jokes Tell Us about Ourselves,” High Plains UU church, Colorado Springs, CO, May 25, 2014, <http://www.hpcuu.org/documents/sermons/LaughingMatters.pdf>. The joke predates this sermon, but as with most jokes, ascertaining exactly where and when it originated would be very difficult.

⁶¹ Mordecai M. Kaplan, “A Program for the Reconstruction of Judaism,” *The Menorah Journal* 6, no. 4 (August 1920): 181–96.

places like the United States, they needed to have a relationship with a Jewish community in which Jewish identity was the default option and Judaism the majority culture.

While Quakers and Unitarians chose denominational logos that emphasized their commitments to service work, the Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation chose as its logo a circular seal, with a much smaller circle in its center labeled in English and in Hebrew as “Eretz Israel,” the land of Israel. Radiating out of this circle, like rays from a sun, were the words “Religion,” “Culture” and “Ethics” in English and Hebrew. Around the seal were the words “The Jewish Community, and encircling that was the word “America.” What the seal was saying was that the center of Reconstructionism, the core value that everything else stemmed from, was Zionism. Reconstructionists would later use other variants of this logo; one version in use by the 1980s dropped the Hebrew and changed the word “Eretz Israel” for the perhaps more symbolic term of “Zion,” but the significance was the same.⁶²

Early Reconstructionists understood their support for Zionism to be one of their key points of divergence with Reform Judaism; every bit as important as their differences on the nature of God, their Zionism contributed to the fact that Reconstructionists were reluctant to affiliate with the more established liberal religious movement. Classical Reform Judaism had seen Zionism as a threat to the acceptance of Jews in the United States, as it undermined their contention that Judaism should be understood as simply a religious identity by contending that Jewish identity also had a national component. While by the time of the Columbus Platform and the Second World War, Reform was beginning to become more open to Zionist viewpoints, the issue was still so contentious it even briefly threatened to lead to disunity and schism.⁶³ Reconstructionists

⁶² Another variant of the JRF logo that predated the formation of the state of Israel said “Palestine” at the center. At the time the term would have been used by Zionists to describe the location they were settling.

⁶³Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 293-295, 326-334.

did not need to engage in these kinds of heated debates because they were united in the belief that Zionism was necessary; the key question was simply how to implement it.

Reconstructionism sought to figure out what the ideal relationship between American Jews and a new Jewish majority state should be. This was not a simple question, as comparatively few Reconstructionists wanted to uproot themselves and make Aliyah to go live in Israel, even after it achieved statehood. As a result, Reconstructionist leaders were realistic that the creation of a new state did not, and should not, entail the end of the Jewish diaspora. Because Kaplan's vision rejected both a supernatural God and a notion that Jews were specifically chosen in any sense, Israel could no longer be seen as other religious Zionists saw it, namely, as the fulfillment of a divine promise. Instead, the central inspiration that Mordecai Kaplan and his Reconstructionist followers would cite for their particular version of Zionism was the cultural Zionism of Ahad Ha'am.

Ahad Ha'am was a useful thinker for Reconstructionism to seize upon because his popular ideas about Zionism were originally formulated as a sort of alternative to more traditional religious Judaism. Ahad Ha'am, Hebrew for "One of the People," was a pen name for Asher Ginsberg, the scion of a wealthy family in Ukraine. As a young man in the later half of the nineteenth century he had increasingly been drawn to the Enlightenment thought of the Haskallah movement, and had come to see an emerging Jewish cultural and nationalist consciousness as a replacement for the Hasidic Judaism of his youth, and even speculated that it might be an alternative, a kind of logical evolution, from Rabbinic Judaism as a whole. Zionism in Ahad Ha'am's mind was not simply the creation of a single Jewish state; it was an evolution of what Judaism was and a departure from the idea that Judaism was purely a religious

community.⁶⁴ Israel was supposed to be a “spiritual center,” not simply a refuge or a home, but a beacon of Jewish culture and values that would inspire and sustain Jews in the diaspora. This notion was appealing to Reconstructionists because it meant that diaspora Jews like themselves still had an importance to Zionism beyond merely lending it material and political support. Further, like Kaplan, Ahad Ha'am was a man who, having lost the traditional understanding of his religious faith, tried to find a new conception of Judaism to replace it.

Speaking before a sympathetic Jewish audience in New York in 1963, Kaplan laid out a vision of Zionism that drew heavily on Ahad Ha'am's ideas. In his speech, Kaplan compared the Jewish people to a wheel. In this analogy the State of Israel, with a permanent Jewish majority, was the hub. Other national Jewish communities in the diaspora were spokes of the wheel, essential to supporting the hub, and simultaneously connected by the hub to each other. The last piece, he claimed, was “the rim which holds the spokes together at the other end would be the evolving religious civilization known as Judaism which united the Jewish people of the past, present and future.”⁶⁵ None of these component parts could exist without the other, though Kaplan felt that the state of Israel perhaps had pride of place as the center of the life of Jews.

Kaplan took these ideas and considered them in an American context. Noam Pianko, in an important study of Kaplan's Zionism, writes that Kaplan's idea of “civilization,” the core of his masterwork *Judaism as Civilization*, was intended not primarily as a religious philosophy but as a contribution to thought about national belonging and American nationhood.⁶⁶ Despite the intention, focusing on the book as a religious text became key to Reconstructionist self-

⁶⁴ Steven J. Zipperstein, *Elusive Prophet: Ahad Ha'am and the Origins of Zionism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 88-89.

⁶⁵ Mordecai M. Kaplan, *An Agenda for American Jews: A Symposium with Mordecai M. Kaplan and Moshe Sharett* (New York, NY: Farband-Labor Zionist Order, 1963), 7.

⁶⁶ Noam Pianko, *Zionism and the Roads Not Taken: Rawidowicz, Kaplan, Kohn* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 97.

understanding. Kaplan, in the intellectual wake of Horace Kallen, began to conceive of an “ethical nationhood,” a kind of pluralist national identity for Jews, that would be an antidote for Christian nationalism. Jews would be Americans, citizens of the state, but also maintain solidarity and membership in a Jewish nation that extended beyond national boundaries. Pianko persuasively suggests that Kaplan may have seen this as an answer to the ideal of Christianizing the social order that was present in the writing of social gospel thinkers like Richard T. Ely and Walter Rauschenbusch, a notion that implicitly excluded Jews. In the 1930s, with the rise of Nazism, Kaplan’s nationalism also offered a preferable alternative to the fascist kind.⁶⁷ Kaplan’s critics to his theological right sometimes charged that his religious views essentially just boiled down to nationalism.⁶⁸

Yet for all of their intellectual debt to Ahad Ha’am, it should not be assumed that Reconstructionists saw Zionism as a bloodless, merely philosophical project. Kaplan’s Zionism could end up displaying the kind of hard nationalist logic that he often critiqued in others. In his journal he lamented that “the land to be rendered fruitful. . . is in the hands of evil Arabs.” He also extolled the Zionist settlers who “rival the early American pioneers in grit and daring” because they were willing to “settle in pest ridden lands where they are liable to be struck down at any moment by Arab bullets.”⁶⁹ The implication seemed to be that Arabs, like native Americans, should be wiped out or driven from the land. In those private pages Kaplan would sometimes express a guarded appreciation for the masculine boldness of Ze’ev Jabotinsky and his militant brand of Revisionist Zionism, even if he did not approve of his tactics. The tone of

⁶⁷ Pianko, *Zionism and the Roads Not Taken*, 115-118.

⁶⁸ Mel Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1993), 191.

⁶⁹ Mordecai M. Kaplan, *Communings of the Spirit: The Journals of Mordecai M. Kaplan, Volume I, 1913-1934*, Edited by Mel Scult (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2001), 124, 177-178.

Kaplan's public statements on the matter was less forceful, but the content was similar; in *Judaism as Civilization* Kaplan vehemently sought to rebut what he called "the claim of Arab agitators that Palestine belongs to the Arabs." First, he argued that there could be no independent Palestinian nation because the territory had belonged to Britain (and before that had been part of the Ottoman Empire), which had never granted the Arab inhabitants autonomy, and as a consequence legally the land belonged to the Jews. Then in a move that seemed to draw on the worst impulses of manifest destiny and colonialism, he suggested that what was ultimately more important was that land had not been rendered "fruitful" by its current inhabitants. Kaplan argued that "If Palestine were completely, or even for the most part, occupied and developed by its inhabitants, the Jews might have to resign themselves to the loss of their homeland. In actuality, only a fraction of the material and cultural values that Palestine is capable of yielding is utilized and rendered productive by the non-Jewish inhabitants."⁷⁰ The democratic and pluralistic aspects of Kaplan's Zionist vision, even the fact that it was often phrased like more of a utopian vision intended for American Jews than a workable political program, did not really militate against the oppressive aspects of nationalism.

As with most aspects of early Reconstructionism before it became a full-fledged denomination in the 1960s, Kaplan's actions loomed large as an example for his followers. Early in his career, Kaplan had unsuccessfully tried to make Zionism a part of religious worship, turning the anniversary of the Balfour Declaration into a Jewish holiday that he called the "Day of Redemption" complementing the existing "Day of Atonement."⁷¹ Kaplan became very active in the Zionist Organization of America in the 1920s, serving as head of its administrative

⁷⁰ Mordecai M. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life* (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 2010), 274-275.

⁷¹ Mel Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1993), 169.

committee. He was friendly with Chaim Weizmann before he became the first President of Israel. Well-known to American Zionist leaders due to his connections, Kaplan was called to serve as a mediator between various contending factions in the leadership of the ZOA. On one notable occasion he was part of a delegation that visited Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis in an effort to get him to resign from the Supreme Court and take charge of Zionist organizing in the United States. Brandeis declined the offer, believing he would be equally useful on the Supreme Court. One of the proudest moments of Kaplan's life was when he served as the ZOA representative at the dedication of Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and during his speech he compared the creation of the new institution to the ancient Rabbinic academy of Yavneh. Kaplan stepped down from many of his duties in the ZOA by the 1930s in order to write, but his early intense personal dedication to the establishment of a Jewish state provided a model for other Rabbis in the denomination.⁷²

As an advocate for Zionism Kaplan felt himself to be caught between two extremes. In lecture notes he observed, "I have been fighting a war on two fronts, religionists and secularists." Each saw Kaplan as being in the other camp. His rejection of a supernatural God was too extreme for the most religious Jews, but his desire to preserve religion alienated him from secular Zionists. Kaplan did not despair, however, noting, "I attack this dualism and am repudiated by both, but thankfully by temperament I thrive on conflict."⁷³

While in many ways Reconstructionist Zionism was like the Quaker and Unitarian commitment to humanitarian service, the effectiveness of their advocacy for that cause was not

⁷² Major writings about Kaplan's Zionist activities include: Mel Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1993), 308-337.

⁷³ Mordecai M. Kaplan, "Random Thoughts," 1964. Reconstructionist Foundation, Box 47, Folder 2, Doctor Mordecai M. Kaplan, n.d, 1961, 1963, 1965. American Jewish Historical Society, New York, NY.

clearly linked with the importance such work had in defining religious identity.

Reconstructionism was a small movement, and while a few of the leading rabbis like Kaplan had a high visibility within Zionist circles, it is not clear that the denomination made many measurable contributions towards the creation or maintenance of the state of Israel. But these practical concerns had little to do with the passion that Zionism invoked. Ira Eisenstein, Kaplan's son-in-law, protégé and fellow rabbi at his congregation, the Society of the Advancement of Judaism, invoked this fervor in his autobiography, where he depicted his longing for a Jewish nation as akin to a conversion experience:

The Zionist fever gripped me. Yes, this was the way. Rebuilding the nation was the way to bypass all the theological problems; in a home of our own we Jews could resume where we left off. The long dispersion was only an interlude, an interruption in the ongoing collective life of the Jewish people!⁷⁴

Eisenstein's words were blunt; he understood Zionism in part to be a solution to contemporary theological debates as much as a workable political program. Kaplan, Eisenstein and other Reconstructionists learned that support for Zionism could be a path back to religion for many skeptical Jews who were otherwise willing to abandon the ritual trappings of Jewish worship. In a heartfelt letter to Eisenstein, an employee of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute's Walker Lab explained his journey to joining the denomination, writing that he had tried both Orthodox and secular approaches to Judaism and felt both to be hollow. After becoming more involved in Zionist activism, he found a renewed enthusiasm for Jewish ritual and tradition, which in turn led him to the Reconstructionist community and the teachings of Mordecai Kaplan.⁷⁵ Eisenstein and the other rabbis in the Reconstructionist movement felt that Zionist

⁷⁴ Ira Eisenstein, *Reconstructing Judaism: An Autobiography* (Wyncote, PA: The Reconstructionist Press, 1986), 72.

⁷⁵ Laurence F. Friedman, "Letter to Ira Eisenstein," October 31, 1960. Reconstructionist Foundation, Box 47, Folder 10, Ira Eisenstein Correspondence, 1960-1961. American Jewish Historical Society, New York, NY.

commitments marked them off from older approaches toward Judaism, like the assimilationist Ethical Culture society. In 1964, after the creation of the state of Israel, Eisenstein responded to a letter by a Jewish attorney, who argued that Zionism and even Jewish religion were unnecessary in the United States because Jewish ethnic distinctions would melt away due to assimilation and leave an undifferentiated (presumably white) “American” identity behind. Writing to an associate, Eisenstein explained that the attorney was “In some respects [an] old-fashioned liberal who is sadly out of date; he sounds more like Felix Adler at the end of the century than an observer of American life in 1964.”⁷⁶ For Kaplan, the key difference from Adler had been his insistence on maintaining a Jewish identity; for Kaplan’s protege Eisenstein, that difference was most concretely expressed in their respective stances on Zionism.

Eisenstein frequently found himself defending his Zionism against the charge that it was a narrow nationalism, opposed to the kind of liberal global solidarity that Jews should seek to cultivate. After historian Arnold Toynbee wrote “The Meaning of History,” in which he hoped for the end of nations and attacked Zionism as an old-fashioned return to the medieval ghetto, Eisenstein wrote to the *New York Times* to defend the movement. “Is not the truth just the reverse?” he asked. “Zionism is, if anything, a movement to emancipate the Jews from ever again being herded into medieval ghettos — or modern ones.”⁷⁷ For others situated elsewhere in the American Jewish community, such as within Reform Judaism, it was the Second World War, the Shoah, and the subsequent declaration of the independence of Israel that had caused them to doubt liberal universalism as a solution to antisemitism and to embrace Zionism. Those in the

⁷⁶ Ira Eisenstein, “Letter to Isidore Sobeloff,” December 2, 1963. Reconstructionist Foundation, Box 50 , General Correspondence, 1963-1965. American Jewish Historical Society, New York, NY.

⁷⁷ Ira Eisenstein, “Letter to the Editor of the New York Times,” May 8, 1961. Reconstructionist Foundation, Box 50, Folder 3, General Correspondence, 1960-1961. American Jewish Historical Society, New York, NY.

Reconstructionist orbit had been Zionists since the movement's emergence in the 1920s.

Reconstructionist ideas of Zionism showed a remarkable consistency; though there were debates before Israeli independence over the comparative advantages of an independent Jewish state in Palestine or a Jewish self-governing territory as part of the British empire, they were always zealous advocates of Jewish political self-determination.

Shortly before the creation of the state of Israel, Rabbi Eugene Kohn, the managing editor of the *The Reconstructionist*, responded to an article by an American Jew who had written that he did not see a reason to create a Jewish state, and in fact hoped that while Judaism would continue to exist, there would be an end to any kind of Jewish distinctiveness that would separate Jews from other religious groups in the United States. For Kohn this was anathema to everything he held dear, and in a letter he conveyed the Reconstructionist position on why Israel was vital. His rebuttal was a story:

A keen Jewish observer recently returned from Palestine said that what mainly impressed him there was the fact that, for the first time in his life, he almost forgot he was a Jew. The Palestine Jew can afford to let his Jewishness sink into his subconscious, because he lives in a Jewish world. He does not have to worry whether he is acting as a 'good Jew', because all his personal and human interests express themselves naturally and spontaneously in ways that willy-nilly contribute to the totality of Jewish life. But in the diaspora, Jewish civilization cannot be the prevailing one. It is everywhere subject to the pressures of the majority civilization. If Judaism is to survive at all, it can do so only by Jews' becoming more, not less, conscious of their Jewishness.⁷⁸

For Kohn, as for other Reconstructionist Rabbis who followed Kaplan, both spaces needed to exist. There had to be Israel, the place where being Jewish was the default option, an identity as natural as breathing, while there also had to be diaspora, to call that inherent identity into question, to challenge it, and to make Judaism more than simply a kind of nationalism.

⁷⁸ Eugene Kohn, "Letter to Elliot E. Cohen," August 22, 1946. Reconstructionist Foundation, Box 49, Kohn, Eugene-Correspondence, 1946. American Jewish Historical Society, New York, NY.

Reconstructionist leaders' commitment to Zionism was intended to be total. When Kaplan's former student Rabbi Milton Steinberg went on his honeymoon with his young bride Edith Alpert in 1929, the couple visited Italy and Switzerland, not purely out of a desire to play tourist, but also so that Milton could attend the Sixteenth World Zionist Congress in Zurich. The couple then went to Palestine for the rest of the trip. Edith was less enthralled with the travel itinerary and what was effectively a working vacation than her husband was.⁷⁹ Milton Steinberg's creative work, his historical novel, *Like a Driven Leaf* (which is described in chapter 3) served as a defense of Zionism. While the plot was primarily about one man—Rabbi Elijah Ben Elisha's—religious search for truth even when it led to heresy, another major theme of the novel was the attachment of the Jewish people to the land of Israel as they sought to rebel against the repression of the Romans who had deprived them of autonomy. Steinberg portrays the Jewish rebels of the Bar Kochba revolt unfavorably, as hotheads and warmongers who irrationally pick a fight with Rome they cannot win. His narrative venerates Elijah's friend Rabbi Akibba, who is ultimately murdered by the Romans due to his loyalty to the Jewish people. Akiba's sacrifice is heroic in a way that even Elijah Ben Elisha's otherwise laudable intellectual journey is not, as he is willing to die for his people and his nation. While the book is not straightforward allegory, it would be easy for readers to interpret the war against the Romans as either a reference to the need for Jews to organize together against Nazi antisemitism or as a metaphor for the armed struggle of some Zionists against the British for the creation of a Jewish state. Either way, Steinberg's ultimate vision of Rome's wrath, with Jews massacred and their land despoiled, was horrifying. The message to readers in the 1930s was not subtle; Jews should band together politically and socially in a time when hostile powers were seeking to destroy them. Steinberg's

⁷⁹ Simon Noveck, *Milton Steinberg: Portrait of a Rabbi* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, Inc., 1978), 48-49.

son, Jewish Studies scholar Jonathan Steinberg, has observed that his father's book is still unusually popular with interns at the American Israel Political Action Committee, many of whom felt driven to participate in the organization after reading it.⁸⁰ Political nationhood could perhaps be the firmest bulwark against religious doubt.

The Reconstructionist laity echoed the enthusiasm of their rabbinical leaders for the Zionist cause. Zionism was more immediately accessible to the laity than the far more abstract debates about reconceptualizing God. It did not require extensive philosophical or theological training to understand the importance of establishing and maintaining a Jewish state, or to connect this with one's own Jewish identity. They demonstrated this commitment not only by giving money to Zionist causes, and participating in organizations like Hadassah, but also in various events in their synagogues. Kaplan's daughter Judith (who was the wife of his protege, Ira Eisenstein) was musically-inclined and wrote a number of musical productions about Zionism and Reconstructionist life that were performed in Reconstructionist communities. One satirical musical written from before the formation of the state of Israel included a musical number, the "Zionist Song" about purchasing land that declared: "Oh, we have all been tryin'/ To rebuild the land of Zion/ And it's dunams we've been buyin' So that all the noble pion-/ Eers can make their home once more in Palestine/ With grim determination we will save the nation/ With Jewish dough we'll make a go of our emancipation."⁸¹ In a later musical that she wrote with her husband Ira Eisenstein called "Behold the Day," congregants celebrated Israeli independence day by watching as an Israeli Defense Forces soldier narrate a heroic history of the waves of

⁸⁰ Jonathan Steinberg, "Milton Steinberg, American Rabbi: Thoughts on His Centenary," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 95, no. 3 (2005): 579.

⁸¹ Judith Kaplan Eisenstein, "Hurrah for the Jews," N.D. RG 2, Ira and Judith K. Eisenstein Plays, Scripts and Cantatas, Box 17. Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, Ira and Judith Kaplan Eisenstein Reconstructionist Archives. A dunam was a measurement of land used in the Ottoman Empire.

Zionist immigration. The text of the musical had the narrator repeatedly extol the martial virtue of the young people marching in their military uniforms, and explain it is necessary to keep fighting for Jewish freedom and an independent Jewish state. Congregants sang patriotic songs as the narrator told how Zionist pioneers had made the land fruitful, announcing “Behold this great day, the plough turns up the field. Pruning hook, thresher, spade and fork. We storm the land. We kindle the earth again, with a flame of green.”⁸² Not only were Reconstructionists watching their leaders proclaim the value of Zionism but through performing in musical productions like these they could take an active part in ritually commemorating and advocating for Zionism.

Yet even while it was at the core of their identity, the Reconstructionist embrace of Zionism was not always easy. The actual formation of the state of Israel created problems for Reconstructionists, because they differed from the Israeli government over the critical question of who was a Jew. Israel held to the Orthodox view that Judaism was passed matrilineally, from mother to child, or was the result of an Orthodox conversion. Kaplan felt that this older basis was no longer valid, and instead explained to his followers that “The voluntary self-identification with the Jewish People and with this spiritual heritage, however one may interpret it, should be enough to make one a Jew.”⁸³ Kaplan urged the creation of an international conference of Jewish thinkers to resolve the question, and agree on a new definition of who was a Jew. This was never to become a reality, and the existence of what amounted to the religious establishment of

⁸² Judith Kaplan Eisenstein and Ira Eisenstein, “Behold the Day,” N.D. RG 2, Ira and Judith K. Eisenstein Plays, Scripts and Cantatas, Box 17. Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, Ira and Judith Kaplan Eisenstein Reconstructionist Archives. The title “Behold the Day” was a reference to Jeremiah 31:31, where God resolves to create a new covenant with the Jewish people.

⁸³ Mordecai M. Kaplan, “‘Dear Friend’ Appeal Letter,” January 20, 1959. Reconstructionist Foundation, Box 47, Folder 1, Doctor Mordecai M. Kaplan, 1959. American Jewish Historical Society, New York, NY.

Orthodoxy troubled those that vigorously supported the new state. Reconstructionists might love Israel, but the Israeli government did not necessarily always return their loyalty.

Despite this reception, until the twentieth-first century Reconstructionism still prized Zionism as critical to what it meant to belong to their community, and indeed what it meant to be a Jew. Recently there have been efforts to disentangle Reconstructionism from its advocacy of Zionism and support for the government of Israel. Rabbi Rebecca Alpert, author of a popular introduction to Reconstructionist Judaism, for example, wrote in 2017 that her commitment to Reconstructionism required her to support the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement. Because Reconstructionism remains focused on adhering to Kaplan's thought, Alpert has argued that this modification of Kaplan's ideas is a necessary accommodation to the modern conditions of Jewish life, in keeping with the ultimate objective of Kaplan's philosophy. She also suggests, that Kaplan sought a spiritual home for the Jewish people rather than the creation of a nation-state.⁸⁴

For most of Reconstructionism's history Zionism had been more than merely a cause. It had been central to the identity of the movement. It made them different from Reform Judaism, and gave them something to believe in rather than just a skepticism of established Jewish traditions. It remains unclear if contemporary Reconstructing Judaism, the modern name of the Reconstructionist movement, will ultimately be able to find a clear identity without Zionism.

Did Religious Stop-Gaps Work?

As Quakerism, Unitarianism and Reconstructionist Judaism became God-optional, did these God-surrogates work? Could these adaptations fill the place that traditional theism had in the

⁸⁴ Rebecca Alpert, "Reconstructionism without Zionism." *Shalom Rav* (blog), January 18, 2017. <https://rabbibrant.com/2017/01/18/reconstructionism-without-zionism-a-guest-post-by-rabbi-rebecca-alpert/>.

lives of their members? The answer was that, in general, yes, this was a successful innovation. The members of these groups did not suddenly stop going to worship services, and none of the denominations suffered any kind of significant decline in membership.

The shift meant that these groups had to spend less time justifying their theology or the metaphysics of belief. Their own membership did not care and neither did most outsiders. Few people were going to argue with Quakers if there really was an Inner Light within each person if the visible manifestation of that belief was lived out in providing food aid. While Reconstructionist support for Zionism did draw some criticism, these debates were largely about its morality or political wisdom, not whether it was acceptable for Reconstructionism to position Zionism as central to their identity. Reconstructionist support for Zionism served in part to mute criticism of their theology within the Jewish community.

Yet even with these measures linking service and religious identity, these traditions had problems filling some of the roles in their members' lives that had been the province of traditional theistic religion. In particular, they had a hard time dealing with tragedy, sickness, death and mourning. This weakness was most apparent in how they offered pastoral care. Humanist Unitarian and Reconstructionist clergy could not offer the emotional comfort to the surviving friends and family of the deceased that traditionally theistic practitioners had. Ira Eisenstein believed himself to be notably less effective as a rabbi than his theologically-traditional colleagues, because he felt that he could not honestly promise to mourners that their deceased loved one was with God or express any hopes about the afterlife, whereas Conservative and Orthodox rabbis could offer this comfort.

He also had trouble visiting sick congregants in the hospital. As he explained: "The anti-supernaturalist stance I took when I opted for Kaplan's approach to Judaism became a conflict

when the sick person pleaded for intervention with the Deity on his behalf. Does one say that God has more pressing problems than to interject Himself into your *personal* problem? Is it best to say that I don't believe in the kind of God who listens to prayer and then out of his infinite mercy provides us a cure?"⁸⁵ Even after decades of working as a rabbi in the movement, and having founded a seminary for Reconstructionist rabbinical training, Eisenstein still had no clear answer for how a clergyperson who did not believe should react around death.

Unitarian humanist minister John Dietrich, on the other hand, tried to pretend that his inability to comfort the suffering or the dying was not a defect, but a feature of his modern religious worldview. He was overtly hostile to providing pastoral care, seeing it as embarrassing, emasculating and a waste of his time. In his first pulpit in Pittsburgh, as he became more theologically radical, he ended the practice of visiting congregants in any fashion unless they specially requested it. When Dietrich became a minister in Minneapolis and fully embraced humanism he actually had written into his contract that he would only deliver sermons and not have any pastoral responsibilities.⁸⁶ Dietrich's humanism, his ideal of religion, envisioned a man (and it was always a man; Dietrich emphasized the manliness of humanism compared to traditional religion) thinking rationally and autonomously, without the need for supernatural consolation. Dietrich's role as a minister was not to give comfort, but to enlighten such a man with his oratory. A good humanist would not need any kind of pastoral counseling or comfort. As Dietrich put it, "we must be willing to look at death and suffering in a manly way."⁸⁷ Congregants were expected to die unemotionally, as it was inevitable. Simply telling people to

⁸⁵ Ira Eisenstein, *Reconstructing Judaism: An Autobiography* (Wyncote, PA: The Reconstructionist Press, 1986), 114-115.

⁸⁶ Carleton Winston, *This Circle of Earth: The Story of John H. Dietrich*. (New York: G.P. Putnam and Sons, 1942), 52-53, 137.

⁸⁷ William F. Schulz, *Making the Manifesto: The Birth of Religious Humanism* (Skinner House Books, 2004), 22.

get over their pain might seem to be the easiest way for Dietrich to deal with suffering and death in his religious thinking, as he could not say that such events served any kind of overarching purpose in the universe. Dietrich had a hard time living with this conviction himself, however. When his wife died of cancer, Dietrich had difficulty coping and could not even discuss it with his sons. His inability to find a compelling way to find meaning in death and suffering was critical to his reevaluation of his views and his eventual turn towards a kind of theism.

Liberal Quakerism's emphasis on mysticism, and the popularization of Clearness Committees, groups of Quakers convened to help provide guidance and counseling for members about specific life topics, probably made them the best equipped of the three groups to deal with issues of death and suffering. The fact that there was not a paid clergy, who had special reasons to be consistent in their rejection of traditional theism and supernaturalism, also meant that Quakers were free to find comfort in whatever metaphysical understandings of death were advanced within their congregations that they found appealing.

None of the groups could easily provide the kind of comfort that traditional theism had in moments of personal despair. A Catholic priest could promise at a dying woman's bedside that she would be with her family in heaven, but a Unitarian minister was likely to be skeptical about a personal afterlife. A religion based around service, either to humanity or to the Jewish nation, could be easy to dedicate one's life to, but it was harder to die within such a faith.

Of course, for many of the members of these groups traditional religion would also have offered little comfort *in extremis* anyway. They could not easily believe in a traditional personal God, or have the same hope for a personal existence in heaven and eternal life that past generations had. Nor could they be convinced that human suffering served some grander purpose. The reason the stop-gaps had been adapted was not because denominational leaders

had decided they were better than conventional ideas of God. It was because they were one possible solution in communities when the consolation of traditional religion had begun to cease to function. In an age of skepticism they were simply glad to have found purpose.

Chapter Seven: Legalizing God-Optional Religion

On March 8th, 1965, the same day that the first American combat troops arrived in Vietnam, the Supreme Court of the United States issued a decision in *United States v. Seeger* that grappled with defining what a “Supreme Being” meant in American law. On its surface the case was about what religious beliefs were required to claim conscientious objector (CO) status. To avoid military service under the 1948 Selective Service Act, an applicant needed to object to all war on the basis of “religious training and belief... in relation to a Supreme Being involving duties superior to those arising from any human relation.”¹ Could an agnostic like Daniel Seeger, without a clear belief in God, be a CO? The Warren Court found that he qualified, arguing that his beliefs held the same place in his life as a “traditional deity.” Seeger and two other defendants that had been joined to his case were granted CO status. *Seeger* has been heralded by scholars and activists as a historic legal victory for religious freedom, a case that acknowledged and accepted the religious diversity in the United States.²

Yet there has been an unacknowledged dimension to the *Seeger* case. The Supreme Court’s decision was not merely a wholehearted embrace of secularism; instead, it was a moment when the Court gave standing and protection to liberal religion, particularly to God-optional religion. Funded and backed by God-optional and Godless religious groups, particularly Quakers, the defense case was conceived of by supporters not simply as a way to help

¹ Section 6 (j) of the *Selective Service Act of 1948*, 62. Stat. 613. The Selective Service act was renamed Universal Military and Training Service Act in 1951. The American combat troops mentioned here were the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade who arrived at Da Nang to defend the American airbase there.

² Seeger is still regularly cited in both legal arguments and popular appeals to extend religious protections to non-religious people. For a recent example see: Eugene Volokh, “Officials of Secular Groups Must Be Allowed to Solemnize Marriages Just like Clergy Can,” *The Washington Post*, July 14, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/volokh-conspiracy/wp/2014/07/14/officials-of-secular-groups-must-be-allowed-to-solemnize-marriages-just-like-clergy-can/>.

conscientious objectors but as a vehicle to legitimate a perspective sympathetic to these groups in American law. The opinion of the Court, delivered by Associate Justice Tom Campbell Clark, did exactly this, grounding the Court's reasoning in a religious sensibility that drew from writings of liberal Protestant theologians Paul Tillich and Bishop John A.T. Robinson, as well as the recent endorsement of religious pluralism by the Second Vatican Council. The Court also cited the growing awareness of Buddhism and Hinduism, religions that in large part had become visible to the American public thanks to the spread of liberal religious ideas.³

Daniel Seeger won his case not only because it was well argued and vigorously supported by Quakers, Unitarian Universalists and Humanists, but also because it was brought at the right cultural moment. God-optional views had existed beyond the handful of denominations that embraced them most tenaciously, particularly sheltered in seminaries, universities and even in some synagogues and mainline churches, but the 1960s saw these views emerge to become a visible option among a broader segment of American society. College students now read Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Prison Letters* and wondered how to realize a "religionless Christianity," while a year after the Seeger case was decided, *Time* magazine would put the question "Is God Dead?" on its front cover, spotlighting the work of a handful of Christian Atheist theologians. What had once been the province of a rarefied elite was quickly becoming simply one more option in the American religious spectrum.

God-optional religious groups were the primary victors in *Seeger*, but it was a victory for religious pluralism as well. The definitions of "religion" and "supreme being" it enshrined in law were derived from the views of the God-optional faiths but expansive enough to protect theists

³ United States v. Seeger, 380, U.S. 163 (1965)

8 Justices joined with the majority in Seeger (Tom Clark, Earl Warren, Hugo Black, John M. Harlan III, William J. Brennan, Potter Stewart, Byron White and Arthur Goldberg). Justice William O. Douglas filled a concurrence.

and humanists, religious conservatives and liberals, and they could apply to religious majorities and minorities. The expansion of both God-optional ideas and legal protection for those ideas outside the confines of the God-optional denominations has been one of the key legacies of this movement.

Religion and Conscientious Objection

The history of conscientious objection in the United States had long intersected with the government regulation of religion. Before the American Revolution, many states had specifically excluded Quakers from required militia service because their religious “peace testimony” of nonviolence prohibited them from fighting. During the drafting of the Bill of Rights, James Madison originally suggested that the documents contain a provision allowing for religiously-based conscientious objection, but he ultimately decided that conscription was a state function and outside of the power of the federal government.⁴ During the American Civil War, the Conscription Act of 1863 made no special provision for conscientious objection. It did, however, allow a draftee to pay a substitute to take his place. This obviously posed a moral dilemma for many pacifists, the most numerous of whom were Quakers, who did not want to provide any financial aid to the war effort. Persistent lobbying by Quakers led to a new law in 1864, which allowed members of pacifist denominations to do alternative service in hospitals or by working in relief efforts supporting recently freed slaves, and stated that if an individual spent money to be exempted from the draft, then their money would go only to the care of injured soldiers rather than the war effort.⁵

⁴ Kent Greenawalt, *Religion and the Constitution: Volume I: Free Exercise and Fairness* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 50.

⁵ Peter Brock, *Pacifism in the United States, From the Colonial Era to the First World War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 713-779.

This system would be tweaked when the United States instituted the draft in World War I. The idea of paying for an exemption from service was removed, and this made membership in a pacifist denomination the principal determinant of CO status. The Selective Service Act of 1917 that governed conscription included a provision that allowed conscientious objection but substantially limited the practice. These regulations stipulated, “any registrant who is found by a local [draft] board to be member of any well-recognized religious sect or organization organized or existing on May 18, 1917, and whose existing creed or principles forbid its members from participation in war in any form, and whose religious convictions are against war ... shall be furnished by such local board with a certificate... to the effect... he can only be required to serve in a capacity declared by the President to be noncombatant.”⁶

The limitation of this provision to “well-recognized religious sects or organizations” was principally a way of restricting the ability to claim CO status to members of historic peace churches, mainly Quakers, Mennonites, the Church of the Brethren and a small coterie of other established Christian denominations. During World War I, Pentecostal pacifists and Jehovah’s Witnesses, despite their religious opposition to warfare, often found their applications rejected by draft boards, and they suffered harassment by the federal government for engaging in draft resistance.⁷

⁶ “Selective Service Regulations, 1917,” in *Conscience in America*, ed. Lillian Schlissel (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co, 1968), 133.

⁷ George R. Knight, “Adventism and Military Service: Individual Conscience in Ethical Tension,” in *Proclaim Peace: Christian Pacifism from Unexpected Quarters*, ed. Theron F. Schlabach and Richard T. Hughes (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 157–71; Theodore Kornweibel Jr., “Race and Conscientious Objection in World War I: The Story of Church of God in Christ,” in *Proclaim Peace: Christian Pacifism from Unexpected Quarters*, ed. Theron F. Schlabach and Richard T. Hughes (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 58–81; Murray W. Dempster, “Pacifism in Pentecostalism: The Case of the Assemblies of God,” in *Proclaim Peace: Christian Pacifism from Unexpected Quarters*, ed. Theron F. Schlabach and Richard T. Hughes (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 31–57; Jay Beaman, *Pentecostal Pacifism: The Origin, Development, and Rejection of Pacific Belief among the*

Another part of the draft law exempted all “ministers of religion and theological students under certain conditions” from any military service. This blanket protection extended beyond the peace churches to many different religious groups. An individual’s denomination and status in a religious hierarchy thus made a considerable difference in their treatment under the law and could allow them to avoid conscription.

That the law gave preferential treatment to some religious groups was quickly noticed and legally challenged. At the start of 1918, the Supreme Court of the United States, then presided over by Chief Justice Edward Douglass White, issued their finding on a group of cases related to the legality of the draft. One of the points that these potential draftees argued against the government was that provisions allowing members of peace churches and religious professionals to avoid service constituted a government establishment of religion under the First Amendment.⁸ Their goal was primarily to overturn the entire system of conscription, and challenging religious exemptions was simply one minor part of that.

The unanimous opinion of the Court, written by White, completely dismissed these arguments. Not only did exempting peace churches and other religious professionals not constitute an establishment of religion, White wrote, but it even “goes so far as to aid in the free exercise of those religions which forbid participation in war.” In further defense of the exemptions, White pointed out that Quakers and other COs had been often exempted from military service during the American Revolution, a point which ignored that those actions had

Pentecostals (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1989); Jay Beaman, “The Extent of Early Pentecostal Pacifism,” in *Pentecostals and Nonviolence: Reclaiming a Heritage*, ed. Paul Alexander (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012), 3–38. The federal government was particularly hostile to the black Pentecostals of Church of God in Christ because they (wrongly) saw their pacifism as primarily politically motivated, and they believed that Jehovah’s Witnesses’s willingness to fight in an eschatological conflict against Satan meant they were not really opposed to all wars.

⁸ *Selective Draft Law Cases*, 245 U.S. 366 (1918)

been undertaken at the state level and that the Revolution had taken place well before the Bill of Rights even existed.⁹

White's and the Court's decision probably reflected political considerations as deeply as legal ones. There was little chance that in the midst of World War I the Supreme Court would overturn the very mechanism that allowed the construction of a viable military. Nor could they easily strike down the provision on COs without facing the prospect of having to imprison a large number of people for their religious faith, something that would have been a public relations disaster. Thus, the Court upheld the draft law, even though it bluntly favored certain religious groups and certain kinds of religious expression.

Defining religion in a legal sense

The coming of World War II provided an occasion to get rid of the embarrassing provisions of the 1917 Selective Service Act. The new Selective Service Act of 1940 no longer considered the denominations of people applying for CO status. Instead the law allowed anyone who was opposed to all war for reasons of "religious training and belief" to attain an exemption and perform alternative (nonmilitary) service in Civilian Public Service camps set up by the government. The government CPS camps were administered mostly by historic peace churches and other pacifist religious groups, so religious denominations were still involved in the government management of COs, but attaining CO status no longer required membership in these groups, something that was seen by Congress and many other observers as representing

⁹ *Selective Draft Law Cases*.

what scholar Lillian Schlissel calls a “more liberal interpretation of claims of conscience” than had been the case in 1917.¹⁰

Yet the 1940 Selective Service Act raised a new problem, one that prior laws had not posed, of what exactly was “religious training and belief”? Religion itself was not a clear term; and what differentiated religious beliefs from other kinds of beliefs? What kind of “training” was needed for someone to oppose war on a religious basis?

Government officials struggled to figure this out and created a form for CO applicants to complete. On the form the government tried to access an individual’s religious belief by asking questions like “give the name and present address of an individual whom you rely on most for religious guidance” and “describe the actions and behavior in your life which in your opinion most conspicuously demonstrate the consistency and depth of your religious convictions.” Despite the supposed move away from relying on denominational affiliation as a determinant of CO status, a sizable portion was devoted to an applicant explaining the details of membership in religious organizations. For example, the form included questions such as “describe carefully the creed or official statement of said religious sect in relation to participation in war.”¹¹

Yet even if the questions were standardized, the government had no consistent way to judge the answers they were provided by CO applicants. The boards that reviewed the applications varied widely on the means they used to make their determinations. If an application was declined, a CO claimant could legally appeal, and it was ultimately up to the court system to

¹⁰ Rachel Waltner Goossen, *Women Against the Good War: Conscientious Objection and Gender on the American Home Front, 1941 - 1947* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Lillian Schlissel, *Conscience in America*, ed. Lillian Schlissel (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1968), 214-215.

¹¹ “Special Form for Conscientious Objectors (DSS Form 47) 1941,” in *Conscience in America*, ed. Lillian Schlissel (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1968), 219–24.

figure out what was a sustainable claim. Often the contention between prospective COs and their draft board was over what counted as a religious belief.

Early in 1943 the Second Circuit Court of Appeals, which addressed federal appeals from district courts in Connecticut, New York and Vermont, returned a decision in *United States v. Kauten*. The case involved Mathias Kauten, a draftee who tried to claim exemption as a CO. Kauten's application was initially denied and sent to an appeals board, not because his opposition to war was insincere but, as they wrote, because "his belief does not emanate from any 'religious training and belief' but rather from his philosophical and political convictions."¹²

Perhaps the central question that the court had to determine was if Kauten's beliefs fit the legal definition of religion and thus would allow him to claim CO status. It was a difficult case. Kauten was an artist who had been raised as a Catholic but claimed to be either an atheist or agnostic. On the form to apply for conscientious objector status, he had crossed out the word religious and wrote "this is not true in my case." When the FBI investigated his claim (as they did all CO claimants), the people they interviewed noted that his pacifism was real, but some argued that it stemmed from his art work rather than from a "religious nature." There was also a clear political edge to his pacifism. Kauten had openly expressed his belief that the U.S. had provoked Japan into war and that Selective Service was a plot of the Roosevelt administration to end unemployment. Much of his hatred of war seemed to stem from a belief that governments did not have a right to pass laws or engage in actions that would infringe on individual freedom.

The court decided that the mere conviction that war was futile or wrong was a political or philosophical consideration, not a religious belief. Yet while the court could have simply

¹² Appeals Board Findings quoted in *United States v. Kauten*, 133 F.2d 703 (2d Cir. 1943)

declared that Kauten's belief was not religious, because he did not believe in a deity or was not a member of a church, they did not. Remarkably, the court used the decision to broaden the scope of what was thought to constitute religion.

The court found that unlike the 1917 draft law, anyone applying to become a CO could no longer be turned down because they lacked membership in an established peace church. Instead the court argued that the law was designed to provide for a "more skeptical generation," and this thus made "conscientious scruple against war in any form, rather than allegiance to a definite religious group or creed, the basis for exemption." Kauten, they argued, was moved by political concerns, and lacked such scruples, but other objectors should be judged by this standard.¹³

Then the court made an even bolder move. It discussed what religion meant in legal terms and gave examples. Though they conceded that a simple definition was impossible because "the content of the term is found in the history of the human race," the court tried its best at explaining what religion was, writing:

Religious belief arises from a sense of the inadequacy of reason as a means of relating the individual to his fellow-men and to his universe— a sense common to men in the most primitive and in the most highly civilized societies. It accepts the aid of logic but refuses to be limited by it. It is a belief finding expression in a conscience which categorically requires the believer to disregard elementary self-interest and to accept martyrdom in preference to transgressing its tenets.¹⁴

The court understood religion as best expressed in conscience. This meant that rather than stemming from a belief in a deity, a being or supernatural phenomena, religion was legally conceived of as a kind of moral code. Then the court suggested that it was a religious obligation

¹³ *United States v. Kauten.*

¹⁴ *United States v. Kauten.*

when Socrates at his trial in ancient Athens did not attempt to get his judges to acquit him due to his scruples. The court's reasoning indicated it was not Socrates' belief in a deity or his membership in any kind of existing religious community that made his actions religious, but rather the moral stand he made at the cost of his life.

The court went on to suggest that any heeding of an inward moral calling might be religious in nature, suggesting that for the poet Wordsworth, "Duty" was the "stern daughter of the voice of God." Any objection to all warfare, the court wrote, "may justly be regarded as a response to an inward mentor, call it the conscience or God," which was "for many persons at the present time the equivalent of what has been thought of as a religious impulse."¹⁵

The goal of the court was not to accommodate atheists. *Kauten* still did not permit nonbelievers to qualify as COs. But it was broad enough to protect most agnostics and believers from God-optional faiths, who defined the divine in ways that did not include belief in God as a personal being. In subsequent cases the Second Circuit would uphold the precedent they had set in *Kauten*.¹⁶ The Second Circuit had laid the groundwork for God-optional religion to become entrenched in American law, but this would not go unchallenged.

Marcus Aurelius is Not Enough: *Berman v. United States*

If the *Kauten* case had been taken as a precedent, then legally there would have been little need for *Seeger*. *Kauten*'s invocation of Wordsworth and references to God as "an inward

¹⁵ *United States v. Kauten*.

¹⁶ In the 1944 case *Reel v. Badt*, for instance, a hearing officer for the Department of Justice issued a report that caused Fredrick Reel to be denied status as a CO, arguing that "religious belief" required belief in a deity and the supernatural. The Second Circuit, in an opinion delivered by Judge Augustus Hand, angrily reversed that decision and declared the hearings officer's views were contrary to the law as they had articulated it. See: *Reel v. Badt*, 152 F.2d 627 (2d Cir. 1945).

mentor” meant that it was steeped in liberal religion. The court’s openness about the potential for nonliteral definitions of God were very close to what *Seeger* would establish.

In 1946, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals backed a conflicting definition of religion. In *Berman v. United States*, the defendant Herbert Berman tried to claim CO status and was denied. Berman was a socialist and heavily involved in peace work prior to the war. In a statement to his draft board, he declared that all war was “futility” and that it “never has been and never will be a method of social progress.” The fact that Berman was a sincere pacifist was not at question in the case. Rather, the issue was that the draft law excluded pacifists who held that belief for “philosophical, social or political” reasons rather than religious ones.¹⁷ Berman argued that his beliefs were religious, and cited the decisions of the Second Circuit, particularly *Kauten*, but also cases decided on the same basis, *Phillips v. Downer* and *Reel v. Badt*, in support of this point. Berman also assembled an impressive amount of supporting documentation to try to bolster his case. He had a large number of letters, including one from Norman Thomas, the former minister turned head of the American Socialist Party, and others written by a Unitarian minister and two Congregationalist ministers. These letters suggested that while Berman was not a member of a church, the depths of his convictions to help humanity should be judged to be religious. Berman had also included a letter to the draft board written by Walter G. Muelder, a Professor of Theology and Christian Ethics at the Graduate School of Religion at the University of Southern California, who argued that sincere belief in a social theory with the goal of benefiting humanity was inherently religious. Berman had a compelling case that he was associated with a number of figures on the religious left, who regarded his convictions as being religious.

¹⁷ *Berman v. United States*, 156 F.2d 377 (1946).

In a decision drafted by Judge Albert Lee Stevens, a career public servant from Los Angeles, the court rejected that argument.¹⁸ They decided that Berman's beliefs were purely political, and in making this ruling they set out deliberately to undermine *Kauten* and the rulings of the Second Circuit. They would also seek to readjust the definition of religion, moving it back closer to the 1890 standard implemented by the Supreme Court. The court declared that the "plain language" of the statute meant references to "religious training and belief" could only apply to "an individual's belief in his responsibility to an authority higher and beyond a worldly one."

The court buttressed this claim that religion required a deity by drawing selectively from several sources to define the term "religion." The Ninth Circuit's main way to determine what the "plain language" of the statute meant was to simply look up the word in several dictionaries. They quoted the definitions from *Funk and Wagnall's New Standard Dictionary*, which stated that religion was a belief in an "invisible superhuman power." They were less attentive to the many other definitions that the dictionary listed, such as the second one which defined "religion" as "any system of faith, doctrine and worship," or the third, which indicated the term might include "an essential part or practical test of spiritual life...*religion* as morality," while the sixth noted it as being "conscientious devotion in practice; scrupulous care."¹⁹ Acceptance of any one of these other definitions would have led the Ninth Circuit to the logic that the *Kauten* case had defined religion correctly. The court offered the same selective treatment of definitions in *Webster's New International Dictionary* (2nd Edition), listing the first and sixth definitions, one of which stated that religion was "adoration of God or a god" and the other which suggested it

¹⁸ David C. Frederick, *Rugged Justice: The Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals and the American West, 1891-1941* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 190.

¹⁹ Isaac K. Funk, Calvin Thomas, and Frank H. Vizetelly, eds., *Funk and Wagnalls New Standard Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: P.F. Collier & Son Corporation, 1938), 2081.

was a “conviction of the existence of a supreme being, or more widely of supernatural powers.”

The court ignored the dictionary’s eighth definition of religion, which stated that the word meant:

A pursuit, an object of pursuit, a principle, or the like, arousing in one religious convictions and feelings such as great faith, devotion, or fervor, or followed with religious zeal, conscientiousness or fidelity....
Acceptance of and devotion to such an ideal as a standard for one's life.²⁰

The Ninth Circuit had an agenda, ensuring that only a certain kind of mainline and conservative religious belief be protected under the law, and thus they ignored definitions that would conflict with that stance. The judges on the court were not unaware that other views existed on religion, but they opposed them vehemently. Their decision noted that some people held liberal religious views, and they admitted that social perceptions of religion were not static, having changed considerably since the founding of the United States. They acknowledged that increases in scientific knowledge had explained away “manifestations... once attributed to a deity.” They acknowledged that Transcendentalist and liberal religious views were becoming more common, observing that “Nature and God seem so close to Oneness that some thinkers blend them inseparably.”

To the Ninth Circuit, however, this was a travesty. The judges declared, “all the discoveries of science and the deepest reach of minds do not fill a life or satisfy the soul hunger to... understand the ultimate purpose of creation.” The court insisted that at some point “logical equations” had to end, and people had to rely on belief. Although they might be “intellectually satisfying,” the “Meditations of Marcus Aurelius do not suffice for the boy in the fox hole, under fire.” Despite the implied reference to the clichéd phrase “no atheists in a foxhole,” the court was

²⁰ *Webster’s New International Dictionary*, 2nd Edition (Springfield, MA: G. & C. Merriam Co., 1938), 263.

not making an argument directed against atheists; instead they were suggesting that the rationalism of liberal religion and modernism was opposed to a true or authentic religiosity. Berman was backed by Unitarians, and the judges knew enough to discern from his convictions that he was not a Godless nihilist ripped from the pages of Dostoevsky, so they seemed unconcerned about some kind of rampant secularism. Rather, the judges' decision addressed the potential challenge to orthodoxy from those people who relied on reason before revelation, who blended "nature and God" and believed in "Oneness." The court affirmed its faith in a different kind of religion when it quoted from Philippians 4:7 and declared, "Faith 'which passes all understanding' carries on."²¹

Not everyone on the court agreed with this stance. William Denman, a prominent New Deal reformer in San Francisco appointed to the court by Franklin Roosevelt, defended the Second Circuit's ruling in *Kauten* and rejected this argument in a vigorous dissent.²² Denman pointed out that many religious faiths, including Taoism, some variants of Buddhism and "Comte's religion of humanism" did not have Gods. These, he argued, were still religions.

Denman's arguments above all sought to establish that Berman's beliefs were a valid form of religion, and that Berman faced discrimination because of them. He observed that many of the socialist authors that Berman cited as an influence, particularly Norman Thomas, argued that socialism was a fulfillment of Christian ethics, so that even if Berman did not subscribe to the notion of a deity he still maintained a form of Christian belief. Denman wanted to prove that

²¹ *Berman v. United States*.

²² Frederick, *Rugged Justice*, 177-181. During the second World War Denman was also the lone voice of dissent that argued that the Ninth Circuit should hear two cases related to the internment of Japanese Americans. Denman perceptively argued that the Japanese were being held mostly due to racism and compared the U.S. government's actions to those of the Nazis. See: Roger Daniels, "Korematsu v. United States Revisited: 1944 and 1983," in *Race on Trial: Law and Justice in American History: Law and Justice in American History*, ed. Annette Gordon-Reed (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 145.

Berman was not a materialist; his belief in conscience, Denman explained, was actually the same as Immanuel Kant's belief in the Categorical Imperative, and thus was religious. Denman's linkage of Kant, a key figure in American liberal religious thinking, along with his attack on materialism, indicates that he was not advocating for the law to avoid considering religion, or for allowing any belief to be accepted; Denman sought to have liberal religious beliefs (broadly interpreted) to be recognized as within the scope of the law's protection.

The contradictory decisions of the Second and Ninth Circuit in the *Kauten* and *Berman* cases respectively created a legal dilemma. Congress feared that future cases would end up being decided by the Supreme Court, where the outcome remained uncertain. They chose an expedient solution, to amend the legislation on who qualified for CO status.

As the government would explain during Seeger's first trial in District Court, this conflict spurred Congress in 1948 to alter the draft law's provisions on conscientious objection.²³ The new legislation specified that "religious training and belief" meant "belief in a Supreme Being." Applicants who tried to claim CO status were handed a form with questions about their beliefs, notably "do you believe in a Supreme Being?" Anyone who answered no was not eligible to be a CO.

Congress was essentially trying to write the findings of the *Berman* case into the law. Denman could quote the Greek poet Menander that "Conscience is the God of mortals," and the court in *Kauten* could cite Wordsworth that Duty was the "voice of God," but for the purposes of

²³ Robert M. Morgenthau, "Government's Trial Brief for United States of America v. Daniel Andrew Seeger," 1964, Daniel Seeger, AFSC, 22-23.

the law only an interventionist monotheistic Supreme Being was a valid supreme being, and a belief that reflected this notion was the only thing that counted as religion.

God-Optional Religion on Trial

God-optional groups had every reason to see the 1948 draft law as threatening. Even when their members were theists, many of them believed in a distant God, and these conceptions meant their idea of a deity did not fit neatly into the traditional view of a “supreme being” as Congress had required it. In prior decades God-optional religious groups might simply have had to endure the lack of official recognition from the government, and discrimination against their beliefs in favor of traditionally theistic religions, but by the 1960s the intellectual and religious climate of the United States was in transition, and God-optional views which had once been the province of a handful of denominations and elite educational institutions began to appeal to a wider public. A question that concerned Quakers, Unitarians and Reconstructionist Jews now affected a far greater number of people, and these groups seemed less like outliers than as bellwethers for the rest of the nation.

At Union Theological Seminary in the 1940s and 1950s, a theologian named Paul Tillich integrated existentialist thought into his liberal theology. Tillich was a minor national celebrity, appearing on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1959. His notion of the “God above God,” the concept of God as a “Ground of Being,” or the idea that religion was belief in an “ultimate concern,” were radical departures from more traditional language about God. The mid-1960s, the era in which *Seeger* was decided, became a watershed moment for these new conceptions of God.

In England, Anglican Bishop John A.T. Robinson popularized the work of Tillich by writing a book in 1965 entitled *Honest to God*. Robinson argued that notions of God had historically evolved; in the past God had been seen as dwelling above the world in the heavens, then had been understood as somehow “out there” and external to the universe, and the next phase, he argued, was to see God as the Ground of Being. Because God for Robinson was synonymous with ultimate reality, any division between theism and atheism was mostly a matter of definitions rather than disputed facts.²⁴ The Bishop also cited the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in support, emphasizing the parts of Bonhoeffer's writing that the late German theologian had written shortly before he was executed by the Nazi regime, in which Bonhoeffer considered how Christianity changed from era to era, and in which he had wondered what it would mean to have an age of "religionless Christianity." Robinson's work became a lightning rod for controversy, both because of the radical nature of his theology and because of criticism that he misunderstood the theology of both Tillich and Bonhoeffer.²⁵ Regardless of how accurate to his sources Robinson was, his conclusions were a departure from the kind of language about God people were used to hearing from Anglican clergy, and his books generated widespread public interest.

Other theologians caught the public eye as well. Harvard Divinity School professor and Baptist minister Harvey Cox published *The Secular City* in late 1965, in which he admitted that the importance of religion was rapidly declining in the modern world but that he saw that process in a hopeful light. The secularization of society and the rise of pluralism were good, Cox

²⁴ John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God*, Trade Paperback edition (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1963)

²⁵ N.T. Wright, “Doubts about Doubt: Honest to God Forty Years On,” *Journal of Anglican Studies* 3, no. 2 (2005): 181–96.

asserted, suggesting that it was perhaps the ultimate project of Christianity. In what for many traditional religious readers was the most shocking part of the book, Cox argued that the term “God” might be temporarily retired because of its ambiguity. Like Robinson, Cox also leaned on the writing and martyrdom of Dietrich Bonhoeffer for moral support.²⁶

The following year, after the *Seeger* case, *Time* magazine featured the “Death of God” theological movement on its front cover. The Death of God theologians who taught a version of Christian atheism were relatively obscure; much of their work was academic theology, and some had rather individualistic interpretations.²⁷ *Time*’s coverage lent support to the idea that Christian Atheism could be reputable enough to attract seminary professors and that it merited public attention.

These ideas found a receptive audience. Historian Douglas Rossinow, writing about the culture at University of Texas Austin during the 1960s in his book *The Politics of Authenticity*, has noted the Christian liberalism and Christian existentialism that pervaded undergraduate Christian groups like the University YMCA-YWCA. Students read Harvey Cox and Paul Tillich alongside Albert Camus and Soren Kierkegaard, sometimes opting for more theologically neoorthodox writers like Karl Barth. Rossinow describes a 1962 banquet at the UT-Y to install new presidents of the YMCA and YWCA in which attendees recited a prayer that described the Y’s goal as stripping away the unreal of religion to find God “underneath,” with Paul Tillich’s

²⁶ Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (New York: Macmillan, 1965). For a useful summary of the impact of *The Secular City* see: James Hudnut-Beumler, *Looking for God in the Suburbs: The Religion of the American Dream and Its Critics, 1945-1965* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 189-194.

²⁷ Some of the Death of God theologians believed that the phrase was just a metaphor, while others seemed to believe that God had literally existed and then died. The most esoteric views were those of Thomas J.J. Altizer, who witnessed Satan and Angels appear to him in a theophany. These experiences helped convince him that God had died. See: Katharine Q. Seelye, “Thomas Altizer, 91, Proponent of ‘God Is Dead’ Theology, Dies,” *The New York Times*, December 3, 2018, sec. Obituaries, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/02/obituaries/thomas-altizer-dies-at-91.html>.

ground of being invoked by undergraduates.²⁸ Liberal and radical theological views rejecting more traditional notions of theism now abounded, and the challenge the *Seeger* case faced was whether they legally counted as “religious.”

Another reason that liberal religious groups supported Seeger stemmed from skepticism over the draft. Beginning in the early twentieth century, but especially after World War I, there were a notable number of Protestant clergy, and smaller numbers proportionally of Jews and Catholics, who began to espouse pacifist beliefs, stating their opposition to the use of force. The scholarship of Patricia Applebaum has explored what she calls “Protestant pacifist culture,” and indicates that a number of denominational leaders were part of a discernible pacifist community. Figures like Unitarian John Haynes Holmes, Episcopalian John Nevin Sayre, Kirby Page of the Disciples of Christ, and Baptist Harry Emerson Fosdick worked with denominational peace groups and other organizations like the Fellowship of Reconciliation to oppose all conflict. Even ostensibly secular groups like the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom or World Peaceways were animated by a Protestant pacifist language. While World War II weakened this community, it had begun to coalesce again against American military involvement in Southeast Asia by the time of the *Seeger* case, and would remain a factor throughout the war in Vietnam.²⁹

²⁸Doug Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity: Liberalism, Christianity, and the New Left in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 85-114.

²⁹ Patricia Appelbaum, *Kingdom to Commune: Protestant Pacifist Culture between World War I and the Vietnam Era* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 26-28, 203-204. Appelbaum’s description of this pacifist culture as “Protestant” is something of a misnomer. The Catholic Worker movement, large numbers of Jews, and some socialists without clear religious affiliations were involved as well. Many Unitarians and liberal Quakers would have debated whether they were in fact Protestants. For other accounts of American pacifism that touch on movements or groups connected with Appelbaum’s “Protestant pacifist culture” see: Peter Brock, *Twentieth-Century Pacifism* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1970); Guenter Lewy, *Peace and Revolution: The Moral Crisis of American Pacifism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988); Anne Klejment and Nancy L. Roberts, *American Catholic Pacifism: The Influence of Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement*

New unconventional ideas about God and religion and the antiwar convictions that lead these groups to oppose the draft were directly connected. A trend towards mystical understandings of the divine, and a lessened focus on a relationship with a discernable personally intelligible and interventionist deity, tended to accompany a belief in pacifism. Writers on mysticism, figures such as Quakers Rufus Jones and Thomas Kelly, Anglican Evelyn Underhill, FOR member Muriel Lester and Glenn Clark, who blended pacifism, mystical Christianity and New Thought ideas, provided a theology that undergirded the pacifist movement.³⁰ In some cases this kind of mystical understanding could lead individuals to act with the belief that preventing war was a religious obligation. Norman Morrison, who would immolate himself in front of the Pentagon several months after the end of the *Seeger* case, was inspired by such a conviction.³¹ Quakers obviously had a long pedigree of opposition to war (as is discussed in chapter 5), and liberal Quakers, the God-Optional part of the denomination, defined themselves as a community based in part around their commitment to their historic peace testimony, so they were particularly devoted to the cause of helping COs. The 1948 Draft Law in this context could not have been more provocative, as its definition of religion seemed to exclude many of the people most likely to seek conscientious objector status for reasons tied to their faith.

(Greenwood Publishing Group, 1996); James Tracy, *Direct Action: Radical Pacifism from the Union Eight to the Chicago Seven*, 1st ed. (University Of Chicago Press, 1996).

³⁰ Appelbaum, *Kingdom to Commune*; Patricia Appelbaum, "Protestant Mysticism: Pacifists and the 'Practice of the Presence,'" *Quaker History* 94, no. 2 (October 1, 2005): 1–24; J. William Frost, "Modernist and Liberal Quakers, 1887-2010," in *The Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies*, ed. Ben Pink Dandelion and Stephen W. Angell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 78–92; Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006).

³¹ Isaac May, "Forged in the Fire: Norman Morrison and the Link between Liberal Quakerism and Radical Action," *Culture* 9 (Spring 2014), <http://cultandculture.org/culture/index.php/issues/26-culture-9-spring-2014/97-forged-in-the-fire-norman-morrison-and-the-link-between-liberal-quakerism-and-radical-action.html>.

The *Seeger* case did not arise randomly. Quaker organizations and other religious groups deliberately selected and supported it through the court system. Daniel Seeger was one of several individuals that these groups were supporting in an effort to undermine the draft system. While these organizations did intend to work toward for the public good, their interest in the case was not completely selfless. Broadening the category of people allowed to claim conscientious objector status and protecting liberal religion through the law were both of direct benefit to the religious organizations supporting Seeger.

Liberal religious groups' fear of the 1948 draft law was justified. The law was used to delegitimize their specific religious beliefs. In 1952 the Ninth Circuit denied the appeal of Arthur Parsette Clark, who had requested CO status. Clark was a member of a Unitarian church and stated that the most important source of his aversion to war stemmed from the "teachings of Jesus of Nazareth... as they are related in the New Testament."³² However, Clark also considered himself to be an agnostic and admitted he was uncertain of the existence of God. This was not a particularly exceptional position to hold among Unitarians, who had accepted Humanism and extremely non-literal definitions of God since the 1920s (as addressed in chapter four), but for the Ninth Circuit, it meant that Clark's beliefs did not qualify as being religious in nature.

An even more extreme case was that of Frederic Wayne Etcheverry, a Quaker from Santa Monica Monthly Meeting, which happened almost simultaneously with *Seeger*. Etcheverry sought to legally challenge the constitutionality of the draft law and stated in his application for CO status that he had faith in "an anthropomorphic being who makes contact with all individuals

³² Arthur P. Clark, "Special Form for Conscientious Objector" quoted in *Clark v. United States*, 36 F.2d 13 (9th Cir. 1956).

by a vine-like spiritual field which tries to take root. To kill another human is to cut off part of God.”³³ Despite the fact that Etcheverry did believe in an anthropomorphic God, his terminology was simply too unorthodox for his draft board and the Ninth Circuit Federal court during his subsequent appeal, which found against his CO claim, deciding that Etcheverry's God was not the kind of "Supreme Being" recognized in American law. Etcheverry tried several times to get his case bundled with Seeger's as the latter went to the Supreme Court, but his legal maneuvers were unsuccessful, and he started a prison sentence at the Federal Correctional Institution in Lompoc, California on January 14, 1965. Following Seeger's victory, Etcheverry's conviction was vacated by the Ninth Circuit on September 21, 1965, after he had spent a little over eight months in prison for his convictions.³⁴

Other claimants were more successful than Etcheverry at joining their case with Seeger's. One was the 1959 case of Forest Britt Peter, a CO applicant whose rejected claims involved Unitarianism. Peter stated that he did not use the term “God” or “Supreme Being” to describe his faith, though he thought others might describe it as such. He did insist that he was religious. Instead of defining religion as belief in a Supreme Being, however, Peter cited the work of Unitarian minister John Haynes Holmes, which understood religion as “the consciousness of some power manifest in nature which helps man in the ordering of his life in harmony with its demands....” Despite basing his claims on perhaps the most eminent Unitarian religious thinker of the era, Peter's declarations were rejected as not being religious.³⁵

³³ Frederic W. Etcheverry quoted in “Begins Sentence.” *News Notes of the Central Committee for Conscientious Objectors* 17, no. 3 (May-June 1965): 2.

³⁴ “Friends and Their Friends.” *Friends Journal* 11, no. 8 (April 15, 1965): 204; 16 American Jury Trials 257 (Originally published in 1969), § 115. Bail on appeal.

³⁵ *United States v. Seeger*, 380 U.S. 163 (1965)

Another of the cases that was joined with Seeger's was that of Arno Sascha Jakobson, also initially denied conscientious objector status. Jakobson was born to Jewish parents but had become estranged from that faith, he claimed, because of the "bloodthirsty nationalism" in the Book of Joshua. When he was notified by the draft board that he had been selected for service in 1958, Jakobson applied for CO status, explaining that he did believe in a Supreme Being but he also attached a sheet to clarify his views.³⁶

Addressing his draft board, Jakobson expressed his belief in what he called "Godness." Godness, he argued, was the ultimate cause or creator of existence. Jakobson suggested that human beings could have two kinds of relationship with Godness. One type of relationship would be a vertical and direct relationship with the creator. Jakobson rejected this idea for himself, both because he suggested that the creator was unfathomable to finite humans and due to his concern that such a relationship could become so otherworldly that it would lead to ignoring human concerns and the world's problems. Jakobson preferred another kind of relationship to Godness, a horizontal relationship, relating to the ultimate creator through one's concern for humans and the world. The Second Circuit decision stated that in Jakobson's view, "the way to arrive closer to Godness is by approaching the universals inherent in existence. The individual must deal directly with life, death, health, love, time—the 'givens' of existence stemming from the Ultimate Cause—as he finds them in himself and others." Jakobson compared his own views to those espoused by the character of Father Zossima, an Orthodox monk and spiritual teacher in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, whom he interpreted as accepting the "basic blessedness of the fact of being."³⁷

³⁶ *United States v. Jakobson*, 325 F.2d 409 (2d Cir. 1963).

³⁷ *United States v. Jakobson*.

Both the draft board and the first court that head the case decided that this was not religion. Adhering to a standard much like that used in the *Berman* case, they held that religion was essentially a belief in an anthropomorphic deity, a kind of traditional monotheism. Jakobson's religious views had a lot in common with many other religious sensibilities; his insistence that the divine was incomprehensible to human beings had similar elements to Apophatic theology, while his ideas about the imminent and transcendent nature of this creator were akin to some ideas of pantheism. These ideas were too radical to fit within the confines of the court's limited notions of what constituted religion.

The Second Circuit, in an opinion by Judge Henry Friendly, reversed this judgement and found that Jakobson's beliefs met the definition of religion. Part of the logic of this opinion was based on the recent *Torcaso v. Watkins* (1961) case, which had clearly stated that government could not pass laws or impose requirements that would "aid all religions against non-believers," something that made a law requiring belief in the existence of a God to be considered for CO status legally problematic. But the bulk of the decision was not about this legal question. Instead the court carried out a prolonged argument that liberal theological views on God should also be considered religious.

Judge Friendly, in the unanimous opinion of the court, argued that the 1948 statute "clearly does not require belief in an anthropomorphic deity." Friendly, out of legal necessity, rather disingenuously reinterpreted Congressional motives in passing the 1948 act, suggesting it did not mean to legislate such a limited conception of God. "Long before 1948 men whose belief in a Supreme Being would not have been questioned had substituted the notion of 'God out

there' for 'God up there'" he explained, suggesting the long pedigree of liberal theological ideas made them legally valid.³⁸

Above all, the court grounded this broadened understanding of the definition of "religion" not in changes in the law but instead in changes in theology. The court explained, "a contemporary theologian of high distinction and wide influence, who has taught at great universities on both sides of the Atlantic, Professor Paul Tillich, has written of God in terms that would surely embrace Jakobson's beliefs."³⁹ The insinuation that Paul Tillich was qualified to weigh in on the definition of God as a "theologian of high distinction" led the court to use his writings much the same way they might have cited legal precedent.

This is not to say that Friendly or anyone on the Court was particularly familiar with Tillich's works or was a close student of liberal theology. Though in the footnotes of its decision, the court cited quotes from several of Tillich's works, including *Courage to Be*, *Shaking the Foundations* and his *Systematic Theology*. The court admitted that all these quotes came from a single source, a chapter of Bishop John A.T. Robinson's *Honest to God*, which had been reprinted in *Horizon Magazine*. Many of the court's ideas, such as their notion of a historic divide between there being "God out there" and a more traditional deity "God up there" were probably inspired more by Robinson than by Tillich.⁴⁰ Robinson was a popularizer of Tillich and here the judges were reading even Tillich's work at another level of remove.

The court's use of Tillich thus was evidence of how liberal religious culture achieved a newfound visibility in the 1960s, and the court's opinion clearly showed that its presence in

³⁸ *United States v. Jakobson*.

³⁹ *United States v. Jakobson*.

⁴⁰ Robinson, *Honest to God*.

media and national culture would eventually have an impact on law. Scholar of religion Matthew Hedstrom has written about the dissemination of liberal religious ideas in the twentieth century, particularly through the medium of print, and concepts often left their denominational roots once they entered the broader culture.⁴¹ The *Jakobson* case shows a court doing just this, taking a liberal religious idea, one found in a popular magazine, and interpreting it as objective and secular law.

At the federal level, legal ideas about religion were also changing, and becoming more hospitable to those whose theology was not Protestant orthodoxy. In 1961 the Warren Court decided *Torcaso v. Watkins*. The case was about a public notary who had been stripped of that title by the state of Maryland because he was an atheist, and who would not make a declaration of the belief in God, which the state Constitution required of anyone holding public office. The Supreme Court sided with the notary, declaring that government could not “aid those religions based on a belief on the existence of God as against those religions with different beliefs.”⁴² The right to believe was an absolute, the court found, even if that meant theologically unorthodox views. This was an encouraging sign to liberal religious believers.

Daniel Seeger, The Man at the Center

Liberal religion gradually became an unavoidable cultural current. Seeger, despite being an agnostic, was steeped in the same kind of liberal religious milieu and couched his CO application in those kinds of terms. In many ways he was the perfect person to mount a legal challenge. Seeger’s religious sensibility was very obviously religious in the style of liberal religious

⁴¹ Matthew S. Hedstrom, *The Rise of Liberal Religion: Book Culture and American Spirituality in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁴² Hugo Black quoted in Greenawalt, *Religion and the Constitution: Volume I*, 36.

pacifists, and Quakers in particular. This would not be just a fight about whether agnostics could be religious; Seeger could claim to qualify by virtue of having the “religious training and belief” required to be a CO even if he was unsure about the existence of a personal deity. The Seeger case was a legal battle that was, at least in part, over the acceptability of certain types of liberal religious theology to the government.

Seeger had never intended to be a spokesperson for liberal religion. He had been raised as a Catholic; his experience attending a Catholic school was an unhappy one and he consequently felt little fondness for his childhood faith. He had not even known what a CO was when he was first selected by his draft board, and he was not well educated in theology. Yet Seeger had been exposed to a variety of liberal Protestant practices and traditions, and during college his courses had led him to disdain war through reading Gandhi, Thoreau and Tolstoy.⁴³

In writing to his draft board Seeger was careful to document these influences and use them to make the case that despite his agnosticism about a deity (at least defined in an anthropomorphic sense as a personal being), he still had religious belief. Writing decades later, Seeger would call his writing to the draft board a failure and describe his CO application as “sophomoric.”⁴⁴ While it did not get him CO status, Seeger’s writings were strikingly suited to connect his case with the fate of liberal religion and challenge the 1948 law. He clearly did not believe in a conventional deity, so his case could not be simply reversed on technical grounds; he was not an atheist, which would have been controversial even in liberal religious circles, and he

⁴³ Seeger, “Answers to Form 150.”

⁴⁴ Daniel Seeger, “Personal Reflections on ‘The Legacy of CPS,’” in *In Stillness There Is Fullness: A Peacemakers Harvest*, ed. Chuck Fager and Peter Bien (Bellefonte, Pennsylvania: Kimo Press, 2000), 108.

was obviously immersed in the same religious traditions for which liberal religious associations wanted cultural and legal legitimation.

The statement Seeger gave his draft board was similar to that of many liberal religious COs whose applications were accepted. Writing about the influences that led him to pacifism, Seeger stated that much of his thought about alternatives to violence were laid out by the AFSC in their 1955 pamphlet *Speak Truth to Power*.⁴⁵ This text was full of practical political advice; for example, it suggested that negotiation should take place with the Soviets to allow Germany to be unified as a neutral nation, but it also relied heavily on Quaker spirituality. Underlying all the realistic suggestions was the idea that practicing nonviolence and engaging in “acts of radical love” could help bring about the Kingdom of God.⁴⁶ Though he admitted that he “disagreed... on several basic philosophical points,” Seeger suggested the Quaker plan was the “best I have ever seen advanced.”⁴⁷

Seeger also explained his religious views with explicit reference to liberal religious thinkers. His application included quotes on the nature of religion and God from Immanuel Kant, the great Enlightenment philosopher who had been the forerunner of most of contemporary liberal religious thought; Alfred North Whitehead, the philosopher who would inspire Process Theology; and Georgia Harkness, the nation’s first female theologian employed by a seminary and a stalwart figure in Protestant pacifist circles.⁴⁸ Like most adherents to God-optional

⁴⁵ Seeger, “Answers to Form 150.”

⁴⁶ “Speak Truth to Power: A Quaker Search for Alternatives to Violence” (American Friends Service Committee, 1955), 70. This pamphlet is discussed in chapter 6.

⁴⁷ Seeger, “Answers to Form 150.” A notable exception to Seeger’s liberal religious influences was the writing of Bertrand Russell, who famously wrote *Why I am Not a Christian*.

⁴⁸ Daniel Seeger, “Comments on Justice Department Recommendation,” n.d., Daniel Seeger File, AFSC. For an overview of how these figures were critical to liberal religious thinking see the work of Gary Dorrien: Gary Dorrien, *Kantian Reason and Hegelian Spirit: The Idealistic Logic of Modern Theology*

religion, Seeger also heavily drew from Pragmatism, and he would later accept the characterization that he held “[a] John Dewey version” of religion.⁴⁹

In an address that he gave during the case, Seeger tried to put his agnostic views in a broader historical context, arguing that the modern era had unsettled traditional religion and the idea of a personal God. His views were not a rejection of a divine, or religion, but rather simply rejection of supernaturalism. As Seeger told his audience:

after nearly two centuries of passionate struggles, neither science nor faith has really succeeded in discrediting its adversary. What is more, an important change of heart has been taking place. Theologians have already begun to view their ideas through the new perspectives of evolution and scientists will soon, perhaps, see the spiritual implications of their knowledge. I have faith that we are on the threshold of a new and exciting era in which the religiously-minded will no longer turn their back upon the natural world nor seek escape from its imperfections in the supernatural world, an era in which the materialistically minded will no longer deny the importance of spiritual experience and religious feeling. The combination of scientific knowledge with a newer and deeper religious feeling holds out the exciting promise of a new, clarified and unified vision of reality. In the face of this hope for a new vision of reality, the Supreme Being question, with its check box answers, seemed a blasphemy to me.⁵⁰

It was a vision of a modernized God-optional religion that allowed ambiguity on the status and existence of God. Seeger argued that his agnosticism was more of a protest against the limitations of believing in a personal being, than a rejection of the transcendent. Seeger pointedly argued that that such views were more inclusive than a “narrow Christianity.”⁵¹

(Wiley-Blackwell, 2015); Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism and Modernity 1900-1950* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003); Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion, 1805 - 1900* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

⁴⁹ Daniel Seeger, “Letter to Albon Man,” February 1, 1963. Daniel Seeger Collected Papers, 1958-2008, Box 1. Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

⁵⁰ Daniel A. Seeger, “Rough Speech,” 1965. Daniel Seeger Collected Papers, 1958-2008, Box 1. Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

⁵¹ Seeger, “Rough Speech,”

Seeger had no personal familiarity with the Quakers when he initially wrote to the draft board, but a friend from college directed him to the AFSC, knowing their reputation for dealing with conscientious objection issues. During this period many of the staff members of the AFSC were former members of the Civilian Public Service, having been COs in World War II, or having served prison time for refusing induction, so Seeger felt he was getting help from a group that had considerable experience.⁵² He walked into the New York office of the AFSC, run by Robert Gilmore. Men seeking draft counseling like Seeger were a common presence to the New York office, but as he was filling out intake paperwork, the office administrative assistant Joyce Mertz took particular notice of Seeger's neat handwriting. As Seeger waited for his meeting with Gilmore she put him to work, labeling the bindings of notebooks in the office in his neat hand. It was fortuitous for Seeger, who would later mark it as an informal start to a long career working for the AFSC.⁵³

Seeger's situation immediately interested Gilmore as a potential legal test case. While Quaker men who applied for CO status usually had little problem securing it, the AFSC worked closely with the Central Committee of Conscientious Objectors, a primarily Quaker organization connected with activist leader A.J. Muste that was dedicated to serving those outside Quakerism and the historic peace churches. The head of the CCCO for most of the period Seeger was pursuing his case was Arlo Tatum, who had been born and raised among evangelical Quakers in West Branch, Iowa, the same milieu from which Herbert Hoover hailed. Tatum was proud of his Quakerism but had also come to consider himself a "religious agnostic," feeling that he had a personal stake in allowing agnostics and atheists to be protected as COs.⁵⁴

⁵² Seeger, "Personal Reflections on 'The Legacy of CPS.'"

⁵³ Daniel Seeger, in discussion with author, November 10, 2016.

⁵⁴ Daniel Seeger, "Letter to Albon Man," February 1, 1963. Daniel Seeger Collected Papers, 1958-2008, Box 1. Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

Many of the CO applicants that the CCCO worked with were politically motivated; some were unable to prove that their beliefs were motivated by religious training while others could not prove that they believed in a supreme being. Gilmore and others involved in draft counseling had believed for years that the draft law discriminated against those men and created an unconstitutional establishment of religion. But challenging the law was perilous, as conscientious objection was not constitutionally protected, allowed only on the sufferance of Congress, and a legal victory that opened the way for anyone to be a CO might cause Congress to eliminate legal protections for COs altogether in retaliation. There was also the possibility that they could lose the case, and the Supreme Court might enshrine a traditional, personal notion of God as the only one acceptable under the law.⁵⁵

In his letters about the Seeger case, Tatum expressed palpable anger over the fact that Congress had legislatively defined God and seemingly made the word synonymous with an anthropomorphic personal being. He saw this as not only violating his religious convictions but as an affront to his conception of religious freedom under the constitution.⁵⁶ Despite his strong sympathy, however, Tatum was initially hesitant to run any risks by pursuing Seeger's case. He believed that they would be better served by waiting for a case to be brought by a Unitarian, Quaker or Buddhist agnostic or atheist who was denied CO status for not believing in God. These candidates would have been perceived as religious to all but the most traditionally-minded court (meeting the standard of objecting to war due to "religious training and belief"); then the

⁵⁵ Nancy Black Sagafi-Nejad, *Friends at the Bar: A Quaker View of Law, Conflict Resolution, and Legal Reform* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2011), 95; Daniel Seeger quoted in Cherie Roberts, "Quaker Universalist Fellowship Interview with Daniel A. Seeger," *Quaker Universalist Voice*, accessed April 25, 2015, <http://universalistfriends.org/library/interview-with-daniel-seeger>; "Extracts from Letters from J.B Tiste to Arlo Tatum" (Central Committee for Conscientious Objectors, April 5, 1963), Daniel Seeger File, AFSC.

⁵⁶ Arlo Tatum, "Letter to Kenneth W. Greenawalt," October 28, 1963. Daniel Seeger Collected Papers, 1958-2008, Box 1. Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

only legal question would have been about the provision regarding belief in a supreme being. Simply, Tatum wanted to make the case only about those who formally belonged to God-optional denominations. Others, including Seeger, would point out that there was a value in running the risk of having a candidate without formal religious membership, as a victory would help potential COs beyond those formally affiliated with God-optional groups.⁵⁷ The executive secretary of the CCCO, Caleb Foote, doubted that Seeger's case would have a successful legal outcome, but nevertheless thought the issue at stake were so central to the CCCO's mission that it was worth investing the time and money to defend him anyway.⁵⁸

Gilmore was more optimistic. He believed Seeger's case was close enough to the ideal test case, and because he represented the more influential AFSC, his views won out over the doubts in the CCCO. Seeger would later explain that Gilmore was especially interested in using him to challenge the law because he was not part of the left-wing counterculture; as Seeger would explain in an interview: "I was not a beatnik. I was not scuffety. I was, you know, very proper. I was articulate."⁵⁹ Seeger's case was initially supported out of the AFSC's Right to Conscience Fund, a fund seen as a successor to the funds for "suffering," that Quaker Meetings in past generations had amassed to deal with legal expenses over conscientious objection and for other kinds of religious witnesses like refusal to take oaths.

By the time his case went to trial, Seeger was even more intensely connected with the Quakers. Seeger became an employee of the AFSC before the case was even in a district courtroom, serving as the head of the college counseling section. He and his wife Betty Jean

⁵⁷ Daniel Seeger, "Letter to Albon Man," February 1, 1963. Daniel Seeger Collected Papers, 1958-2008, Box 1. Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

⁵⁸ Caleb Foote. "Letter to George Willoughby," November 22, 1960. Daniel Seeger Collected Papers, 1958-2008, Box 1. Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

⁵⁹ Daniel Seeger, in discussion with author, November 10, 2016.

would even volunteer on weekends to lead groups of college students to take part in AFSC work camps.⁶⁰ Seeger and Betty Jean became regular attenders of Morningside Heights Preparative Meeting (part of New York Monthly Meeting) in New York City and took an active part in the Meeting's affairs. Within liberal Quakerism, which had no formal clergy, membership was seen as a heavy responsibility and a sign of profound spiritual commitment. To be an "attender," rather than a member, was a fairly common status to hold within liberal Quakerism, and was formally recognized as such; it was used to describe people who did not feel they could subscribe fully to Quaker theological beliefs or make the time commitments that accompanied full membership but who were nevertheless regular participants in the life of the Meeting. As Quaker Studies scholar Ben Pink Dandelion notes, within Quaker Meetings the divide between formally recognized membership and attenders was often blurred. Attenders might be a part of a Meeting for Worship for years, be active in Meeting for Business or hold appointments to almost any of the committees that directed Quaker life.⁶¹

Regardless of his lack of formal membership, Seeger's Meeting regarded him as a part of their community. They sent a letter in late 1960, several months after he had begun attending, to assure him of this and to express support for his stand. They indicated that the only major impediments to Seeger's becoming a Quaker were not theological but simply his own scruples over joining.⁶² The Meeting would submit a letter to the district court on his behalf, observing that his having attender status was "not strange," as "a number of our most active people are non-members." What was more important, they noted, was that the Meeting was in "a unity in faith

⁶⁰ "To This Citadel, No Admittance!," *New Jersey Record*, January 22, 1964; "Agnostic Upheld," *Los Angeles Times*, January 26, 1964.; Daniel Seeger, in discussion with author, November 10, 2016.

⁶¹ Pink Dandelion, *An Introduction to Quakerism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 238.

⁶² John Young (as Clerk of Morningside Preparative Meeting). "Letter to Daniel Seeger," November 22, 1960. Daniel Seeger Collected Papers, 1958-2008, Box 1. Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

on things of the spirit which he cannot consciously cast in the specific terms of the Supreme Being.”⁶³ Seeger’s supervisor at the AFSC, Robert Gilmore, who had taken on his draft case, made a similar argument when writing to General Lewis Hershey, the head of Selective Service, explaining that Seeger now worked for the AFSC, which was “a religiously motivated pacifist organization” and that the AFSC staff thought that even though Seeger “is not a Quaker, we who have worked with him know that he falls well within our fellowship and understanding.” Gilmore implied that despite his agnosticism, Seeger was a Quaker in all but name, and he reminded Hersey and Selective Service that “The Society of Friends and those associated with it are not always conventional in their religious outlooks.”⁶⁴

In an interview with me for this dissertation, Seeger admitted that he felt accepted in the Religious Society of Friends and had contemplated joining the Quakers during the years his case was being litigated, but held back from formal membership in part because he feared it might change the legal outcome. Seeger worried that if the courts simply accepted him as having views that fit within Quaker orthodoxy, refusing to scrutinize the matter more closely, they might have granted him CO status based on being affiliated with an existing and well-known peace church, which would not have explained the legal notion of God, or broadened the category of those eligible for conscientious objection. While he knew no action he took after applying for CO status was legally supposed to affect the case, it still might be considered by the court and affect their judgement.⁶⁵

⁶³ John Young, “Transcript of a Letter Submitted by Morningstar Heights Friends Meeting Regarding the United States of America v. Daniel Seeger,” January 6, 1963, Daniel Seeger File, AFSC.

⁶⁴ Robert W. Gilmore, “Letter to General Louis D. Hersey,” June 16, 1960. Daniel Seeger Collected Papers, 1958-2008, Box 1. Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

⁶⁵ Daniel Seeger, in discussion with author, November 10, 2016.

Seeger's personal religious connections to Quakerism were noted by courts when he was tried. When Seeger's case came before the district court in New York, attorney Kenneth W. Greenawalt introduced the fact that Seeger attended Quaker Meeting and was employed by the AFSC. The judge of the case noted that these facts should have been inadmissible, as Seeger's connections with the Religious Society of Friends began only after he had applied for CO status. Nevertheless, the fact that Greenawalt believed these things relevant enough to spend significant time dwelling on them during the trial indicated that he believed they had considerable bearing on the case.⁶⁶ Seeger's Quaker connections separated his case from Jakobson's, who may have had a liberal religious sensibility but evidenced no clear denominational ties, and this grounding in the most well-known pacifist denomination made his claims more compelling.

When the Seeger case reached the Supreme Court, that body also connected Seeger's involvement with Quakerism to their choice to expand the permissible beliefs encapsulated by the term "Supreme Being." The court held that Seeger's beliefs occupied the same place as "a traditional deity had in the lives of his friends, the Quakers." They further observed the importance of his work for the AFSC and that "he was a close student of Quaker beliefs from which he said 'much of [his] thought is derived.'⁶⁷ Seeger's belief was not held up against a generalized "other" or an "average person;" instead what the court considered was whether Seeger's agnostic Quaker-inspired faith was comparable to Quakers who believed in a "traditional deity."

Allies in the Faith

⁶⁶ "Transcript of Second District United States v. Daniel Andrew Seeger Case," March 26, 1963, Daniel Seeger File, AFSC.

⁶⁷ *United States v. Seeger*, 380 U.S. 163 (1965).

Seeger's legal defense, beyond evidence of his personal faith, was also connected with liberal and God-optional religion in a variety of other ways. He was again represented by Kenneth W. Greenawalt. Greenawalt, like many prominent attorneys, had been raised in a liberal religious milieu; he was head of the Board of Trustees at the Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, where Henry Ward Beecher had once been the minister. While Greenawalt was not a Quaker himself, his Quaker ties were extensive, and he had worked with AFSC in the past.⁶⁸

AFSC and the CCCO handled the bulk of the legal expenses for the case. Initially the CCCO sought to keep its involvement in financially supporting the Seeger case out of the public eye, but was not entirely successful; their assistance was noted by the *New York Times* and other newspapers.⁶⁹ By early 1965 the CCCO was trying to make the best of the public knowledge of its role in the case by circulating fundraising letters signed by Tatum and Clarence Pickett, who was one of the most renowned Quakers in the world for having led the AFSC as its Executive Secretary when it won the Nobel Peace Prize for relief efforts after the Second World War.⁷⁰ The CCCO and AFSC played so significant a role in helping shepherd the *Seeger* case that Greenawalt suggested that they deserved as much credit as he did for any of its successes.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Kent Greenawalt, *Religious Convictions and Political Choice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), VII; Kenneth W. Greenawalt quoted in "Transcript of Second District United States v. Daniel Andrew Seeger Case."

Kenneth W. Greenawalt is legal scholar Kent Greenawalt's father.

⁶⁹ Eleanor Eaton, "Letter to Arlo Tatum" (Central Committee for Conscientious Objectors, July 6, 1963), Daniel Seeger File, AFSC; Arlo Tatum, "Letter to Eleanor Eaton" (Central Committee for Conscientious Objectors, July 9, 1963), Daniel Seeger File, AFSC. "Agnostic Pacifist," *New York Times*, January 21, 1964.

⁷⁰ Arlo Tatum and Clarence Pickett, "The Daniel Seeger Defense" (Central Committee for Conscientious Objectors, January 1965), Daniel Seeger File, AFSC.

⁷¹ Kenneth W. Greenawalt, "Letter to Arlo Tatum" (Davis, Hardy and Schenck, February 13, 1964), Daniel Seeger File, AFSC.

Beyond the Quaker influence of these two organizations, Seeger, the AFSC and CCCO leaders involved in his case also reached out for support from the American Humanist Association, specifically writing Edwin H. Wilson, and the American Ethical Union, the national body of the Ethical Culture Movement. Above all, they appealed to the generosity of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA), the successor of the AUA after the 1961 merger of the Unitarians and the Universalists. All of them wrote *amicus curia* briefs for the case and tried to raise money to pay the hefty legal expenses of the case.⁷²

The *amicus curia* brief that the American Ethical Union filed when Seeger's case reached the Supreme Court is representative of the kinds of arguments these organizations used. On the basis of several different lines of argument, AEU's lawyers contended that the "theistic or non-theistic basis of religion is not the business of the Government." Most of the evidence for this conclusion was derived from the implications of the *Torcaso* case, but the brief did not stop there. It suggested that the idea that nontheistic religion should be respected did not suddenly emerge in 1961, but was a foundational principle of the United States.⁷³

The brief declared that "the draftsmen of the First Amendment must have envisioned its protections for non-theistic belief, considering the prominence and standing of the Quaker sect at the time." The apparent warrant for this statement about the framers' intent was a misunderstanding of Quaker theology. It went on to say that "like Ethical Culture, the Quaker

⁷² Daniel Seeger, "Letter to Eleanor Eaton," April 2, 1964, Daniel Seeger File, AFSC; Man, Albon P. "Letter to Arlo Tatum," May 18, 1963. Daniel Seeger Collected Papers, 1958-2008, Box 1. Swarthmore College Peace Collection; Man, Albon P. "Letter to Donald Harrington," May 18, 1963. Daniel Seeger Collected Papers, 1958-2008, Box 1. Swarthmore College Peace Collection; Man, Albon P. "Letter to Kenneth W. Greenawalt," May 18, 1963. Daniel Seeger Collected Papers, 1958-2008, Box 1. Swarthmore College Peace Collection. The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship for Social Action was also approached for financial support separately from the overtures to the UUA itself. The American Ethical Union specifically had their legal arm, the National Legal Committee of the AMU write their Amicus brief.

⁷³ Herbert A. Wolff and Leo Rosen, "AEU Supports Conscientious Objector: At Issue: Requirements of Belief in a Supreme Being," *Ethical Culture Today*, December 1964, Daniel Seeger File, AFSC.

faith does not dictate a belief in a Supreme Being.”⁷⁴ While some Quakers in the 1960s undoubtedly held this view, the assertion that their faith did not require a belief in a deity would have been almost entirely unfamiliar to Quakers in the 1770s. Yet while this argument may have been fallacious, it was effective; it rhetorically reinforced the *Seeger* case as a referendum on theology, particularly one on a kind of Quaker theology that the AEU was portraying as mainstream.

The AEU also introduced arguments about the changing nature of theology, and how most theologians’ turn towards liberal religious understandings of God made them interchangeable with agnostics. They cited Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s idea of “religionless Christianity,” and quoted statements skeptical of institutional religion by Reinhold Niebuhr and Martin Buber to indicate a new trend in American religious thinking, one which gave primacy to the individual encountering spirituality on their own, rather than finding God in a church. The AEU also insisted that ideas about God had changed too much to fit within the law, as few believed in a personal God anymore. The lawyers wrote that “within the traditionally theistic religions ideas of God have become so differentiated that they do not readily yield to testing by the Supreme Being clause.” They quoted theologians as diverse as religious naturalist Henry Nelson Wieman and neo-orthodox theologian Karl Barth to argue that almost all authorities viewed God in a way that was transcendent and not easily encompassed in law’s assertion of a Supreme Being, which seemed to favor a personal, interventionist God.⁷⁵

All of the parties supporting *Seeger* agreed that what was at stake was whether the federal government could regulate theology and give preference to religions with traditional ideas of

⁷⁴ Wolff and Rosen, “AEU Supports Conscientious Objector: At Issue: Requirements of Belief in a Supreme Being.”

⁷⁵ Wolff and Rosen, “AEU Supports Conscientious Objector: At Issue: Requirements of Belief in a Supreme Being.”

God. Would God-optional religions be given the same status in law as traditional Christianity and Judaism? Seeger wrote Greenawalt that he hoped the attorney would point out to the Supreme Court how “non-Christian and secularist views shade imperceptibly into the estimates and theories of liberal Christianity,” suggesting that any efforts to prohibit non-theists from being COs really amounted to a legal restriction on the Christian left.⁷⁶ Seeger’s allies highlighted the same issue; when raising funds for the case, the CCCO sent out a flyer to potential donors which explained that they should help pay Seeger’s expenses because it was a way to counteract the federal government’s attempts to “establish [religious] orthodoxy where none can nor should be.” The letter critiqued the draft law and continued “this provision favors theistic religions over non-theistic religions and so is of doubtful constitutionality under the First Amendment.”⁷⁷ CCCO members and others who supported Seeger were mostly associated with God-optional religious groups and they were aware that the law was discriminating against them. The federal government was stuck in the role of defending a theologically conservative or even fundamentalist religious orthodoxy. Faced with this choice, the Supreme Court would side with the religious liberals.

The Court Rules

Greenawalt made the same legal arguments at every level until he reached the Supreme Court. He would cite *Torcaso* and a host of other religious freedom cases, asserting that the Court could not favor one religion over another. Seeger felt nervous as the Supreme Court heard oral arguments but was heartened when he noticed that Justice Arthur Goldberg “had the pages

⁷⁶ Daniel A. Seeger, “Letter to Kenneth W. Greenawalt,” October 15, 1964. Daniel Seeger Collected Papers, 1958-2008, Box 1. Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

⁷⁷ Albon P. Man, “Letter to Donald Harrington,” May 18, 1963. Daniel Seeger Collected Papers, 1958-2008, Box 1. Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

running around getting Bibles, and he was quoting the Bible in my favor.” At that point, Seeger knew that at least one justice was on his side, and when it finally came time for the decision, it would turn out that all of the Justices were with him.⁷⁸ Greenawalt’s case was compelling and thorough. Eight Justices (Warren, Black, Clark, Harlan, Brennan, Stewart, White, Goldberg) joined the majority, with Justice Douglas concurring. When Justice Tom C. Clark delivered the opinion of the Court in *Seeger*, he devoted as much time to considering what religious experts had to say about the nature of a Supreme Being as he did to whether that category was legally problematic.

The real question was not whether the category of Supreme Being was an acceptable category, the court found, but “Does the term ‘Supreme Being’... mean the orthodox God or the broader concept of a power or being, or [citing Webster’s New International Dictionary] a faith ‘to which all else is subordinate or upon which all else is dependent’?”⁷⁹ While the Court tried to confine this question merely to the statute, the implications were broader.

First, the Court observed the “richness and variety of spiritual life in the country” made defining religion difficult. They mentioned Buddhists, Hindus, Quakers, and Mennonites, and alluded to Paul Tillich (“those who think of God as the depth of our being”) as just a sample of that diversity. This was a point that liberal religious groups had hoped the Court would acknowledge.

Then the court played a bit of a definitions game, arguing that Congressional use of the words “Supreme being” in the law meant they had wanted to include people who did not believe in a conventional God. This was transparently not the case; even Greenawalt, Seeger’s attorney,

⁷⁸ Daniel Seeger, in discussion with author, November 10, 2016.

⁷⁹ *U.S. v. Seeger*.

had referred to the “Supreme Being” in the law interchangeably with God.⁸⁰ But now the Supreme Court suggested that Congress had intended to signal a broader openness to different kinds of religious belief, though they admitted that even the “word ‘God’ [has] myriad meanings for men of faith.”⁸¹ The reasoning of the Court was fallacious, but it made it possible for liberal religious beliefs to be accommodated under the law. They imposed a new test; what counted as religion and belief in a supreme being was simply “a sincere and meaningful belief that occupies in the life of its possessor a place parallel to that filled by God of those admittedly qualifying for the exemption...”⁸² If a liberal religious belief was enough like Protestant orthodox beliefs that it could seem “parallel” to them, it was permissible.

The Supreme Court hoped that their conception of a Supreme Being “embraces the ever-broadening understanding of the modern religious community.” This meant taking into account liberal religion. Taking a cue from *Jakobson*, the Court noted how this new standard allowed both Tillich’s and Robinson’s religious views to be included as a belief in a Supreme Being. The Court quoted a paragraph from the second volume of Tillich’s *Systematic Theology* in which he expressed belief not in “the God of traditional theism but the ‘God above God’.” They also included far more numerous passages from Robinson’s *Honest to God*, perhaps suggesting that the Court found that popular work more accessible. Like the court in *Jakobson*, the Supreme

⁸⁰ Kenneth W. Greenawalt quoted in “Transcript of Second District United States v. Daniel Andrew Seeger Case.”

⁸¹ *United States v. Seeger*.

⁸² *United States v. Seeger*. Justice Douglas in his concurrence pointed out that if Congress intentions were interpreted more narrowly, to support only monotheistic orthodoxy, this would be a violation of the Free Exercise clause and also violate equal protection by preferring some religions over others. He hinted, probably correctly, that this narrow interpretation might actually have been Congress’s intention, citing “a more extreme case than the present one” in *United States v. Rumely* where the court “strained” the interpretation of a statue to make it constitutionally acceptable.

Court was particularly fascinated with Robinson's idea that God should no longer be thought of as being spatially located "out there," but was instead the Ground of Being.

The majority opinion of the Court went beyond *Jakobson*, however, by offering a few additional religious supports for their expanded notion of a Supreme Being. The court selectively quoted *Nostra Aetate*, a document produced by the then-ongoing Second Vatican Council about non-Christian religions, including a statement that people of all religions have one ultimate end, God. The Court, perhaps persuaded by the *amicus curia* brief, also paid considerable attention to the Ethical Culture Movement and the writing of its leader David Saville Muzzey, who claimed that God should not be seen anthropomorphically but rather as a "perfect pattern...of humanity as it should be, purged of the evil elements which retard progress towards 'the knowledge, love and practice of the right.'"⁸³ These views, the Court found, were all examples of valid religious beliefs.

Before concluding the majority opinion, the Court was again "reminded" of Paul Tillich and quoted from *Shaking the Foundations*: "if that word [God] has not much meaning for you, translate it, and speak to the depths of your life, of the source of your being, of your ultimate concern, *of what you take seriously without any reservation* [emphasis added by the Supreme Court]."⁸⁴ This, the Court implied, was what they were establishing in law.

Lasting Effects

Liberal and God-optional religion had become legal writ for the highest court in the land. It was a great victory for the groups that had funded the case. *Time* Magazine titled an article that

⁸³ *United States v. Seeger*.

⁸⁴ Paul Tillich quoted in *U.S. v. Seeger*.

reported on the case “Any God will Do,” showing that the public as well as the court did not see the *Seeger* decision as a victory for non-religion as much as it was a victory for a different and non-traditional kind of religion.⁸⁵ *Seeger* would not be the last Supreme Court case about religion and conscientious objection. The 1970 case *Welsh v. United States* allowed even an atheist to fit under the rubric of being religious. *Seeger* had opened the door to the acceptance of unorthodox beliefs of many kinds, allowing petitioners to argue for acceptance if they found themselves marginalized by the law.

Seeger and the two other defendants were elated. Once he was free of the concern that formally joining the Religious Society of Friends might affect his legal case, Seeger joined the denomination. He devoted the rest of his life to Quakerism, becoming a leader in the denomination. He became active among Quaker Universalists, who were non-Christian Quakers; his career was also connected with Quakers and would lead him to eventually replace Robert Gilmore as Executive Secretary of the New York Regional Office of the AFSC, and later he would serve as director of Pendle Hill, the Quaker study center in Wallingford, Pennsylvania. Though Seeger never achieved the fame of the past generation of Quaker leaders, like Jones, Cadbury, Holmes and Rushmore, he was still considered a weighty Friend.

During an interview for this dissertation, Seeger conveyed to me that it was strange that his most known accomplishment was his connection to a single legal case when he was in his early 20s. He found it odd that one event from so many decades past threatened to eclipse in importance his long religious and professional life. Yet the court case indeed cast a long shadow, and for Seeger personally it helped dictate the trajectory of his life. His connection with

⁸⁵ “Theology: Any God Will Do.” *Time*, March 19, 1965.
<http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,833584,00.html>.

Quakerism also obviously dated to the beginning of the case. He spoke with me over Skype with a statue of the Buddha prominently displayed on the shelf of his office behind him. Seeger explained that he had become interested in Asian religions based on the Supreme Court opinion, which compared his religious views to that of the Buddhists. It had inspired him to read more on Buddhist philosophy.⁸⁶

The *Seeger* case would also alter the liberal Quakerism where Seeger spent his life, as well as the other God-optional denominations. They were as legally legitimate as other religions after 1965, they had little left to prove, and many in the public now knew what they taught. What exactly the God-optional denominations believed was still being worked out, but now they could sort that out themselves without pressing fears of government intervention. In the twentieth century United States, the words of the Supreme Court Justices could have just as profound a religious effect as the pronouncements of any theologian.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Daniel Seeger, in discussion with author, November 10, 2016.

⁸⁷ Considerable recent scholarship has focused on how legal systems shape religion, see: Sarah Barringer Gordon, *The Spirit of the Law: Religious Voices and the Constitution in Modern America* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2010); Isaac Weiner, *Religion Out Loud: Religious Sound, Public Space, and American Pluralism* (New York: NYU Press, 2014); Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Candy Gunther Brown, *Debating Yoga and Mindfulness in Public Schools: Reforming Secular Education or Reestablishing Religion?* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2019).

Conclusion

Almost two decades after his Supreme Court victory, Dan Seeger stood in front of an audience of Quakers in an auditorium at St. Lawrence University in upstate New York. He was no longer an outsider to Quakerism in any sense; by this point he was a career staff member of the American Friends Service Committee and a longtime member of the Religious Society of Friends.

Speaking at an FGC session on the theme of “Variations on the Quaker Message,” Seeger tried to chart a middle course for the future of the denomination between those Quakers that dubbed themselves “Universalists,” who wanted Quakerism to become a sort of parliament of world religions—allowing each individual to hold whatever religious convictions they cared to have—and those who wanted to retain some notion of Quakerism as rooted in Christianity.¹ For a sizable portion of these Christian Quakers, the issue was less one of theology than it was of style; they could accept that non-Christians were as righteous as they were, but they worried that the Bible and discussion of Jesus Christ was being supplanted by references to non-Christian sources

¹ Seeger was giving a talk on behalf of the Quaker Universalist Fellowship (QUF), a group inspired by a 1977 speech by English Friend John Linton. The QUF were religious perennialists, who believed all religions contained elements of truth. They espoused the need for the denomination to incorporate non-Christian perspectives into the Religious Society of Friends. The “Universalists” in the late 20th century Quaker context bear very little resemblance to how that term had heretofore been used in theology. Universalism, and the Universalists who believe in Universalism, usually describes the belief that everyone, Christian and non-Christian, is saved by God. The Universalist church that merged with the Unitarians in 1963 is universalist in this sense. Quaker “Universalism” is essentially identical to the beliefs of Aldous Huxley’s perennial philosophy. Linton, who cited Huxley, simply used the term “universalism” to describe that position.

Quaker theology was from its beginning in the seventeenth century nearly universalist. The first systematic theologian of the movement, Robert Barclay, made clear that most non-Christians would be saved regardless of their beliefs. Theologically conservative Quakers, who would reject Quaker “Universalism,” were often universalists in the classic sense of the term.

For the sake of clarity, to distinguish between these positions I always refer to the latter perennialist position as Quaker Universalism, while traditional theological universalism is simply referred to as universalism. See: John Linton, “Quakerism as Forerunner,” Quaker Universalist Group, 1977. https://qug.org.uk/wp-content/pamphlets/QUGP01-Quakerism_as_Forrunner-LINTON.pdf.

like the Bhagavad-Gita, Jungian psychology and even Wiccan ritual. Some noted that the “Universalist” position often tended to eliminate references to Christianity.

Seeger claimed he was uneasy both with those who would “gnaw away at the specifically Christian content of Quakerism, as if seeking to reduce it in form to ethical culture” and those “Christocentric Friends,” who he claimed were engaged in religious exclusivism. Seeger took what he felt to be a middle position. As he put it:

It is natural and useful for the theologies of individual Friends to vary widely. But is it not also a particular mission of Quakerism to embody a Christianity capable of the magnanimity and devotion suitable to the essentially collaborative process needed among people of faith the world over in the common task of advancing the spiritual transformations without which we shall perish?²

There was no need to choose, Seeger told his audience, between being a Christian and being open to other faiths. While Seeger had become more receptive to using the word “God” to describe his beliefs than he had been at the time of his Supreme Court case, he still rejected belief in a personal being, and sought, as he later put it, to find a way to “make real the religious sensibility without the prop of a mythical divine being.”³ Over the years, however, he had become worried that the elastic theology of liberal Quakerism might leave it without a core identity.

This was the great dilemma of God-optional religion. In opening themselves up to a multiplicity of beliefs, adherents risked spurning the traditions that brought them together in the first place. It was not a new dilemma for religious liberals, who always knew that accommodating modernity included running the risk of losing their religious core; this was what

² Daniel Seeger, “Is Coexistence Possible?: Christianity and Universalism in the Religious Society of Friends,” St. Lawrence University, Canton, NY, 1984, Quaker Universalist Fellowship Papers, RG4/110, Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College.

³ Daniel Seeger, in discussion with author, November 15, 2016.

Theodore Parker meant when he talked about the “transient and permanent in Christianity” and Adolf von Harnack suggested was talking about when he referred to as the “kernel and husk,” i.e., that contrast between ideas that were essential and those that could be discarded as relics of the past. Like these past thinkers, Seeger did not believe that this was an irresolvable conflict; it was possible to respect the essentials of Quakerism and also accept theological change. Such a commitment also meant that despite the fact that he did not believe in a conventional God, Seeger found himself walking a tightrope. He had been the clerk of the Quaker Universalist Fellowship and one of the key figures advocating for Quakers to take into account the wisdom of the world’s religions, while also being a voice for retaining Christian tradition. He was a cultural Christian and he felt that such a kind of Christianity should be important to Quakers. As he put it, “The irony was that the Religious Society of Friends was more accommodating to spirituality expressed in terms of Hindu or Buddhist vocabulary than it was in terms of Christian vocabulary, and this seemed to me ultimately and utterly ridiculous.”⁴

There were years when Seeger noticed he was one of the few people in his monthly Meeting who would quote the Bible during worship, or who claimed to see a value in studying it. He worried that as a backlash to the religious right, many Quakers saw Christianity entirely in a negative light, and they avoided learning anything about the history or theology of Christianity. In his position as an official of the AFSC, which became increasingly made up of non-Quaker employees, he was an advocate for retaining a connection with Quakerism to ensure the AFSC remained affiliated with the denomination, which he saw as making the organization more than just a secular advocacy organization. Because of his position with the Quaker Universalists, various Quakers in New York Yearly Meeting kept scheduling Seeger to talk at events alongside

⁴ Daniel Seeger, in discussion with author, November 15, 2016.

Lewis Benson, the neo-orthodox critic of Rufus Jones who had urged Quakers to reemphasize Christianity. Quakers expected the events to be a heated confrontation between two competing ideologies, but Seeger found himself cheerfully agreeing with Benson that Friends should spend more time learning the Bible.⁵ There was undeniably a huge gulf between the two men's conceptions of Quakerism—Seeger believed in a vastly different kind of God than Benson—but they both shared a concern that Quakers should not lose touch with their Christian roots.

The Nova Effect

Philosopher Charles Taylor has called the explosion of new religious options that appeared in the late twentieth century “the Nova Effect.” The abundance of new theological options had a profound effect on God-optional groups. It meant that all three groups saw significant efforts to introduce metaphysical, neo-pagan and Asian religious practices and beliefs into their traditions. With the decline of leftist political activism surrounding the Civil Rights movement and with the end of the Vietnam War, these communities no longer shared a sense of what kind of service work should provide the kind of unity that theism once had, and this lack of unity made exploring other religious options more attractive. Complicating matters further, few of the choices on this new menu of theological options actually demanded intellectual assent to their being correct; most were simply a kind of linguistic, ritualistic and stylistic clothing that fit over a broad perennialism. Being a witch or practicing Zen was rarely a claim that these practices held some kind of exclusive authority, as humanism or naturalistic theism still reined in practice; they were often simply new ways of expressing religious feelings.

Sociologist Richard Wayne Lee has persuasively argued that in the case of Unitarian Universalists there was a conscious pivot in the 1980s by denominational leaders to allow these

⁵ Daniel Seeger, in discussion with author, November 15, 2016.

religious neopagan, Native American and Zen Buddhist perspectives because they believed these might attract baby boomers into Unitarian Universalist churches. Lee also points to the increasing number of women in ministerial roles, as well as of male clergy identifying with the feminist movement, who saw the neopagan spiritualities as providing a feminist alternative to the patriarchal rationalism of Unitarian Humanism.⁶ In 1986 Panthea Pagan Temple applied and was eventually accepted into the Unitarian Universalist Association, becoming the first explicitly pagan community to be so embraced. When the UU hymnal was revised in 1995, they added readings by Starhawk, a witch from the Reclaiming Tradition. In a 1995 resolution, the General Assembly of the UUA endorsed these "Earth-centered traditions" as one of the key sources of Unitarian Universalist spirituality.⁷

Neopaganism entered Quakerism in the 1980s. During that period neopagans were able to create recognized interest groups, much as various kinds of theologically conservative Quakers had done, within yearly Meetings. Metaphysical religious influence also grew in popularity within Quakerism. Small groups within some unprogrammed liberal Friends Meetings have embraced *A Course in Miracles*, a metaphysical religious book that claims it was directly dictated by the author channeling the spirit of Jesus, and much like Christian Science teaches that the physical world is illusory. There is a literature by Quaker-Buddhists (or perhaps Buddhist-Quakers) that seeks to ground Quaker silent worship in a Buddhist modernist-style theology.⁸ In

⁶ Richard Wayne Lee, "Strained Bedfellows: Pagans, New Agers, and 'Starchy Humanists' in Unitarian Universalism," *Sociology of Religion* 56, no. 4 (1995): 379–96, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3712196>.

⁷ Jerrie Kishpaugh Hildebrand, and Shirley Ann Ranck, introduction to *Pagan and Earth-Centered Voices in Unitarian Universalism*, edited by Jerrie Kishpaugh Hildebrand and Shirley Ann Ranck (Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 2017), XXIII–XIV.

⁸ Jean Weston, "The Teachings of George Fox and A Course In Miracles," *Universalist Friends: The Journal of the Quaker Universalist Fellowship*, no. 49 (February 2009): 11–23; Thomas D. Hamm, *The Quakers in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 124–126.

Though the intensity was perhaps greatest in the late twentieth century Quaker involvement in metaphysical religion and spiritualism had a longer pedigree. The Spiritualist movement that developed in upstate New York in the nineteenth century began among Progressive Friends, one of the smaller

Quaker Silence, a detective novel about a crime-solving Quaker elder at the Cambridge, Massachusetts Friends Meeting, the heroine wistfully laments how much Quakerism has changed by integrating new religious perspectives, thinking to herself that “in these sad days of laissez-faire Quakerism truly anything was possible. It could be that a number of the younger people at the Meeting would think nothing of hanging an icon around their necks.”⁹

In recent decades there has been a noticeable faction of self-proclaimed “nontheistic Quakers,” Friends who do not believe in any kind of God but reject the term atheist. Dan Christy Randazzo notes that these perspectives have especially flourished in connection with the Quaker Universalist Fellowship and British Quaker Universalist Group. The 2006 edited collection *Godless for God’s Sake: Nontheism in Contemporary Quakerism* emerged out of events held for nontheistic Quakers at Woodbrooke Quaker Study Center in England and Pendle Hill in the United States, which shows that nontheism is now receiving some degree of support and recognition from Quaker institutions. Os Cresson, in his 2014 book *Quaker and Naturalist Too*, traced an intellectual and religious genealogy for this movement, grounding it in Quaker tradition

offshoots of Quakerism. In the early twentieth century liberal Quaker leaders also dabbled in psychical research. At one point, after Jesse H. Holmes’ death a psychical research team claimed to have contacted his spirit, which dictated several books to them.

See: Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women’s Rights in Nineteenth-Century America*, 2 ed. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001); Chuck Fager, *Remaking Friends: How Progressive Friends Challenged Quakerism & Helped Save America*. (Durham, NC: Kimo Press, 2014), 197.

⁹ Irene Allen, *Quaker Silence* (New York: Villard Books, 1992), 60.

and history.¹⁰ Nontheists did not dominate liberal Quakerism, but have nevertheless become a visible, and largely accepted, constituency.¹¹

Reconstructionist Jews, like Quakers and Unitarians, tried to find meaning in other ways without relying on a traditional God. By the late 1980s some of the religious language that Mordecai Kaplan had removed from the Reconstructionist prayer book was added back into the new edition. The editors of the prayer book, Kol HaNeshama, reinserted references to the parting of the Red Sea and the coming of a messianic age, these events being now understood as myths. In the older prayer book, the second chapter of the Shema had been omitted because it declared that God gave the rain and, in his anger had the power to stop the rain: the kind of intervention in the natural world at which Kaplan most balked. One of the newer prayer book's editors, Mordechai Liebling, explained that the reinsertion was important because this part of the

¹⁰ Dan Christy Randazzo, "Quakers and Non-Theism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Quakerism*, ed. Stephen W. Angell and Pink Dandelion (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 274–89; David Boulton, ed., *Godless for God's Sake: Nontheism in Contemporary Quakerism* (Dent, Cumbria [U.K.]: Dales Historical Monographs, 2006); Os Cresson, *Quaker and Naturalist Too* (Iowa City, IW: Morning Walk Press, 2014).

¹¹ British Quakerism has also shifted in God-optional directions. A 2013 survey of British Quakers indicates that 14.5 percent of those that responded said they did not believe in God, with a quarter unsure about God's existence. The number of those respondents who do not believe in God has doubled since surveys conducted a decade prior. In 2018 there were public discussions about what place term "God" might have in a revised edition of the Britain Yearly Meeting's *Faith and Practice*, and if the term should be used less often or more carefully. Rhiannon Grant, a theologian and scholar of modern Quaker thought, has written that British Friends define God in many different ways, increasingly in nonpersonal terms. Grant points out that some Quakers have argued to stop using the word God completely; "The argument here is that the Quaker picture of what God is like is not only vague, but also so far removed from the way other groups usually use the word 'God' that it's bordering on misleading if you make it sound like Quakers believe the same thing as other religious groups." Grant has argued in favor of Quakers retaining the word "God" and using it broadly to describe the divine. See: Pink Dandelion, "The British Quaker Survey 2013," *Quaker Religious Thought* 123 (2014): 136–140. ; Simon Jenkins, "The Quakers Are Right. We Don't Need God," *The Guardian*, May 4, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/may/04/quakers-dropping-god>; Trevor Bending, "The Quakers Are Right. We Don't Need God.," *Non-Theist Friends Network* (blog), May 22, 2018, <https://nontheist-quakers.org.uk/2018/05/22/the-quakers-are-right-we-dont-need-god/>; Rhiannon Grant, *Telling the Truth About God* (Winchester [UK]: Christian Alternative, 2019), 64–65.

Shema should now be read as an environmentalist text. The new prayer book also tried to embrace feminist ideas of God by using gender-neutral language.¹² Sometimes the search to find meaningful religious language and ritual pushed hard against Jewish tradition. When word leaked out to the wider Jewish community that a number of Reconstructionist Rabbinical College students were worshiping pagan goddesses, the seminary was embarrassed and put out a statement declaring that such practices were “outside the boundaries of Jewish symbolism.”¹³

The move to include paganism, miracles and the mystical might easily be mistaken for the re-enchantment of God-optional denominations, but there are indications that was not actually what was occurring. Almost no one thought that through pagan rituals they were actually directly offering sacrifices to God, or that by including mention of the parting of the Red Sea in prayers they were speaking of a historical event. Instead, this was an attempt to give a new language and expression to a belief in a distant God, or to even simply use poetic language to express a hope that there was some kind of God at all. These communities had gravitated so far to the theological left that this language was now understood as largely metaphorical, and hence safe; there was no danger that anyone might mistake it for literal belief. When Kaplan had removed the lines from the Shema about God controlling the rains it had been because he was arguing that they were not true, against people who thought they were. By the late 1980s, by contrast, such passages could be taken as simply a colorful way of referring to the dangers of

¹² Ari L. Goldman, “Reconstructionist Jews Turn to the Supernatural,” *The New York Times*, February 19, 1989, U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/1989/02/19/us/reconstructionist-jews-turn-to-the-supernatural.html>; Rachel Adler, *Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics* (Boston: MA: Beacon Press, 1999), 97.

¹³ Reconstructionist Rabbinical College Memo quoted in Suzanne F. Singer and Judy Oppenheimer, “Reconstructionism: From ‘Heresy’ to ‘Its What Most Jews Are,’” *Moment: The Magazine of Jewish Culture and Opinion* 22, no. 3 (June 1997): 58.

pollution and environmental destruction. By that point, no congregation could seriously contemplate the idea that there was an entity that could do such things.

God-optional communities remain generally more skeptical of traditional notions of God than the rest of the United States, and have continued to be open to a variety of expressions of religiosity. In one of the few studies have been done of these groups, Friends in Philadelphia Yearly Meeting in the early twenty-first century were asked what they thought about God. Only 42 percent of respondents said they believed in a "traditional God" that could answer prayers. As an analysis of the study pointed out, this was "comparable to about 40 percent of professional scientists [who believe in a traditional God], but much less than the over 80 per[?]cent for the US population."¹⁴ The Pew Religious Landscape Survey indicates that Unitarian demographics follow similar patterns; 27 percent of Unitarians do not believe in God, and when other categories of the survey are added together, only 45 percent of Unitarians profess to be either certain or fairly certain that God exists.¹⁵ It is a remarkable achievement that God-optional communities have managed to be relatively stable, and yet inclusive enough to contain such a multitude of views about the divine.

Will God-Optional Denominations Survive?

When I interviewed Seeger for this dissertation, he expressed hope that the Religious Society of Friends could be particularly suited as a religion for the growing demographic of

¹⁴ Mark Cary, and Anita Weber, "Two Kinds of Quakers: A Latent Class Analysis," *Quaker Studies* 12, no. 1 (2008): 134–44.

The study, which was conducted in 2001 and 2002, looked at results among 572 respondents in 10 different Quaker meetings that were part of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. Respondents included both formal members of the Religious Society of Friends and frequent attenders of worship. Because many attenders have taken part in Quaker worship and life for years or even decades the distinction between these groups is often largely symbolic.

¹⁵ Pew Research Center, "Unitarians: Pew Religious Landscape Study," 2014.

<http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religious-denomination/unitarian/>.

“spiritual but not religious,” because it offered a mix of tradition and openness to change, with a commitment to social justice. Summarizing, he explained, “let’s put it this way, the liberal wing of the Society of Friends, the unprogrammed wing of the Society of Friends is wonderfully attuned to the condition of the modern person.”¹⁶ Yet he also expressed puzzlement that Quakerism and other liberal faiths were not growing when they seemed to be so well adapted to contemporary society. Seeger is right that liberal Quakerism, as well as other God-Optional denominations, are demographically stagnant.

Worries about declension are hardly a unique concern to God-Optional groups. Numerous scholars and studies have documented how religious affiliation and involvement in the United States has been in decline for decades. This shift is generational, and younger cohorts tend to be notably less religious than older generations.¹⁷ Some of the declines have been quite steep; mainline Protestants have lost almost half of their membership since the early 1970s, while Southern Baptists and Roman Catholics have both lost over a million members in the past two decades.¹⁸ In less than a century, the acids of modernity, those pressures that the advocates

¹⁶ Daniel Seeger, in discussion with author, November 15, 2016.

¹⁷ Pew Research Center, ““America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” May 12, 2015.

<http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>;

, Mark Chaves, *American Religion: Contemporary Trends* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); David Voas and Mark Chaves, “Is the United States a Counterexample to the Secularization Thesis?” *American Journal of Sociology* 121, no. 5 (March 1, 2016): 1517–56.

<https://doi.org/10.1086/684202>; Robert D. Putnam, and David E. Campbell. *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 3, 98-105, 120-133.

Putnam and Campbell agree these shifts are real but argue that the decline in religiosity among the young since the mid-1980s happened too rapidly to fit under the label of secularization. They suggest that the political association of religion with the Religious Right drove young people to disaffiliated. If this is true, it may have positive consequences for God-optional groups, which are strongly associated with the political left.

¹⁸ Ed Stetzer, “3 Important Church Trends in the Next 10 Years,” *The Exchange, Christianity Today*, April 24, 2015, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2015/april/3-important-trends-in-church-in-next-ten-years.html>; Jonathan Merritt, “Southern Baptists Call Off the Culture War,” *The Atlantic*, June 16, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/06/southern-baptists-call-off-the-culture-war/563000/>; Pew Research Center, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape: Pew Religious

of God-optional religion feared so much, did dramatically eat away at American religion, and they are still doing so.

Dan Seeger is right to think God-optional groups are not exempt from these trends. As sociologists David Voas and Mark Chaves have observed in their blunt article “Is the United States a Counterexample to the Secularization Thesis?” religious decline in the United States over the long run now seems to be following a similar trajectory to western Europe.¹⁹ Like almost all American religious groups, the children of God-optional denominations religious groups are less inclined towards organized religion than their parents. The birth rates for all these groups have always been low, which makes a demographic crisis even more apparent. There are both qualitatively and quantitatively measurable signs that this decline is taking place.

Reconstructing Judaism, for example, had had problems filling seminary classes in its rabbinical school, the maintenance of which is an essential part of its existence as a separate Jewish denomination. Among Unitarians, there are signs that there are fewer children being raised in the faith, and there has been a fall off in the enrollments in UU religious education programs by 27 percent in the past decade. Such trends will portend future problems for the Unitarian Universalist Association if they cannot retain children and young families.²⁰ A mere quick visual survey of most unprogrammed Quaker meetings will reveal that the majority of attendees in the room have grey hair.

Landscape Survey,” May 12, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>.

¹⁹David Voas and Mark Chaves, “Is the United States a Counterexample to the Secularization Thesis?” *American Journal of Sociology* 121, no. 5 (March 1, 2016): 1517–56. <https://doi.org/10.1086/684202>.

²⁰ “UUA Membership Statistics, 1961-2016,” Unitarian Universalist Association (website), accessed February 13, 2019. <https://www.uua.org/data/demographics/uua-statistics>; Christopher J. Walton, “UUA Membership Rises for First Time since 2008,” *UU World Magazine*, November 5, 2018, <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/uua-membership-2018>.

Yet these God-optional groups are not in a dramatic decline. This is in sharp contrast with mainline Protestants in particular, who went from making 52 percent of America in 1958 to being just 13 percent five decades later.²¹ What is happening is probably best described as demographic stagnation, which is, of course, itself a sign of trouble, as these groups have such small numbers. In 1961, when the Unitarians and Universalists merged and started keeping statistics, the denomination had 151,557 members; in 2018 it had gained only 3,233 more, a less than 2 percent increase that does not track with the corresponding growth in the United States population (which grew by 56 percent).²² Reconstructionists did not keep public data about the size of their movement; though some reports in the 1990s placed their numbers at around 50,000, it is difficult to ascertain how accurate these estimates were. Based on limited information, the number of congregations in the movement seems relatively steady; in the 1990s there were approximately 90 congregations and two decades later there are still under 100.²³ Statistics of Quaker Yearly Meetings suggest that membership in FGC Quakerism has declined by a little less than 5 percent between 1964 and 2014. Because Quakers have such theological diversity, they also give some indication of how liberal and God-optional religious groups are affected by demographic decline in contrast to other forms of religion. Liberal Quakers seem to have fared considerably better than other Quaker groups. Evangelical Friends Church International has

²¹ James Hudnut-Beumler, "Introduction," in *The Future of Mainline Protestantism in America*, ed. James Hudnut-Beumler and Mark Silk (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2018), 1.

²² UUA Membership Statistics, 1961-2016," Unitarian Universalist Association (website), accessed February 13, 2019. <https://www.uua.org/data/demographics/uua-statistics>; Christopher J. Walton, "UUA Membership Rises for First Time since 2008," *UU World Magazine*, November 5, 2018, <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/uua-membership-2018>.

²³ Suzanne F. Singer, and Judy Oppenheimer, "Reconstructionism: From 'Heresy' to 'Its What Most Jews Are,'" *Moment: The Magazine of Jewish Culture and Opinion* 22, no. 3 (June 1997): 53. Reconstructionism did publish a demographic study of itself in 1996, which was based on responses from 1324 households. It did not contain total membership statistics but otherwise remains the most comprehensive look at the movement. See: Michael Rappeport, "1996 Demographic Study of the Reconstructionist Movement-- Full Report," November 1996, Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, Ira and Judith Kaplan Eisenstein Reconstructionist Archives.

declined by almost 6 percent in the same period, while that of Friends United Meeting (the successor of FYM, which had beliefs similar to many mainline Protestant denominations) has hemorrhaged over 60 percent of its membership. Both extremes, the leftward option of God-optional religion and rightward one of evangelicalism and religious conservatism, seem to have been more sustainable among Quakers than a theologically moderate approach.²⁴ Resisting secularizing pressures is, over the long term, perhaps futile for any American religious group, but God-optional denominations show indications of being just as resilient as the most theologically conservative traditions, and if trends continue, they will last well into the twenty-first century.

God-Optional Religion is Everywhere

Whatever the status of Quakers, Unitarians and Reconstructionists, God-optional religion has continued to spread outside of denominational confines. God-optional religion appears now in well-established religious traditions. Reform Judaism, for example, in the twentieth-first century is quickly becoming a de facto God-optional community. Jewish Studies scholar Jack Wertheimer's recent survey of American Jewish life gives useful examples of this trend. Wertheimer reports that God is very rarely discussed outside fixed liturgies in both Reform and Conservative Judaism. In practice, beliefs in the community can include atheism and agnosticism, and younger people especially seem not to believe in a personal, interventionist God. A focus on social justice, branded as explicitly Jewish by being associated with the concept of *tikkun olam*, has become the main form of communal religious expression for many Reform Jews. Wertheimer provides the results of an informal survey of one congregation about views of God done by their rabbi. According to the results, 60 percent of the congregants still avowed

²⁴Gregory P. Hinshaw, "Research Note: Fifty Years of American Quaker Statistics." *Quaker Studies* 23, no. 1 (June 1, 2018): 121–35, <https://doi.org/10.3828/quaker.2018.23.1.8>.

belief in God, but the metrics suggest it was very much a distant God they envisioned, with only 26 percent stating a belief in a God that rewarded the just and punished the unjust. The congregants mostly described God as an internal presence within people, that worked to help humans do good works, such as caring for the sick. Wertheimer admits this is only data from one congregation, but it is consistent with the patterns that he and others have seen throughout the Reform movement.²⁵

The key difference between Reform Judaism and the three God-optional denominations discussed here is that Reform has made an effort to officially check the spread of atheism. Since the 1980s, the Rabbinic Responsa the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the central rabbinic arm of the denomination, has made clear that they understood disbelief in God to be incompatible with the basis for Reform Judaism. In their decisions they found against atheists who sought to convert to Judaism, in one case writing that if they did not require a potential convert to “affirm the reality of God in Jewish religious life and experience” it would become a “a legitimate question if we have any standards at all.”²⁶ Being committed to living a Jewish life, being interested in Jewish history and practicing Jewish culture were not enough to qualify someone for conversion to Judaism, according to these standards, as it was for Reconstructionism. Another response dealt with a former Humanistic Jewish congregation, Beth Adam, that requested to join the denomination, despite the fact that it used a liturgy that excluded mention of God. Beth Adam’s application was controversial. Some within the denomination

²⁵Jack Wertheimer. *The New American Judaism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 28-32, 42.

²⁶ TFN No.5754.15, “Atheists, Agnostics and Conversion To Judaism.” Central Committee of American Rabbis, <https://www.ccarnet.org/ccar-responsa/tfn-no-5754-15-147-152/>. Fascinatingly, the denomination had earlier allowed agnostics to convert, with the rationale that they might develop a more robust belief in God later. See: ARR 209-211, “Gerut and the Question of Belief.” Central Committee of American Rabbis, 1982, <https://www.ccarnet.org/ccar-responsa/arr-209-211/>.

argued that it was important to welcome any organized Jewish community, but Beth Adam was rejected in 1990, both with a Responsa and by a vote of the board of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the congregational arm of Reform Judaism.²⁷ It seems likely that if present trends continue, in the long run the increasing acceptance of God-optional views by the laity may force Reform Judaism to eventually reconsider the prohibitions on atheism.

The edges of God-optional are also quite visible in what is sometimes termed Progressive Christianity. The work of the late Marcus Borg, formerly a professor of Religion and Culture at Oregon State University, was particularly popular. Borg was a key figure in the Jesus Seminar, and he advanced a version of historical criticism that depicted Jesus as a social justice-oriented reformer. In his 1997 book *The God We Never Knew*, Borg wrote explicitly about how he had personally come to reject a personal and supernatural God in favor of a pantheistic God, a path that he suggested was an option for other doubting Christians. Borg, a converted Episcopalian who had served as the Canon Theologian of Trinity Episcopal Cathedral in Portland, Oregon, saw his ideas as firmly within the Christian tradition.²⁸

²⁷ TFN No .5751.4 “Humanistic Congregation,” Central Committee of American Rabbis, <https://www.ccar-net.org/ccar-responsa/tfn-no-5751-4-9-15/>; “Humanistic Temple’s Application Denied,” *Washington Post*, June 14, 1994, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1994/06/14/humanistic-temples-application-denied/5f8c64b7-8760-4483-b9ec-4ff0ad78211e/>; Dana Evan Kaplan. *American Reform Judaism: An Introduction* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 54-58. The vote to reject Beth Adam’s membership in the Union of American Hebrew Congregations was 115 to 13, with 4 abstentions.

²⁸Laurie Goodstein, “Marcus Borg, Liberal Scholar on Historical Jesus, Dies at 72,” *The New York Times*, January 26, 2015, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/27/us/marcus-borg-liberal-christian-scholar-dies-at-72.html>; David Gibson, “Marcus Borg, Leading Liberal Theologian and Historical Jesus Expert, Dies at 72,” *Religion News Service*, January 22, 2015, <https://religionnews.com/2015/01/22/marcus-borg-leading-liberal-theologian-historical-jesus-expert-dies-72/>.

John Shelby Spong, the former Episcopal Bishop of Newark, has since the 1990s been another prominent voice in this movement. In a series of books including *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism: A Bishop Rethinks the Meaning of Scripture*, *Born of a Woman: A Bishop Rethinks the Birth of Jesus*, and *Why Christianity Must Change or Die: A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile*, Spong leveraged his ecclesiastical position to become an advocate for what he suggested should be a new reformation, one which would update Christian theology to take account of modern science and culture. He was candid about his intellectual debt to the work of John A.T. Robinson and a prior generation of liberal theologians. Spong was equally clear up front about the fact that his work was a direct challenge to conventional notions of theism, which he associated with worship of a supernatural being. While he maintained that he believed in God, this was a “nontheistic God,” and he urged the adoption of a “nontheistic Christianity.” Spong saw his theological radicalism as paired with social advocacy, and he became particularly vocal as an advocate for the inclusion of gays and lesbians in the Episcopal church.

Other authors that were part of this generation of progressive Christian voices include Karen Armstrong, John Dominic Crossan, Robert Funk and Elaine Pagels. Books by these authors fill the libraries of churches in mainline Protestantism, and they are still widely read even in communities that are ostensibly more theologically conservative. Whatever the official theology, it seems clear that packed into the pews of many of these churches are congregants whose views range from somewhere close to fundamentalism, to those who believe in God as a metaphorical description of the universe having order.

Outside of the United States, the United Church of Canada, a merger of several mainline groups in Canada, dealt with the very public atheism of one of their clergy. Minister Greta Vosper not only objected to the use of religious language by her Toronto congregation, but also

released an open letter criticizing the United Church of Canada's use of theistic language in a prayer they used for the victims of the Charlie Hebdo massacre. She argued that the denomination's support for theism abetted the fundamentalism of those that had led the attacks. The United Church of Canada contemplated defrocking Vosper for her atheism, but eventually in late 2018, reached a compromise by which she was allowed to continue to minister to her congregation. While the beliefs of Vosper and her congregation are clearly outliers in the United Church of Canada, they still show that God-optional beliefs are at least officially tolerated by that denomination.²⁹ It is rare for mainline or liberal Protestant groups to create the kind of public spectacle that occurred around the question of Vosper's ministerial status. Few denominations officially censure anyone for believing in a distant God or rejecting the divinity of Christ. As long as clergy are not publicly declaring their atheism, they can quietly exist in most officially theistic denominations.

Though it would be an exaggeration to say that God-optional ideas have made inroads into American white evangelicalism and other kinds of theologically conservative Christianity, there are a few indications that evangelicals are not isolated from God-optional religious ideas. A few figures in the Emergent Church, the political and often theological leftward edge of evangelicalism, have contemplated increasingly liberal forms of theology. In 2014, Rob Bell, a former megachurch pastor, became an influential if extremely decisive force in evangelicalism due to his book suggesting the plausibility of universal salvation. Bell's book, *What We Talk About When We Talk About God*, argued that old definitions of God, such as "the tribal God," the

²⁹Colin Perkel, "Atheist United Church Minister Keeps Her Job; 'heresy Trial' Called Off," *CTV News*, November 9, 2018, <https://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/atheist-united-church-minister-keeps-her-job-heresy-trial-called-off-1.4170525>; Amy Dempsey, "Meet the United Church Minister Who Came out as an Atheist," *The Star*, February 21, 2016, <https://www.thestar.com/news/insight/2016/02/21/meet-the-united-church-minister-who-came-out-as-an-atheist.html>. Vosper initially identified as a non-theist but later described herself as an atheist.

anti-gay authoritarian deity of fundamentalism, were antiquated; he compared such notions to an Oldsmobile he used to drive which “served me well for many years. But they don’t make Oldsmobiles anymore.” Sounding surprisingly like Harvey Cox, Bell sought to “find other ways to talk about God.” Bell’s new notion of God involved mixing scripture quotations and popular scientific discussions of how the universe is filled with dark matter, and while he might resist the characterization, his particular way of talking about God was not far removed from the distant God of liberal theology.³⁰

Such ideas went beyond just Bell’s large audience. Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton’s 2005 study of American teenagers found that the most represented view among American teenagers was what they call “moralistic therapeutic deism,” a pejorative term for a kind of religious liberalism that sees God as simply inculcating basic morality and allowing all good people, regardless of their religious views, to attain salvation. Conservative Christian intellectual Rod Dreher writes despairingly that moralistic therapeutic deism has become the “de facto religion” of America, and that even within supposedly theologically orthodox Christian churches, people increasingly do not see their moral beliefs as grounded in the Bible.³¹ A study by the group Lifeways in 2016 showed that while evangelicals almost unanimously believe in God, think that Jesus rose from the dead and have some notion that God exists in a trinity, their understanding of these things is changing in a liberal direction. Probably most significant is that 56 percent of evangelicals agreed with the statement that the Holy Spirit is a “divine force and

³⁰ Rob Bell. *What We Talk About When We Talk About God* (New York: Harper Collins, 2014), 8, 5, 11.

³¹ Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton. *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 162-170; Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option* (New York, NY: Sentinel, 2017), 10-11. The Lifeways survey of self-identified evangelicals also indicates that 48 percent accept the idea that individuals can achieve salvation even outside Christianity. This indicates that traditional theological orthodoxy is weakening. See: “Americans Love God and the Bible, Are Fuzzy on the Details,” *LifeWay Research* (blog), September 27, 2016, <http://lifewayresearch.com/2016/09/27/americans-love-god-and-the-bible-are-fuzzy-on-the-details/>.

not a personal being,” an understanding that would run contrary to the Athanasian creed which describes the trinity as three persons.³² Evangelicals still clearly believe that the other aspects of God are personal, but it is telling that one part of the trinity now increasingly resembles the distant God of liberal Protestantism. Neither study’s results should necessarily be taken entirely at face value, however. Part of the intellectual tradition of evangelicalism involves having jeremiads about declension, sometimes without clear reference to actual conditions; taken together, they do show that the evangelical laity are sometimes adopting liberal religious, and even God-optional ideas, usually without suffering formal sanction from their communities.

Outside of Judaism and Christianity, another community to be influenced by God-optional religion is American Buddhism. Buddhism as practiced in Asia for most of its history had typically involved a cosmology with multiple Gods, heavenly realms and spirits, and a variety of ritual practices. Many of the forerunners of American Buddhists, including Americans such as Paul Carus and missionaries like Anagarika Dharmapala, hoped, in introducing Buddhism to an American population, to create a rational religion, stripped of supernaturalism and open to science. Where religious liberals and advocates of God-optional faith still had to contend with the cultural baggage of Christianity, and to argue that it was still valid to believe in Christianity even without belief in a personal God, these Buddhist modernists did not face as steep a task in eliminating many of the older metaphysics of Buddhism, simply because

³² Caleb Lindgren, “Evangelicals’ Favorite Heresies Revisited by Researchers,” *Christianity Today*, September 28, 2016, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2016/september/evangelicals-favorite-heresies-state-of-theology-ligonier.html>. Seventy-one percent also accepted the statement that Jesus was the “first and greatest being created by God.” This is the theological position of Arianism, and it was declared a heresy at the Council of Nicaea. However, it may be that the wording of this particular question may have particularly confused respondents, as the result shifted 50 percentage points since the last time it was asked, only a year prior.

Americans knew less about it.³³ They were largely successful, and after the 1960s it has become common for Americans to describe Buddhism as an atheistic religion, or to suggest that authentic Buddhist practices were secular. The cosmology of Buddhism has been utterly transformed in the United States. Various Buddhist practices have been secularized, and the practice of Mindfulness, for example, is now used in a variety of contexts, including therapeutically as Mindfulness- Based Stress Reduction.³⁴

Perhaps the largest echoes of the intellectual legacy of God-optional religion have been outside of formal denominational structures. Since God-optional ideas achieved some degree of wider public acknowledgement in the 1960s, these ideas became a regular fixture of popular culture. Film was one place that popularized the shift. The immensely popular *Star Wars* in 1977 depicted a religious belief in The Force, which is described by the sagely Obi-Wan Kenobi as “an energy field created by all living things. It surrounds us and penetrates us. It binds the galaxy together.” While partly inspired by the rising popularity of Asian religions, The Force is also a form of the liberal distant God, a sort of vague pantheism. Conservative white Evangelicals were critical of how *Star Wars* depicted a belief in a God without personality.³⁵

In a less known example, in 1989’s fifth Star Trek film, *The Final Frontier*, depicted Captain James T. Kirk, Mr. Spock, Doctor McCoy and the crew of the Starship Enterprise journeying to the center of the galaxy to find “God,” who turns out to be a wrathful,

³³ David L. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Matthew Hedstrom, “Scientific Spirituality,” *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, accessed December 12, 2018, <https://tricycle.org/magazine/scientific-spirituality/>.

³⁴ Jeff Wilson, *Mindful America: Meditation and the Mutual Transformation of Buddhism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

³⁵ *Star Wars: A New Hope*, directed by George Lucas (1977; Beverly Hills, CA: 20th Century Fox, 2011), Blu-ray Disc; Elmer L. Towns, *Bible Answers for Almost All Your Questions* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2003), 142; Robert Velarde, “May the Force Bewitch You: Evaluating the Star Wars Worldview,” *Christian Research Journal* 38, no. 5 (2015), <http://www.equip.org/PDF/JAF2385.pdf>.

paternalistic, Old Testament-style bearded man made of blue energy. In self-defense they kill God with a photon torpedo. The film ends with captain Kirk reflecting that it was not *really* God they encountered, because God is not, in the words of Kirk, “out there” but rather in-dwelling in the “human heart.” It was a message that might have come straight from a Unitarian pulpit.³⁶

Television also followed similar trends. Oprah Winfrey, for example, promoted the idea that spirituality could be almost entirely personal, and that spiritual practices and beliefs could be selected according to what was the most useful and helpful for a person at a given moment.³⁷ Popular culture has become God-optional.

In surveys like the Pew Religious Landscape Survey, many Americans fit into the category of “Spiritual but Not Religious,” the largest growing religious demographic in the United States. This group initially seems the opposite of God-optional religion, which prizes religious institutional settings highly. Yet to claim to be spiritual outside of institutional frameworks is also to claim the right to have multiple different ideas of God, or even reject the notion of God, while still claiming the idea of some kind of higher meaning that is not merely the material and naturalist. Some of those who identify as SBNR believe in God, and others do not. At the most basic level, the category is God-optional.

A Living Religion

³⁶ *Star Trek: The Final Frontier*, directed by William Shatner (1989; Los Angeles, CA: Paramount), Amazon Prime Video. Humanist A. Wakefield Slaten, for example, claimed that God can be found in the human heart. While this superficially resembles a line of Ephesians 3:17, where Christ dwells in the heart, both Slaten and the *Star Trek* quote are preceded by skepticism about the existence of any God external to the human heart. See: Albert C. Dieffenbach, “Facts and Interpretation.” *The Christian Register* 106, no. 25 (June 23, 1927).

³⁷ Kathryn Lofton. *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011); Trysh Travis. *The Language of the Heart: A Cultural History of the Recovery Movement from Alcoholics Anonymous to Oprah Winfrey* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

Whatever its ultimate impact on the future of American religious life may be, God-optional religion is present in churches and synagogues in every state. What started as an intellectual response to the challenges of having faith in the modern world has become the lived practice of hundreds of thousands of Americans. Their experiences are every bit as complex, vital and worthy of study as those of religious practitioners who are seen as more traditional.

As I was in the midst of writing this dissertation, I attended an hour of church programming before a worship service at my own religious community, Charlottesville Friends Meeting, on differing beliefs in God. A small room full of Quakers was asked by the convener to discuss their own conceptions of the divine. An elderly former computer scientist was critical of the very concept of God, arguing that any idea of a being that intervened in the lives of human beings was unsupported by any scientific evidence. From behind me, a woman who had retired from a career as a Presbyterian minister declared that she did not believe in that kind of God either, but that she still valued the term “God.” God, she said, should be understood as a symbolic term, representing our highest values, rather than a supremely powerful person. A third Quaker voiced her opinion that God was everywhere, in the birds chirping outside, in the pews of the Meetinghouse and indwelling in each person; she described pantheism perfectly. From the center of the Meeting room, the man who had convened the meeting smiled at the divergent views, and announced that for him God was a man. The room was silent, shocked at the apparent sexism of the claim. Then he clarified his thought, that God was only a man for him because he was a man and needed God to be a man in order to relate to God in a personal way. Each person, he explained, must also relate to God in their own individualized manner.

Despite eliciting a range of theological views ranging from atheism to more conventional theism, it was not a particularly contentious discussion. I have witnessed liberal Quakers have

heated arguments among themselves about petty issues such as the furnishings of their Meetinghouse or the sentence structure of the minutes taken in business meetings, but among themselves they rarely debate theology. Theology, including about the nature, and even the existence of God, for them is largely a personal matter, outside the community's authority and purview.

These Friends, like other God-optional adherents, felt that sharing a religion does not require defining the boundaries of what God is or is not. Debates about the divine were a distraction from working for justice, of living together in community, of caring for neighbors, and were a hindrance from the core of religion. They had the wisdom to realize that they had no clear response to the question "What do we mean by God?" and they delighted in that ambiguity.

Selected Bibliography

This is a selected bibliography of archival collections, periodicals, books, and articles. It is primarily intended as a reference tool and not as a comprehensive list. I have only included the archival collections or periodicals that I consulted extensively. It also contains sources that influenced the direction of this dissertation but that are not cited in the footnotes. Primary sources such as legal cases, letters or periodical articles are not directly included, though many of these came from the paper collections or periodicals listed below.

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