

**Unitarian Universalist Roots - Ancient & Modern**  
(With a brief, unauthorized history of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee)

**1997 by Jeremy Taylor**

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## I. The Ancient Religious Principles

### The Earliest Unitarians

As the hybrid name suggests, there are two basic historical strands to the Unitarian Universalist tradition: the Unitarian thread, and the Universalist thread.

Unitarianism, although it reflects a universal human impulse toward intellectual liberty and freedom of conscience, begins historically as an early European, Christian “heresy”. The earliest “Unitarians” were passionately believing Christians. They did not call themselves “Unitarians” at that time, (at least that we know of.)

### “Michael Servitus” & the “Convivencia”

The name “Unitarian” does not appear in manuscript form until the Reformation, in association with the Spanish astrologer/theologian/martyr, Miguel Servet, whose name is usually Anglo-Latinized as “Michael Servitus” - in large measure, I suspect, in an effort to obscure the profound debt that Unitarianism and the Unitarian movement owes to the Iberian/Sephardic/Islamic culture of the “Convivencia”, which shaped Servet’s religious imagination. The “Convivencia” was an urbane, multi-ethnic, poly-religious culture made up of Moslems, Christians, and Jews in Spain that existed from roughly the end of the 8th century until 1492 when the “Moors” and Jews were expelled from Spain by royal edict, bringing the Convivencia to a close. For almost 800 years prior to the Expulsion, the cities of Southern Spain were the setting for a culture that modeled religious toleration and mutual forbearance, (and occasional genuine respect), in actual, gritty, conflictual practice, over many generations... Western civilization as a whole

owes a huge (and generally unacknowledged) debt to the lasting legacy of the Convivencia. Not only do we find the unmistakable roots of Servet’s Unitarianism in this culture, we also owe our knowledge of the ancient Greek and other Classic authors to this rich, cross-cultural mix, which preserved knowledge of Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Ptolemy, and the rest - indeed, the whole intellectual heritage of the ancient world which had been lost during the so-called “Dark Ages” in Europe - and reintroduced it into Western thought through Arabic translations...!

### “Unitarians” at the Earliest Christian Church Councils

Centuries before Servet, (centuries even before the initial Islamic conquest of the Iberian peninsula), the earliest “unitarians” may be discerned in the historical record, clearly espousing the same principles, and revealing the same attitudes that mark Unitarians, even today - (not the least of which is that they/we have always tended to be intellectually proud and terminally over-educated.)

These early unitarians came to the earliest Church Congresses, (called to “establish uniform order” after the Emperor Constantine declared Christianity as the new state religion of the Roman Empire), speaking and writing from a position of authority based on their superior scholarship. They said, in effect, “We have read Q Source’ in the original Aramaic, and you folks are only fooling around with corrupt Greek translations, and those translations are particularly unreliable in those passages that purport to suggest that God comes in three parts’. We believe, on the basis of our more careful and accurate reading of the Scriptures, that God comes only in One piece...” (The “unit” in “Unitarian”

refers to the unity and singularity of the Divine, as revealed in the canonical Biblical narrative.)

On the basis of this (somewhat idiosyncratic) reading of the scriptural texts, they argued that there was not sufficient justification in the revealed Word of God to require a belief in Trinity as an entrance card into the community of the faithful.

For what appear now to be fairly obvious reasons, (not the least of which appears to be a kind of intellectual arrogance), they lost the debates, and when they subsequently refused to accept the will of the (less-educated) majority as a revelation of “Divine Truth,” they were declared heretical and expelled from the meetings.

### **An Alternative Unitarian View of the “Trinity”**

As an aside, it appears to me that there is another, perhaps even more important reason for the “defeat” of the early unitarians at the Council of Nice in CE 325, and thereafter. Theological “Trinitarianism” is a recurrent, universally symbolic (archetypal) expression of the fact that all human experience, (and experience of the of the Divine in particular), always “comes in three parts”. All waking consciousness exists in three “modes”: as memories of the past, experiences of the present, and anticipations of the future. At one level, these are “The Three That Are One”, “Father, Son and Holy Ghost”, “Maiden, Matron, and Crone”, etc., (which, as the scriptures and sacred narratives of world religion all suggest, can only be comprehended “in the fullness of time”.) This compelling, universally appealing symbolism of “The Trinity” is, among other things, a reflection of the universal conscious human experience of time. It turns out over and over again that “Trinitarianism” holds more energy, and commands more loyalty, than any coldly intellectual refutation of its “validity” in any particular text or translation...

### **The “Golden Thread” of Religious Freedom**

Whatever the complex of reasons, these earliest unitarians failed to persuade their co-religionists that God was/is/will always be a single, changeless Unity and not a Trinity. When they subsequently refused to accept the spiritual, economic, and political authority of the majority of Constantine’s “orthodox” bishops, they were branded as “heretics” and expelled from the newly formed “Holy Church of Rome”. Immediately thereafter, when (metaphorically speaking) they gathered on the front steps, one step ahead of the angry crowd with torches (that has been pursuing them/us ever since), they made the unhappy discovery that having come to a clear agreement on what there was not sufficient justification in scripture to believe, they then found it impossible to come to the corresponding agreement on what there was sufficient justification in scripture to believe - (their interpretations and convictions were simply too diverse and varied) - and so they were forced, somewhat reluctantly and unhappily, to the conclusion that has characterized the movement ever since: “There shall be no creed - the community of the faithful shall be bound together by other means than credal statement.”

### **The “Golden Thread” of Individual Conscience**

This rejection of the legitimacy of any external theological authority in general, and the whole idea of “creed” in particular, was in effect an affirmation of the absolute primacy of individual (preferably well- educated) conscience in all matters of religion and religious belief. This affirmation of the absolute primacy of individual conscience runs as the proverbial and clearly visible “golden thread” through the history of Unitarianism from then to now...

It is also worth noting that while our “unitarian” forbears may have been “wrong” about the symbolic resonance and archetypal truth of “The Trinity”, the gift of spiritual freedom and

independent, responsible, creative agency that they bequeathed to us (with their martyred blood) out of that “error” is, in my view, worth far more than any affirmation of the “Trinity” could have been, then or now...!

### **Universalism - The Global “Heresy”**

If Unitarianism is an essentially Western, Christian, “intellectual”, doctrinal “heresy”, then Universalism, on the other hand, must be seen as a “global heresy”, not limited to any particular historical and cultural circumstances. There are “Universalist heretics” in all the great world religions, (and all the “minor” ones as well, as near as I can make out...)

What binds the Universalists together out of all the various traditions from which they come is a train of theological thought, intuition, and argument that goes more or less like this: “If you are really thinking about God, (and not just about “some aspect” or “limited attribute” of the Divine, but attempting to focus on the Divine Itself, in all its ineffable fullness), then it is impossible,” (say the Universalists) “to imagine anything that does not come from God... (God is, after all, by definition, the Eternal Source and Support of ALL), and for that reason, it is equally impossible to imagine anything that does not return to God in the end... Therefore,” say the Universalists from all their various cultural and theological perspectives, “there is NO eternal damnation...” The “universal” in “Universalist” refers to universal salvation.

It is from this history that the classic joking comparison between Unitarians and universalists emerges: “Unitarians believe that Man (sic) is too good to be damned by God, and Universalists believe that God is too good to condemn Man.” (For all too many UU clergy, this joke embodies their whole knowledge of universalism.)

### **Global Universalist Theology**

The specific piece of theological conviction that unites all the Universalists from all the various world religious traditions is a rejection of the notion of “eternal damnation”, on what are, essentially, “aesthetic grounds”. They propose that it is grotesque in the extreme to imagine anything worthy of the noble name(s) of God that would behave in any other fashion. Universalist Hindus, Universalist Moslems, Universalist Zoroastrians and Manicheans, Universalist Jains, Universalist Jews, Universalist Buddhists, Universalist Native Shamans and Medicine Women, (the list is endless...) - ALL say, in their own cultural vernacular and particular historical contexts, that the Divine simply does not give birth to the world and suffuse it with His/Her/Their/Its Essence in order to throw any of those “pieces”, or “reflections”, or “sparks” away forever... The “reconciliation of each with all” may take a very, very long time - but the ultimate outcome is not in any real doubt: in the end, ALL are saved.

### **Christian Universalism**

Christian Universalists put their own particular spin on this general, archetypal theological argument by saying that “It was the purpose of the life and ministry of Jesus, in late Imperial Roman times, over at the Eastern end of the Mediterranean, to save humankind from sin - and that is exactly what he accomplished. Because of the life and ministry of the god/man, Jesus, there is no sin bad enough - there is no sinner bad enough to ultimately separated from God in the end. In the final analysis, through Jesus Christ, ALL are saved...”

### **Christian Universalism as a Non-Credal Faith**

Out of this conviction, the Christian Universalists came to the question of creed and dogma head on,

(unlike their Unitarian brothers and sisters.) They said, “There is simply no point in separating the saved’ from the damned’ on the basis of credal statement. All are saved, and to divide the human community up in such a fashion simply prolongs the agony, and postpones the moment of the great reconciliation. So - There shall be no creed, The community of the faithful shall be bound together by other means than credal statement...”

Of course, by saying this, the Christian Universalists were saying exactly the same thing as their Unitarian brothers and sisters, and in so doing, they were affirming exactly the same basic theological principle, (although for slightly different reasons): “There is no legitimate authority in the universe superior to the authority of (preferably whole-hearted, passionate, and sincere) individual conscience”...

### **Christian Universalism in North America**

These two numerically small, intellectually cranky, politically left-wing, Protestant Denominations move through the history of the European colonization of North America, like horses in the same traces - the Unitarians tending to minister to the wealthy, the privileged, and the terminally over-educated, and the Universalists tending to focus their ministries on the poor, the dispossessed, the illiterate, and what liberal Catholic and Anglican theologians tend to call “the anuwim.”

Early Christian Universalist refugees from religious persecution in Europe were instrumental in the drafting and passage of the Declaration of Freedom of Conscience by the Pennsylvania Assembly in 1682, (and it is also worth noting that there was an ancient and vital tradition of “universalism” among the native peoples of North America for what appears to be thousands of years before their arrival.)

### **The First Bible Published in North America**

Many of the earliest European Universalist colonists of North America were printers and publishers by trade, and the first Bible printed in North America was published by Universalists, on a press brought over in pieces by refugee Universalist families expelled from Berlinberg, Germany. To escape religious and political persecution, the Berlinberg Universalist communards dismantled their press, and each family brought pieces of it across the Atlantic as part of their personal baggage. When they all gathered again in Pennsylvania after the arduous ocean crossing, they reassembled the press and proceeded to print the first Bible published in North America - an edition of George deBonneville’s polishing of Martin Luther’s translation of the New Testament, with all the proof-texts demonstrating the promise of universal salvation underlined in red!

### **Universalism and “The Slavery Question”**

Some historians argue that Universalism was the most populous religion in the United States, (or, at least, that it was the most widely held theological position) in this country, just before and after the Civil War. For obvious theological and socio-economic reasons, Christian Universalists were always in the vanguard of the anti-slavery movement from its very earliest beginnings. John Woolman, the earliest American anti-slavery crusader to appear clearly in the written historical record, was clearly and self-proclaimedly a “universalist” Quaker, who rejected the notion of eternal damnation, (even for “the sin of holding slaves...”).

After the Civil War, the Christian Universalists, (particularly the “shell-shocked” Universalist combat veterans), gathered in conference and decided that their noble history of proselytizing through the written word had been “an elitist mistake”, implying that “only the literate could be saved”... Out of this millenarian, egalitarian sentiment, they voted to abolish their official

printing houses, and close their seminaries - (because, of course, an institutional distinction between the “laity” and the “clergy” was a further indication of a failure to offer salvation on an equal basis to “all sinners”) - and focus their efforts for universal salvation on the Westward expansion and preaching “from the Spirit” rather than from any written text...

In a few short decades, many, if not most of the old Universalist churches, publishing houses, and seminaries were closed, and “Universalism” as an American religious movement slipped slowly below the sights of historians focussed on “texts” as the main source of historical evidence.

### **The Merger in 1961**

In 1961, the continuing decline in population of the remaining Universalist institutions forced the remaining “rump caucus” of Universalists, (the heirs of those Universalists who had not followed the idealistic move Westward, or acquiesced in the abandonment of literacy as a primary tool of civilizing culture - the descendants of the Universalist preachers, medical doctors, printers, theological school professors, and just plain folks who had held out for almost 100 years), reluctantly followed the lead of their official youth organization, and voted to merge with the Unitarians and form a new institution, the current Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA).

A couple of years earlier, the Universalist Youth Alliance had merged with the corresponding youth organization of the Unitarian Church, forming a separate and autonomous organization known as “LRY” - Liberal Religious Youth”. (I was an “LRYer” myself, joining the group in Buffalo, New York, in 1959. Membership and participation in LRY was one of the most important formative elements in my adolescence and has deeply shaped my adult life. I am a UU Minister today largely because of my experience in LRY.)

### **The “Lost Tribe” of Universalists**

It was not until the early 1970’s that I became aware of a “lost tribe of Universalists” through the unique ministry of Reverend Kirby Hensley and the Church of Universal Life in Modesto, California. Reverend Hensley became known nation-wide for his willingness to officially and legally ordain anyone who asked, for free, and without any tests or obligations. In his biography of Kirby Hensley, *The Modesto Messiah*, (Universal Press, Bakersfield, 1977), Lewis Ashmore points out that Hensley was raised purposely by his parents (for radical egalitarian theological reasons) to be illiterate. As a boy, he was forbidden to learn to read, (something he did only later in his life as an adult.) Instead, he was encouraged to learn the entire New Testament by heart - the primary “oral tradition” in the community of believers in which he was raised in Appalachia.

Interestingly enough, his habitual preaching texts turn out to be exactly the same as those underlined in red in deBenneville’s Bible! Kirby Hensley’s “wrinkle” on the 19th Universalist egalitarian salvation principle was not to abolish the clergy, but to abolish the laity! (The account of Hensley’s life and ministry offered by Ashmore makes very interesting reading, particularly with regard to the reality, vitality, viability, [and irony!] of “illiterate peoples’ movements” that shape the societies in which they exist, but do not leave a lot of written evidence behind...!)

## **II. Intermezzo**

### **The Two Basic Principles of Psycho-Spiritual Inquiry**

I mention these tid-bits of Unitarian Universalist history for two primary reasons: first: I believe that our history, (particularly the Universalist side of our tradition), is vastly misunderstood and under-appreciated, and second: I am convinced that a person’s “theology” - his or her deepest convictions about and attitudes toward

the Divine and its relationship to the world-as-it-appears-will inevitably be both a clear reflection of, and a prime determiner of, that person's attitude toward "the unconscious" - the realm of energy and experience beyond the boundaries of ordinary waking self-awareness.

### **Dreams, Liberal Religion, and the Evolution of Consciousness**

I am convinced that the most important fact about us human beings is that we are unconscious. Put another way, it is clear that we are still evolving, (and that what is to come is very likely to be even more interesting and important and exciting than what has already transpired... and that's saying a mouthful!) Put in yet another way, (using more traditionally "theological" language), I am convinced that the "Book of Revelations" is not closed, and that "more will be revealed."

That which is to be revealed is that which is still "unconscious" in us today, and for that reason, (among others), the study of the nature and structure of "the unconscious" is almost certainly the most important and potentially productive area of inquiry available to us at the close of the 20<sup>th</sup> century... I would argue that one important way of formulating the dire crisis of global ecology, world culture, and planetary survival that we face today is that it is the direct result of the disparity between the tremendously sophisticated knowledge we possess about how to manipulate the physical world to gratify our needs and desires, and the crude-to-non-existent knowledge we possess about our own unconscious depths - the place where those contradictory, self-destructive "needs and desires" arise in the first place... The crisis we face in the world today is a crisis of evolving consciousness.

Freud is correct to this extent: the dreams we remember from sleep are, indeed, "the royal road to the unconscious". Dreams are by far the most universally available, most compelling, and most potentially useful indications of the workings of the unconscious that we have. Sandor Farenzi

is also correct: "Dreams are the workshop of evolution". If we are to evolve our individual and collective self-awareness with sufficient speed and clarity to avoid the disasters we are creating for ourselves out of our partial consciousness, then paying close attention to dreams and learning to understand more about their multiple messages and gifts of increased awareness is a very important activity.

### **Exploring Dreams**

There are two basic principles which I espouse and practice in the effort to understand the unconscious in general, and dreams in particular, more fully:

- (1) Only the dreamer can say with any certainty what-so-ever what meanings his or her dreams may hold - (a clear reflection of the "Unitarian" principle of the primacy of individual conscience in all matters of deepest meaning and importance) and,
- (2) ALL dreams come ultimately in the service of health and wholeness - (a clear reflection of the "Universalist" principle that "all are saved" - that the spark of the Divine resides at the [unconscious] center of all experience and personality...)

### **Even "Nightmares" Come to Help**

Even the most distressingly "negative" dream experiences, (the ones we tend to call "nightmares"), exist primarily to draw our conscious attention to important symbolic information about our lives that we might otherwise be in danger of missing, (particularly if it were brought to our attention in more seemingly benign, but less intrusive and memorable fashion...)

One of the most important survival strategies of more highly evolved species is the development of consciousness to a sufficient degree that it

can discern threat at a sufficiently early stage to avoid it. Those individuals and species that are able to pull off this “trick of consciousness” tend to survive at a higher rate than those who fail to develop their consciousness to this degree. One consequence of this evolution of consciousness is that when “the deep unconscious source within” has information of particular value and importance to waking consciousness, it is very likely to dress that material up in the nasty, distressing, threatening form of a “nightmare” because we are inherently predisposed to pay attention to information that enters our field of conscious awareness in that fashion - (as opposed to material that enters our awareness in a more seemingly supportive and benign fashion...)

As I am fond of saying, you can be an under-paid graduate assistant in the Sleep Lab at Harvard, and you can be absolutely convinced that Alan Hobson is correct, and that dreams are simply the “epiphenomena of disturbed metabolism”, and your nightmares will wake you up with your heart pounding anyway! The dream addresses us from a depth of deep, common, shared humanity that transcends our waking opinions and convictions. No amount of intellectual certainty that dreams are meaningless will protect a person from their deeper emotional impact and implicit significance.

### **“Wake up! Pay attention...!”**

For this reason, I would offer you the thought that the generic message of every nightmare you’ve ever had, every nightmare your kids ever crawled into your bed to tell you in the middle of the night, every nightmare any creature has ever had is: “Wake up! Pay attention! There is a survival issue at stake in your life at this moment that you can respond to creatively and effectively, if you only notice it in time...!”

In my experience, these two basic principles, (that all dreams come ultimately in the service of health and wholeness, and that only the dreamer can say with any certainty what

meanings his or her dreams may hold), can be applied to the exploration of dreams (and other manifestations of unconscious life, awake as well as asleep) to facilitate the self-examination and self-exploration that appears to be absolutely necessary for our individual and collective survival. Dream work regularly taps the wisdom and creative energy of the unconscious. Working with dreams in this way also clearly demonstrates the value of the basic, archetypal, symbolic pattern of these two basic, Unitarian Universalist theological principles in actual psychological, interactive human practice.

## **III. A Brief, Unauthorized History of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee**

### **The Modern Background**

In the 1920’s and 30’s, it was a “tradition” that the delegates to General Assembly of American Unitarian Association (AUA) would vote a significant annual contribution to the work of the American Friends’ Service Committee (AFSC). The received wisdom in the North American Unitarian movement at that time was that the Friends (Quakers) were more experienced, (and probably even more informed and dedicated) in the area of direct service to suffering humanity than the Unitarians, and that there was no good reason to “compete” with their programs, in what might be a wasteful duplication of effort and squandering of resources by having a separate, specifically and officially “Unitarian” structure for delivering humanitarian relief and community development services. The Quakers, it was believed, “were doing the work in their world” that most Unitarians wanted done, and the best thing to do was to support them in doing it in as generous and efficient a way as possible...

## **The Spanish Civil War - The Shape of Things to Come...**

However, when the fascist forces of Generalissimo Franco defeated the leftist/loyalist forces of King Ferdinand in the Spanish Civil War, there was a mass exodus of loyalist troops across the Pyrenees into France, fleeing the death squads and summary executions at the hands of Franco's victorious forces. Most of these Spanish refugees congregated in the French town of Toulouse, and in makeshift camps in the surrounding countryside.

### **Noel Field**

An exceptionally energetic operative of the AFSC named Noel Field was working in Europe at the time. Field was deeply moved by the plight of the Spanish Civil War refugees in France, and made passionate appeals to his employers at the AFSC in Philadelphia for general and specific aid programs for the Spanish refugees in Toulouse, but was unable to persuade the AFSC to support any "emergency refugee relief project" in France. Apparently, the mix of left-wing political beliefs generally shared by the Spanish War veterans - (ranging as they did from anarchism, and syndicalism, to various permutations of Marxist-Leninism) - made helping them directly "too political" for the majority of carefully "a-political" American Friends...

### **An Aside on "The Politics of Caution"**

My own view is that all such attempts to "stay clean" and steer clear of politics" in this way are always inherently political. They always support the status quo, whether people desire that to be the result of their "a-political" policies or not. Such "a-political" self-censoring efforts also always tend to contribute to an overall atmosphere of fear and repression that masquerades as "wisdom and circumspection", and in fact, directly serves the interests of whatever oppressive power structure has created the atmosphere of excessive fear and

"caution" to begin with... It was true then, and I believe it is still true now: In a nut shell:"There are some things about which it is immoral to be polite..."")

## **The Founding of the Unitarian Service Committee**

Having failed to move his Quaker employers, Field went to his Unitarian minister friend, Steve Fritchman, whose sympathies in the Spanish Civil War were a matter of public record. Apparently Field persuaded Fritchman that the era of "gentlemanly support" of the AFSC by the UA should come to an end because the general Unitarian sympathy for and estimation of the historical importance of the loyalist struggle in Spain against fascism was not being reflected in the programs of the AFSC.

Fritchman mobilized support for the idea of a separate Unitarian humanitarian relief agency, and succeeded a year later in persuading the General Assembly of the Unitarian Association to create a new agency, the Unitarian Service Committee (USC), and to hire Noel Field as its first, "field director."

Strengthened by this success at home, Field continued his work among the Spanish refugees in earnest. In the years that followed, Field, acting in the name of, and funded by the USC, developed deep ties of trust and support in the Spanish refugee community - so deep, that his work resulted in the establishment of an "underground railway" responsible for saving hundreds, (if not thousands) of people from torture and death at the hands of the Nazis and their allies across Europe, as the fascist military take-over of Europe begun in Spain continued to spread. This work was funded all during the war by contributions from the UA, and from individual Quakers, and others, who shared Field's and Fritchman's vision of the importance of a humanitarian relief and rescue effort "behind enemy lines."

## **The USC in the Cold War**

When the war ended, the infrastructure that Noel Field had supported and nourished was still in place, and seems to have been a natural progression for him and the USC to continue their rescue efforts - now focussing on saving people from torture and death at the hands of the forces allied with Joseph Stalin. On into the 1950's, Field, still serving as "Director" of the Unitarian Service Committee, although apparently he had not set foot in the U.S. for years. He continued to supervise and provide direct aid to war refugees, and to spirit targeted individuals and their families out of danger in the new totalitarian regimes of Eastern Europe, (and, it is rumored, from Soviet Russia itself...)

Field himself was eventually arrested in Czechoslovakia and accused of being "an American spy". (Costa-Gavras' motion picture, *The Prisoner*, [not to be confused with the Alec Guinness film of the same name, about a fictionalized Cardinal Mindzenty] is a lightly fictionalized account of the last days of Noel Field in the Czech prison where he eventually died, and the un-named "American philanthropic organization" for whom the film's protagonist worked was the Unitarian Service Committee...)

## **The Home Front**

Meanwhile, back in North America, the anti-communist reaction, and its self-appointed leader, Joseph McCarthy, were in full cry. When Noel Field was detained in Czechoslovakia, several Unitarians banded together under the leadership of Homer Jack to "cleanse the USC of its Communist influence", and "restore the confidence of the UU movement" in the USC and its overseas programs. Noel Field was fired from his position as (absentee) Director of the USC while he languished in prison, and a new Director, Donald Sabin, was installed.

## **The USC Under Donald Sabin**

Sabin's primary qualification for the job appears to have been his recent tour of service as civilian administrator for the Japanese Internment Project. The "camps" at Tule Lake, Manzanar, and the rest of the racial concentration internment centers in the Western United States were all under his direct administrative authority. When Donald Sabin arrived at the USC, he brought with him as his second-in-command a man named Harold Bacek. Bacek had been the Naval Intelligence Officer assigned as "Liaison" to Sabin during the Japanese Internment.

The two of them ran the domestic and overseas operations of the USC, (and the later organization, the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee - UUSC - formed after the merger of the two Denominations in 1961) for almost 20 years, in close cooperation with U.S. Government Agencies, particularly including the U.S. Agency for International Development (AID), (a name that should be familiar to all as an organization that has been used by the Civilian Intelligence Agency [CIA] as a "cover" in a number of instances...)

## **The Story Gets Personal**

I entered this scene at the UUSC in 1969 when I was "drafted" - (in my case, "called to do my Alternate Civilian Service as a Conscientious Objector to War".) I came to the UUSC to fulfill my "military obligation" under the law at a time when Don Sabin was preparing for retirement. I was told by the then- Director of Domestic Programs, Rev. Dick Nash, that I should "lie low" and "take it easy" until Sabin retired, because Dick believed, on the basis of private conversations with Harold Bacek, the "heir apparent" to the Directorship of the UUSC upon Sabin's retirement, that "a new era" of more bold, liberal, and exciting programs would be inaugurated by Bacek, once he was in office. (It was during this period of relative inactivity that I read through the files in the Domestic Programs

Office, and had occasional lunches with other, retired USC and UUSC employees and consultants in Boston, and learned the history of the agency that I have presented here...)

### **The “Saigon Project” in a Nutshell**

Soon after Don Sabin retired and Harold Bacek took over, Dick Nash resigned, in protest over the “betrayal” of the promises he perceived himself to have received from Bacek regarding a change in the direction of UUSC programs and policies, particularly in relationship to programs directed toward the needs gay and lesbian communities. Dick’s departure left Sue Redfern (Spenser) and I to “hold the fort” in the Domestic Programs Office. Soon thereafter, a letter of resignation by a field staff person named Donald Feldman came into the UUSC Headquarters on Beacon Street. In that letter, Feldman accused the UUSC “Saigon Project” of being a “cover” for a clandestine military information gathering program, and not the effort to prepare the ground for “a Viet Nameese National School of Social Work” as it purported to be.

There were several efforts on the part of Harold Bacek and others to suppress the content of Feldman’s letter and his charges, but the letter was eventually made public, after the official close of a UUSC Board of Directors meeting in the Spring of 1969. These revelations led to a sit-in at the Headquarters building organized by Mass Bay area theology students, and later to a series of demonstrations and arrests at that summer’s UUA General Assembly. Held in Boston. These “commotions” prompted Dana Greeley, the then-President of the UUA, call for the creation of a “Blue Ribbon Commission” to go to Viet Nam to investigate the charges directly...

(a longer, more detailed account of these events is available on request: E-mail [DreamMC@aol.com](mailto:DreamMC@aol.com))

### **The “Blue Ribbon Commission”**

Dana Greeley appointed himself as Head of the Blue Ribbon Commission, some of whose members included Alex Jack, the primary organizer of the sit-in demonstration by Boston area theological school students, (and son of prominent Unitarian anti-communist activist, Homer Jack), and Michael Ferber, a former member of LRY and one of the students who burned his draft card on the steps of Arlington Street Church to protest U.S. Involvement in the war in South East Asia), among others. They traveled to Viet Nam separately, and cooperated in the writing of the joint report on their return.

That report was never published or released to the membership of the UUA who authorized the investigation, mainly because it came to a very “uncomfortable” conclusion - namely, that Feldman’s charges were true, but that UUSC support of, and participation in the USAID funded “Saigon Project” should continue anyway.

### **The Secret Blue Ribbon Commission Report**

When the Blue ribbon commissioners arrived in Viet Nam, and visited “UUSC/Project Saigon”, they discovered that it was a newly constructed high-rise apartment building, housing low and middle-level clerical and administrative workers in the Diem government. The basement and the first two floors were a “secure perimeter”, jointly administered by U.S. Military personnel and South Viet Nameese military. The public justification for the tight security at the UUSC Project was the necessity of protecting the government workers from Viet Cong attack. In addition to providing this “security” for government workers, the building was also the place where any and all “suspected Viet Cong operatives” apprehended in or around Saigon were brought for “interrogation” by American and Viet Nameese military intelligence officers. The evidence is overwhelming that torture took place in this building on a regular basis.

I was told that now-infamous photo of the chief of the South Viet name CIA executing the man in the street with his pistol was taken right in front of the UUSC Project, and that if the photo had been taken from the reverse angle, the name would have been clearly emblazoned over the entrance. It was apparently the habit of the chief of the South Viet Name CIA to stop by the “Project” office every morning on his way to his headquarters to see what information had been “discovered” during the previous night, and that on that day, the news was particularly bad, and he was in a particularly bad mood, and when his men brought the prisoner to him and told him what the evidence was that he was “V.C.”, in frustration, the chief simply “executed” him on the spot...

### **The Rationale for Suppressing the Commission Report**

This was situation that the UUA Blue Ribbon Commissioners discovered when they arrived in Viet Nam, These circumstances had not been known by most of the UUSC Board Members back in the U.S. Because of the standing UUSC policy prohibiting Board Members from visiting or “inspecting” UUSC overseas projects, on the grounds that they were “not sufficiently trained, or sensitive to local customs and circumstances” for their visits to have anything but a “disruptive effect” on the actual work of the various projects. Since Dana Greeley himself had called for the establishment of the Commission, this policy had not been invoked in this “special case”. As far I can ascertain (my written communications with UUSC staff and board members over the years have all gone unacknowledged and unanswered), this policy is still in place, leading me to still harbor grave doubts about the current status of UUSC overseas programs in relation to clandestine US policy.

Each member of the Commission arrived separately “in country” and was apparently “let in” by the CIA operatives on site at the Project.

The fact that the UUSC project was a cover for this military information gathering effort was not hidden, but instead each Commissioner was presented with the argument that continuation of the Project was an absolute necessity in order to bring the war to a swifter close, and to end U.S. Participation in the struggle. Each Commissioner was deeply committed to that goal, and they were slowly persuaded that “in this dire situation” the ends justified the means...

### **Ending the War “By Any Means Possible”**

Apparently (at least so I was told) the CIA operatives “confided” that the information coming into the National Security Agency (NSA) from General Westmoreland’s command was all regularly “falsified”, (with inflated “body-counts” and reports of the imminent collapse of the North Viet Name war effort, etc.), and that the only reliable intelligence about just how “un winnable” the war actually was coming from the “UUSC/Project Saigon”, and for that reason, serious, intelligent, effective opposition to the war should lead any sophisticated observer to the conclusion that the perpetuation of the “Project” would ultimately lead to a quicker end to the war, and saving many more lives than were lost in the “interrogation efforts”...

### **The Religious Problem of Imagination**

It must be difficult for anyone who was not there at the time to imagine the desperation that gripped this country at that period in our history. The combination of “being let into the inner circle”, combined with the depth of conviction that the war in South East Asia had to be brought to a close by any means possible apparently froze the imaginations of the Blue Ribbon Commissioners. They submitted their “secret report” and went their various ways. I can only wonder what thought they gave to public disclosure of the information revealed to them. I can only believe that it would have

contributed to a speedier end to the war than any amount of “cleaner information” coming into the NSA from “UU Project - Saigon”. My personal suspicion is that the Achilles’ heel of elitism, to which Unitarians have vulnerable throughout our history, was once again our undoing in this case. The Blue Ribbon Commissioners did not imagine that an open debate, within the denomination, and ultimately in the public media, would have been “in the best interests” either of the Nation, or of the Denomination.

I believe they were wrong in that judgement. I believe that if our tradition suggests any generally applicable principles for institutional life, it is the precept that ideas and moral issues are best addressed and clarified in the cauldron of public discussion and debate, so that individuals can make up their own minds on the basis of equal access to the facts.

### **The Problem Today**

All this would simply be “a lesson of history” with little relevance to today’s liberal religious movement were it not that the UUSC apparently still receives much of its funding for over seas programs from anonymous “family foundations”, many of which have headquarters “inside the beltway” in and around Washington D.C. - family foundations that do not appear to fund any other UU efforts. Such foundations have already been named in Congressional Committee testimony as the “new conduits” for CIA and other “covert funding”, now that AID has become exposed as a notorious cover for clandestine policy operations of the US intelligence establishment. This together with the effective isolation of UUSC programs from oversight by elected representatives leaves the question of the current purpose and status of many UUSC programs still in doubt.

Even beyond the possibilities of continuing abuse of the trust of the UU Denomination, the deeper ethical and spiritual issues that arise from an honest appraisal of our institutional and

social/cultural/theological history remain largely unexamined.

This historical essay is an effort to address that continuing concern.

(Approx. 7000 words)