

Thom Botsford: Four Critical Books about the UUA
Reworked from 5/29 notes for UUCP
For Fairhope Unitarian Fellowship
Sunday, Aug. 28, 2022

Good morning and thanks for inviting me to speak today on some difficult issues as portrayed in several highly critical books taking our denomination to task for its attempted censorship of one minister's modest, independently published book of essays back in 2019.

When I first heard of this so-called "Gadfly Affair" a few months ago, I was surprised. It didn't sound right: Unitarians trying to condemn a man and his book! How could that happen in a tolerant, free-speech-loving denomination like ours?

First, some preliminary information about me. I'm a Fourth Principle UU, someone valuing the free and responsible search for truth and meaning above all else—since such freedom enables us to fulfill the other principles. One reason I left traditional churches was their insistence on dogma—inflexible "truths" that must be taken "on faith" without regard to critical thinking. For the past thirty years or so, Unitarian Universalism has provided a refuge to me from dogma. And I have taken great pride—perhaps too much pride—in our openness and tolerance of minority points of view.

I am also a "question mark" Unitarian Universalist. That is, I have plenty of questions but not often any answers. I think ultimately there is very little we can be certain about in this world, so I am suspicious of people who claim that they have the solutions to intractable human problems and propose paths of immediate action. I am not a social justice warrior though I sympathize with almost all of our social justice causes. It seems to me you can't be an effective "warrior" and a truth seeker at the same time. I share this information so you can understand my natural biases and inclinations.

My object today is to be a reporter—to let you know what is in these critical books so you can determine whether they are worth reading and whether the issues raised are pertinent to you and this fellowship. Our denomination, by the way, is so small that any news about it gets limited attention. It is drowned out by all the other information on the web and over the airwaves. It's easy not to notice what is

going on with the UUA or even with our local church. That's another reason I am here today. I will tell you what the UUA will not. What I say today would never appear in the UU World magazine or any other official organ of the denomination, and that's a shame. It appears that UU leadership is not so much about seeking truth as it is about overcoming racism and other forms of oppression—the new Gospel, if you will, for some of our members.

SHOW COVER OF *WOKE RACISM*

Subtitle: How a New Religion Has Betrayed Black America

I learned about the UUA's problems with dissent and free speech in a new book by the commentator and linguistics professor John McWhorter, *Woke Racism*. McWhorter teaches at Columbia University, is a regular contributor to The New York Times and a contributing editor at The Atlantic. Though he is not conservative, he is sometimes falsely accused of being on the "alt right" because of his disagreements with other Black intellectuals.

McWhorter candidly writes, "I know quite well that white readers will be more likely to hear out views like this when they are written by a black person, and I consider it nothing less than my duty as a black person to write this book. A version of this book written by a white writer would be blithely dismissed as racist. I will be dismissed instead as self-hating by a certain crowd. But frankly, they won't really mean it, and anyone who gets through this book will see that whatever traits I harbor, hating myself or being ashamed of being black is not one of them" (xiv-xv).

At this point I need to introduce two concepts: (1) antiracism and (2) "The Elect": "One can divide antiracism into three waves along the lines that feminism has been," McWhorter explains. "First Wave Antiracism battled slavery and legalized segregation. Second Wave Antiracism, in the 1970s and '80s, battled racist attitudes and taught America that being racist is a moral flaw.

"Third Wave Antiracism, becoming mainstream in the early 2010s, teaches that because racism is baked into the structure of society, whites' "complicity" in living within it constitutes racism itself, while for black people, grappling with the racism surrounding them is the totality of experience and must condition exquisite sensitivity toward them, including a suspension of achievement and conduct.

“Under this paradigm, all deemed insufficiently aware...of *existing as white* ...require bitter condemnation and ostracization to an obsessive, abstract degree that leaves most observers working to make real sense of it, makes people left of center wonder just when and why they started being classified as backward, and leaves millions of innocent people scared to pieces of winding up in the sights of a zealous brand of inquisition that seems to hover over almost any statement, ambition, or achievement in modern society” (5).

Those who follow this paradigm of Third Wave Antiracism, McWhorter labels “the Elect”—people “who think of themselves as bearers of a special wisdom granted to them for any number of reasons—empathy, life experience, maybe even intelligence. They see themselves as understanding something most do not. “They are mostly thoroughly nice people. They are your neighbor, your friend, possibly even your offspring. They are friendly school principals, people who work quietly in publishing, lawyer pals. Heavy readers, good cooks, musicians. It’s just that, sadly, what they become on this narrow but impactful range of issues, is inquisitors” (18-19).

Clearly, McWhorter includes “woke” Unitarian Universalists among these individuals:

“This Elect imperative has infected Unitarianism quite a bit ... attracting comment from within [the denomination] that neatly illustrates the nature of the mindset. Reverend Richard Trudeau has watched the “zombie” phenomenon:

These leaders—at the Unitarian Universalist Association, in our two seminaries, and in the UU Ministers’ Association—have become so committed and intransigent that I have started to think of the ideology that has captivated them as a mental virus with which they have become infected. By this analogy I do not mean to imply that they are mentally ill, of course, but only that they seem stuck in a rut (think Communism, 1917-1918). Victims of this mental state can be recognized by their calls to “dismantle our white supremacy culture” (52).

SHOW COVER OF *THE GADFLY PAPERS*

Subtitle: Three Inconvenient Essays by One Pesky Minister

AND COVER OF *THE GADFLY AFFAIR*

Subtitle: A 21st Century Heretic's Excommunication from America's Most Liberal Religion

“Reverend Todd Eklof, similarly alarmed, wrote a book, part of which critiqued this new Elect element in Unitarianism. The UU Ministers' Association censured and expelled him for it; he was also ...barred from supervising ministerial interns, leaving Unitarian ministers nationwide (with any skepticism of Elect ideology) worried about speaking out” (52).

Is Todd Eklof a sacrificial lamb? I wonder. Here's his bio: He's a former Southern Baptist minister who converted to Unitarian Universalism in 1988 and entered the UU ministry in 1999, serving a UU church in Louisville, Ky. In 2011, he became minister of the UU Church of Spokane, WA, his current position. He holds a doctorate in ministry from Meadville Lombard Theological School, among other degrees. According to the blurb on the book, he is widely appreciated for his advocacy and activism in the areas of criminal justice reform, restorative justice, marriage equality and environmental issues.

Eklof obviously takes pride in history of the Spokane church, which was founded in 1888. Only a few years later, in 1911, Religious Humanism was born in that church, he says.

Under these circumstances, “it is difficult to imagine that [more than 125 years later] I would be excommunicated from the community of Unitarian Universalist ministers for writing and freely distributing a book of dissenting essays at the UUA's 2019 General Assembly. Although I expected some backlash, given that such backlash was essentially what I was writing about, I could not have imagined how explosive my little book would become only a few short hours after I began giving it away [to] members of this venerable tradition, the most liberal religion in human history, who barely had time to read past its cover. I managed to hand out less than 200 of the 750 copies I had planned to give away before I was confronted by five members of the Assembly's so-called Right Relations Team and, before the day ended, was instructed not to return by one of the event's Co-Moderators.

Eklof continues:

“During the following twelve months I would be publicly condemned by hundreds of my colleagues, fired without cause or explanation as an adjunct professor at Meadville-Lombard Theological school, censured by the UU Ministers’ Association, learn that top leaders in the UUA had conspired with some in my own congregation to help remove me from my post, and, finally, have my professional credentials removed by the UUA’s Ministerial Fellowship Community—excommunicated from the professional community of my peers . For many, this astonishing reaction proved its points far more than reading it could have and made its impact far more potent than I could have hoped. This soft book-banning, if not burning, and the immediate condemnation and year-long harassment of its author put *The Gadfly Papers* on Amazon’s best-seller list at least twice, albeit in a very niche market. Not bad for a hastily written collection of a few self-published essays” (Eklof, *Affair* 5-6).

The UUA rejects Eklof’s characterization, of course. Spokespeople for the denomination have made the point that Eklof could have returned to the assembly if he had only agreed to meet with UUA officials for a “covenanting session.”

Eklof flatly rejected that offer, suspecting a theological lynch mob at work:

“To repeat, I have been asked to attend meetings in which my guilt had already been decided, including a meeting to discuss the ‘disruption’ my book was causing and a tribunal conducted by those who had already publicly condemned me, and I have been asked to allow my inquisitors to ‘guide’ me in a public process of restoration. To date, however, no one from the UUA or UUMA has ever asked me to attend a meeting to discuss the concerns my book raises. As an Enlightenment thinker who is part of what, until recently, has been an Enlightenment-based religion, it would be unethical for me to comply to such despotic demands” (15).

You must be thinking by now that Eklof’s little book contained something outrageous. If so, I couldn’t find it. The book is standard political discourse. I can see why some readers would disagree with Eklof and, yes, there are some barbs that may have ruffled the feathers of dutiful church folks. But, overall, only those

unaccustomed to the give and take of political or philosophical controversy would be offended.

What's in Eklof's book? Note that he bills himself as a "gadfly," a reference to the father of Western philosophy, Socrates, who was well known for stirring the pot of controversy and making folks angry. He was a brilliant pest who ultimately lost his life, drinking the hemlock rather than leaving Athens in disgrace.

One of Eklof's essays bemoans "the coddling of the Unitarian Universalist Mind" and the "safetyism" and "identitarianism" that goes along with it:

"Safetyism refers to a culture or belief system in which safety has become a sacred value, which means people are unwilling to make trade-offs demanded by practical or moral concerns" (Lukianoff and Haidt). Additionally it extends the traditional understanding of what being safe means. A focus on 'emotional safety' leads many to believe that..."one should be safe from not just car accidents and sexual assault but from people who disagree with you" (Eklof, *Papers* 2).

Identitarianism refers to our growing tendency to view ourselves as members of our special groups first and foremost. You know the groups: People of Color, LGBTQ people, women, people with disabilities, etc. I've heard people joke that there's a "safe zone" for every group at a UU convention except, of course, straight white men.

One unforgettable example Eklof sites is the reaction of trans activists to an article in the UUA World. Though the article was supportive and sympathetic, it was said to have done much "harm" because it was not written by a trans person. "The implication...is that it's now forbidden for anyone to talk about trans issues but trans people, and, by extension, any other identity group by outsiders, no matter how supportive their words may be" (*Papers* 23).

Probably the essay in *The Gadfly Papers* that most offended the UUA powers-that-be is a penetrating critique of the denomination's self-confessed White Supremacy Culture or "WSC." Eklof does not think there is sufficient evidence to say that our church is a white supremacist organization: "To rightly conclude the UUA is institutionally racist, or upholds systems of white supremacy, we need to

consider premises, if there are any, from which these conclusions rightly follow,” Eklof writes (*Papers* 87).

One book that does consider the premises is this one:

SHOW COVER OF *A SELF-CONFESSED WHITE SUPREMACY CULTURE*
Subtitle: The Emergence of an Illiberal Left in Unitarian Universalism

The author, Anne Larason Schneider, is a retired political science professor and former Dean of the College of Public Programs at Arizona State University. She previously held positions at Yale University and Oklahoma State U. and has written several scholarly books on public policy. She is a member of the Valley Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Chandler, AZ, one of the congregations where the “White Supremacy Culture” essay and its antiracist strategies were first introduced and largely rejected.

“If you think ‘White Supremacy Culture’ refers to right-wing groups that believe in the superiority of the White* race and engage in hateful and violent acts toward People of Color, then you are using the definition that 95 percent or so of the public would use, but this term is being redefined to mean something entirely different,” she notes. “The new WSC refers not simply to far-right White groups that express racial hatred toward People of Color, but has been broadened to the entire, primarily homogenous, culture of the U.S—to all White people and to all values, not just those pertaining to race. The U.S. culture, so the argument goes, was designed by and for White people to the detriment of People of Color. All White people benefit from it, therefore are complicit in it, and by extension, are White Supremacists” (Schneider 7). **The author capitalizes “White” as well as “Black.”*

... “By defining down the term, flattening it to encompass all White people from all parts of the political spectrum including those who abhor racism, this movement is identifying as enemies the very people needed as allies in anti-racist, anti-oppression work,” Schneider writes. “The new WSC advocates are risking alienating many classic liberals, progressives, moderates, and conservatives who want to eliminate racism but who believe other strategies will be more effective” (8).

A pressing issue for Schneider, McWhorter, and Eklof...is that criticisms of the WSC paradigm “are being shut down, silenced, through authoritarian-style name calling and ‘gaslighting’ and with comments such as these: ‘The fact that you object to the term WSC just proves that you actually are a White Supremist,’ or, ‘You just aren’t woke yet,’ or, ‘If you don’t agree with me then you simply have not been listening.’ The end game of this cycle—White privilege, implicit bias, microaggression--can be White fragility...producing a never-ending cycle that will do nothing to reduce racial disparities or create more sympathetic attitudes and behavior by White people.”

Schneider continues:

“The UU model...which is to apologize for the harm done by microaggressions and intensify one’s efforts is exemplary. But the question is whether the continued use of training programs that emphasize White privilege...will typically produce the...loving and kind responses we [need]. That is far from certain, particularly given the way these concepts are being weaponized.

“When the self-confessed WSC of the UUA is used to ban a UU minister and stop him from continuing to distribute his book at a UU General Assembly, then surely it is time for a new way” (154-155).

SHOW COVER OF *USED TO BE UU*

Subtitle: The Systematic Attack on UU Liberalism

What You Need To Know, What You Need To Do

Frank Casper, one of the authors of this self-published book, has been a member of the UU Congregation of Atlanta since 1993. He has served in several positions there including head of Adult Religious Education and is now lay minister emeritus after 10 years of experience in the Atlanta congregation. He has preached throughout the Mid-South District.

The other author, Jay Kiskel, has been a member of the Northwest Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Atlanta since 1988. He has served on the congregation’s board as well as on the Mid-South District board. He is currently president of the Universalist Convocation, which sponsors annual meetings so Universalists can gather and celebrate their heritage.

Both Casper and Kiskel are active with the Fifth Principle Project.

The UU Fifth Principle upholds “the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and society at large.” Alarmed, Casper and Kiskel seriously doubt that most UUs are democratically represented in our General Assembly or by the UUA leadership:

“Nearly a decade ago changes to the Association’s bylaws weakened the role of democracy in the denomination. Those changes consolidated our 19 districts into five regions and eliminated the representation of local UUs on the board in favor of at-large members,” they explain.

“Another significant change was the creation of a central Nominating Committee as opposed to the decentralized district method, to identify candidates for the UUA Board of Trustees.

“This centralized committee has among its objectives to bring diversity with regard to race, gender, and sexual orientation or identity to the composition of the board. The committee may have achieved its objective of diversity, but, in our opinion, has failed to achieve diversity of thought and is now essentially a gatekeeper to preserve the ideological mindset of the board” (Casper 2).

“...Consider the 2017 declaration by the UUA Board of Trustees that UUism is based on white supremacy and is racist and oppressive. That decision, rendered in 90 minutes by only a handful of people, clearly was not subjected to critical debate or considerations regarding the ramifications such a decision would have on UUism.” The charge that UUism harbors white supremacy “has set into motion activities that could very well result in inappropriate changes to our principles and upend our congregational autonomy” (3).

Casper and Kiskel make the case that “Liberatory Theology” is behind these changes.

“We are now in a better position to understand the new liberatory theology that the UU leadership is working to establish as the new UU orthodoxy,” the authors write. “This is a broad and far-reaching effort to move our denomination toward a

more ecclesial rather than an associational religious institution. This implies the right to exercise coercive jurisdiction, to admonish UU members, ministerial or lay, who have not conformed to its view, and if needed, to punish them. The trend here is simply unmistakable. There is an ever-increasing effort across the board to emphasize covenants that carry consequences for dissent with re-interpretations of our principles, stressing community, responsibility, and “right relations” over conscience, congregational autonomy, and freedom.”

There is even a proposed 8th Principle: “We, the member congregations of the UUA covenant to affirm and promote journeying toward spiritual wholeness by working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and in our institutions.”

Wrong approach and wrong tone, say Casper and Kispel.

Also, we might ask what is meant by “spiritual wholeness.” And who among us will determine accountability for not “dismantling racism”? Finally, why aren’t our First and Second principles adequate? One proclaims the “inherent worth and dignity” of every person, and the other calls for “justice, equity, and compassion in human relations.”

Casper and Kiskel fear that “the Enlightenment discourse of reason, individual rights, science, and evidence that undergirds our liberal faith [has] become a threat to the moral imperative of anti-racism and anti-oppression, which has been declared the core of our new liberatory theology. [As a result] Discourse must be monitored and transgressions punished” (140-141).

Hence my title for today’s talk: “A New Dogma?” If that Eighth Principle is adopted, we will inevitably weaken the fourth and the fifth principles. Antiracism and anti-oppression taken to the limit cannot tolerate freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, or even democracy itself when it doesn’t deliver the desired outcomes. Tellingly, it demands that we accept much on faith, not reason. Beware.

Works Cited

Casper, Frank, and Jay Kiskel. *Used To Be UU: The Systematic Attack on UU*

Liberalism; What You Need To Know, What You Need To Do. Self published, 2021.

Eklof, Todd F. *The Gadfly Affair: A 21st Century Heretic's Excommunication from America's Most Liberal Religion.* Oakleaf Press, 2021.

---. *The Gadfly Papers: Three Inconvenient Essays by One Pesky Minister,* Independently published, 2019.

McWhorter, John. *Woke Racism: How a New Religion Has Betrayed Black America.* Portfolio/Penguin, 2021.

Schneider, Anne Larason. *A Self-Confessed White Supremacy Culture: The Emergence of an Illiberal Left in Unitarian Universalism.* Self published, 2019.

.....