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INTRODUCTION

I am a black born, Unitarian bred minister of the liberal faith. I am an anomaly. This uniqueness has placed me in a dilemma. My allegiance is split. My long and enriching experience with Unitarianism has led me to a commitment to the liberal ministry. At the same time I am proud to be an Afro-American, and I realize my fate is tied to that of the black community wherein I am also committed to work. The former presents itself as a calling, the latter as a fate, but both are experienced as demands. To fulfill my duty would be simpler if these communities overlapped or encompassed one another, but how am I to meet the demands of two apparently exclusive communities? As I straddle two groups, necessity pushes me to seek an interface as grounding from which to address both communities.

This personal predicament leads me to address the general problem of the segregated nature of the Unitarian Church. Really, Unitarian Universalism's only significant penetration into the black community has been limited to a dozen inner-city churches. Frequently UU churches located in urban communities are unable to attract blacks, while in other areas there are no blacks. In our congregations we find a few black families at most, and often,

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none at all. A similar pattern is found in our ministry. Only twelve black men have been received into ministerial fellowship in this century.

This Unitarian Universalist experience is not different from that of the other mainline denominations. In fact, 90 percent of all black churchgoers belong to the black denominations. The other 10 percent belong to all-black conventions and/or churches in the white denominations, and only 1/10 of 1 percent attend congregations with a racially mixed membership.[1] Having no all-black churches, we fall in the latter infinitesimal category. Homer Jack's depiction of Sunday morning as "The Segregation Hour" is bitterly apt.[2]

Such a situation is painfully embarrassing for us, who, as advocates of racial equality, feel that the lack of a significant black presence in our churches indicates latent racism. In a survey released in 1973, Religion Among the Unitarian Universalist, Robert Tapp reported that racial integration was a high-order problem for church action in the opinions of many UU's,[3] and I am frequently asked how we can make our churches more attractive to blacks. However, since the advent of Black Power, the once sacred principle of integration is held up only

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[1] Frank S. Loescher, The Protestant Church and the Negro (New York: Association Press, 1948), p. 77. This is the most recent survey that I have discovered to date.

[2] Homer Jack, "Sunday at 11: Segregation Hour," Christian Register (October 1954), p. 15.

[3] Robert Tapp, Religion Among the Unitarian Universalist (New York: Seminar Press, 1973), p. 79.

ambivalently. We do not know how to reconcile integration with black autonomy, and the resulting paralysis has led us to acquiesce in our indecision. In this post-black empowerment era, we UU's are no longer clear enough about our values or deep enough in our thinking about race to enable us to move decisively. The late Paul Carnes, former president of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA), in reflecting on the controversy that arose out of the creation of the Black Unitarian Universalist Caucus (BUUC), said, "I've always regretted . . . that we did not process more adequately what happened to us as a people." He hoped that someone "will process this and find out what happened to our denomination in order to learn something about ourselves. . . ."[1] His statement implies what I have already asserted, that UU's do not know what their priorities are when it comes to establishing racial justice. This is a humbling realization, that we do not stand above the social attitudes of our times, as we are prone to believe, but rather, flounder about in their midst with everyone else.

This impasse is particularly frustrating for those who believe that the liberal religious message proclaims values that transcend racial, cultural, and economic differences. Many of us expect the substance of our liberal church to reflect its ideals, and in our personal and communal efforts to communicate across the before mentioned differences, we see a test of the

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[1] "Into the Deep: An Interview with Paul Carnes," Kairos (Brewster, Mass., Spring 1978), p. 12.

universality of the liberal gospel. The present reality is that the appeal of Unitarian Universalism is to a relatively narrow segment of our society, the upper middle class. William Schulz, director for Social Responsibility of the UUA, recently affirmed this point. He writes, "We are as a movement, growing whiter and whiter, safer and more suburban. The economics of Unitarian Universalism imply a cocoon-like comfort while turmoil goes on about us."[1] This raises the obvious but difficult question within the problem of segregation: Do the black and Unitarian Universalist communities hold substantially different sets of values, as a strict class analysis leads us to believe? If this proves to be true, it will, in part, explain why we have so little appeal in the black community.

The problem of segregation in our churches seems more unfortunate when we recognize that UU's have much to gain, beyond the realization of their liberal values, by having blacks in their congregations. Here, there is a potential for the kind of growth-inducing dislocation that awakens a new self-awareness--an awareness of whiteness; its beauty, its meaning, and its ramifications. A new self-awareness is essential because people can only affirm others after they have truly affirmed themselves. This can happen through hearing and appreciating the story of black Americans. Besides opening this dimension of awareness, this story also dramatizes the biblical messages of suffering and

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[1]William Schulz, "Director for Social Responsibility Reflects on UU Paradox," UU World (March 1, 1979), p. 2.

liberation in our era. A black presence in our church will daily bring to mind the meaning of oppression and the demand on all churches to combat injustice aggressively and judiciously. Finally, we might hope that the black experience could provide a resource for enthusiasm and spirituality to balance the one-sidedly intellectual quality of Unitarian Universalism.

If we look beyond the personal and denominational situation, where we have identified the problem, to the American context, we see that the pattern of racial segregation in which we are caught is pervasive in the culture itself. Robert Bellah, in The Broken Covenant, reveals the meaning of this at the deepest level. He asserts that myth, insofar as it "transfigures reality . . . [by providing] moral and spiritual meaning to individuals or societies,"[1] is the heart of a nation's self-understanding. In America, part of this self-understanding is embodied in the mythic ideal of American pluralism.

The black community stands in stark contrast to that myth and reveals its limited scope. Most Americans emigrated to this country, but the black was forcibly brought and then legally segregated from the mainstream of American life. From the black perspective, this myth was meaningless, or worse still, demonic for those who believed that the myth included them. In fact, it frustrated them and destroyed their sense of self-worth. As the story of the black American living essentially outside the mythic

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[1]Robert Bellah, The Broken Covenant (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), p. 3.

structure emerges, it challenges America's fundamental self-image. This is important in Bellah's analysis because, if the American myth is to regenerate, a development he believes is essential, it must come from a true understanding of our history. A true understanding can only come about when blacks and others have criticized the American experience from their perspectives. This thesis, while focusing on Unitarianism in particular, is also a part of this necessary criticism of American life.

In this thesis I come at the problem of segregation in Unitarian Universalism from a historical perspective. Two of our earliest black Unitarian ministers founded churches in the black community. Egbert Ethelred Brown founded a mission church in Jamaica in 1908 and founded another church in Harlem, New York City in 1920. Lewis A. McGee helped establish the inter-racial Free Religious Fellowship in Chicago's black ghetto in 1947. I will bring their experiences to bear upon the issue of segregation, but their stories are important in themselves and are, indeed, the centerpieces of this thesis. Up until now this problem has always been viewed in the white context, which meant that one could not be sure if the de facto white composition of our congregation was the overwhelming barrier for most blacks. These two ministers bring a voice to the black community without having to overcome the "color line," and their examples address the question: How does the style of a black minister with the liberal religious message work in the black community? The answer may be that the message itself did not address the community and, therefore, contributed to the segregated nature of our church.

The stories of these two pioneering, black liberal ministers, will show that the Unitarian church remained segregated, in part, because of the predominant social reality and attitudes of the pre-civil rights era. Geographically, blacks and Unitarians were segregated into different regions and neighborhoods. Economically, Unitarians generally belonged to the middle and upper classes while blacks were kept in the lower classes. Generally, their experiences were radically different. Neither group would have experienced the crucial sense of "at homeness" in the other's church.

Unitarian Universalists must realize that we have been and still are a class- and culture-bound religion inspite of our Universalist roots and Unitarian efforts to break out. Brown and McGee came to Unitarianism from Methodism which appealed to the black middle class and, in turn, the blacks they attracted were upwardly mobile and achieved a degree of economic well-being and intellectual and emotional independence from the mores of the black community. These people had already left the black religious tradition, but were reluctant to commit themselves to another church. Seeing our narrow appeal in the white community, a pragmatist would have had little hope that the liberal religious message would appeal to the black community, but idealists like Brown and McGee were motivated, as am I, in part, by our personal need to reconcile these two communities. The narrowness of the Unitarian message hampered these men in their efforts to attract the black community. I must conclude that Unitarianism remained racially segregated because it was a class-bound, culturally captive religion.

My main thesis is that the Unitarian Universalist Church will remain largely segregated until there is a two-fold transformation: one in society, the other within the church. First, on a societal level, it is imperative that Unitarian Universalists vividly recall that political freedom is the essential support of intellectual freedom. Political and economic freedom are essential; we must take seriously the cliche that until all of us are free, none of us are truly free. It is a "moral imperative," then, that we commit ourselves to the establishment of a just society. The benefit of this endeavor is the evolution of a society potentially more responsive to Unitarian Universalist values. Secondly, within our church, the transformation would begin with the strengthening of our spirituality through an enriched story--a story that exposes our commitment to freedom, shakes up our class bias, sensitizes us to the needs of others, strengthens our sense of human connectedness, and finally, inspires us to struggle for the freedom of others.

The first chapter presents a discussion of the dominant images and motifs in black religion and Unitarianism. This discussion will set the framework of the fourth chapter on which we will review the stories of Brown and McGee. The second chapter will tell the life history of Ethelred Brown and his efforts in Jamaica and Harlem to establish a Unitarian church. The third chapter will recount Lewis McGee's experience in founding the Free Religious Fellowship, I will compare and contrast his story to that of Brown in order to raise questions about the difficulties Brown faced in his ministry. Chapter four will

begin with a discussion of the American Unitarian Association's role in keeping the Unitarian church segregated. Then it will move on to analyze the message Brown preached by locating him in the description of black religion and Unitarianism developed in the first chapter. This will show why the black community was relatively unresponsive to his message. The final chapter will address the question of how Unitarianism and black religion can enrich one another.

The process of collecting the material for this thesis was arduous but rewarding. The most fortuitous event was meeting Ethelred Brown's daughter, Dorice Leslie. By the time I spoke to her, I had formed an opinion about Brown which she largely confirmed. Yet, in meeting her, I gained a sense of the tragedy of Brown's life. Researching his life was a deeply emotional experience for me, and if my writing is tinged with subjectivity, it is appropriate, for not only was I disheartened by his story, but I have a deep investment in the long term outcome of his vision.

The writing of this thesis would not have been possible without the assistance and support of many people. I am thankful to John Godbey, J. Ronald Engel, Shelby Rooks, and the senior class for reading, criticizing, suggesting new leads and insights, and encouraging me in this project. I am grateful to Lewis and Marcella McGee for allowing me to interview them and for reviewing and suggesting extensive changes in the third chapter. The editorial help of Wendy Jerome was also invaluable. Most

importantly, I thank my wife, friend, and fellow student, Donna, for having patience with me as I plodded through this thesis and for assisting me in taming my awkward sentences and unique spelling.

CHAPTER I

TWO AMERICAN FAITHS

Why does de facto racial segregation prevail within the Unitarian church? A vast cultural and economic chasm has existed between blacks and Unitarians across which it is difficult to communicate. What have the Afro-American, the descendant of bondage, and the Unitarian, the inheritor of freedom, to say to one another? Surely they have common concerns, but they have lived with this rift. This thesis will look at two attempts to make a bridge between the black and the Unitarian communities.

H. Richard Niebuhr's The Social Sources of Denominationalism describes what fostered the separation between the churches of the disinherited and the churches of the middle class. His central premise is that "denominations . . . represent the accommodation of religion to the caste system. . . . The division of churches closely follows the division of men into castes of national, racial, and economic groups."[1] I will argue that black religion and Unitarianism are simply two examples of Niebuhr's

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[1]H. Richard Niebuhr, The Social Sources of Denominationalism, Meridan, 11th ed. (New York: The World Publishing Co., 1929), p. 6. I rely on Niebuhr in this thesis for two reasons:

thesis: black religion is a religion of the disinherited, while Unitarianism is a religion of the middle class.

H. Richard Niebuhr agrees with Ernest Troeltsch that "the really creative, church forming, religious movements are the work of the lower strata."[1] He goes on to describe how these religious movements are formed and how they change into middle class churches. In this process, the form and content of the religion changes so as to exclude the lower classes. He uses Methodism as an example.[2]

Niebuhr finds that the test of genuine religiousness for the disinherited is "in the spontaneity and energy of religious feeling rather than in conformity to an abstract creed." (UUs have eliminated the common creed but not the abstractness of their individual beliefs.) As the religion becomes that "of the fortunate and cultured and has grown philosophical, abstract, formal, and ethically harmless in the process, the lower strata of society find themselves religiously expatriated." We see a shifting of world views in the lives of people who have gained a degree of economic control and a broader perspective through education. The middle class becomes increasingly concerned with the individual since in the economic arena one's personal energy, skills, and knowledge bring success, and this enhances one's sense of self-worth and power. The middle class takes on "an activist

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(1) Although first published 50 years ago, this book has become a classic and his descriptions are still accurate today; (2) Niebuhr was a contemporary and an associate of Ethelred Brown, the main figure in this thesis.

[1] Ibid., p. 29.

[2] Ibid., pp. 54-72.

attitude toward life" while the disinherited must contend with the ways of fate. The life of the lower classes is often an experience of powerlessness. What small gains are made come through solidarity and cooperation. Different religious needs emerge out of different life experiences. Salvation for the disinherited, according to Niebuhr, comes as an act of God's grace. Their gains are seen as an act of God's will and mercy. For the middle class, salvation tends to be seen as "the end of striving." "The content of faith is a task rather than a promise."[1] For the poor, the alleviation of their suffering is God's gift, while for the middle class, good works is a sign of grace. Consequently, middle class religion, responding to individualism, focuses on personal salvation, while the disinherited, seeking God's intervention for their group, tend toward millenialism and corporate redemption.

The delineation Niebuhr makes of the religion of the disinherited and that of the middle class is helpful. However, since he talks about all of American Protestantism, his analysis is too broad to give us the focus we need on the relationship between the black and the Unitarian communities. The stories of two black Unitarian ministers, Egbert Ethelred Brown and Lewis A. McGee, provide an opportunity to examine the relationship of these two communities. They were black pioneers in a white denomination who struck out to bring the message of Unitarianism to the black community. We have never adequately examined either

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[1]Ibid., pp. 30, 31, 81, 83.

of their efforts. We have not learned from our past.

How does one move from the stories of Brown and McGee to an analysis of the Unitarian predicaments? James Wm. McClendon Jr. in his Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology, proposes that an ethics of character-in-community can lead to a theological discourse, not of calculations, but of real, personal encounters with moral decisions. In these events one will see the values that moral philosophy and theology try to uncover acted out in real life situations in the context of a believing community--values that are seen, not as ideals, but as they both influence and are embodied in humanity. McClendon is concerned with values as convictions, that is, those values that set the tenor of one's life. "For as men are convinced so will they live." This is the essence of character, to act in line with one's convictions. Character is developed in community and is manifested in the "living convictions which give shape to actual lives and actual communities."[1] The raw data for theology can be found in the lives of the members of the community.

The ethics of character-in-community as recounted in biography is the realm of theology.

> The best way to understand theology is to see it, not as the study about God (for there are godless theologies as well as godly ones), but as the investigation of the convictions of a convictional community, discovering its convictions, interpreting them, criticizing them in the light of all that we can know, and creatively transforming them into better ones if possible.

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[1]James Wm. McClendon, Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974), pp. 35, 37.

The source of this theology is found in "attending to lived lives," for the life story of individual members of a convinctional community is the focus of investigation. McClendon therein claims that "biography at its best will be theology."[1] The biographies of Brown and McGee are central to the story of Unitarian religion's encounter with the black community.

How does McClendon carry out his investigation, moving from biography to theology? McClendon writes that the key to any biography is the constellation of dominant or controlling images which may be found in the life of which it speaks. People understand themselves in the context of certain images and metaphors. When I identify myself as an American, specific images emerge: the founding fathers, the War of Independence, the flag, the pioneers, the native American, the slave. Given this pool of shared images, certain images dominate any particular life, images that reveal a person's most basic motivation and self-understanding. Such images, whether derived from Greek myth, the American democratic faith, or the Bible, are basic to human religiosity. They are the means by which we locate ourselves in the world and comprehend the wonder that is life. Investigating these most basic questions revealed in individual lives from a particular community of faith is theology.

> Our biographical subjects have contributed to the theology of the community of shares of their faith especially by showing how certain great archetypical images of that faith do apply to their own lives and circumstances, and by extension to our own. In doing

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[1] Ibid., pp. 35, 37, 38.

> so, they make clearer the answer to a (preliminary) theological question, What is religion? Part of the answer is that it is just such use of images. By images, I mean metaphors whose content has been enriched by a previous, prototypical employment so that their application causes the object to which they are applied to be seen in multiply-reflected light; they are traditional or canonical metaphors, and as such they bear the content of faith itself.[1]

This chapter compares the dominant images of two religious communities. Although many images are shared, under distinctive cultural conditions different ones are emphasized. In making a comparison between Unitarianism and black religion, I hope to determine why these two communities have remained essentially closed to one another. Toward this goal, the remainder of this chapter will be a review of the works of some of the major writers in these two religious traditions. This will enable me to hold forth their distinct archetypical images.

Black Religion

> If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet depreciate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. This struggle may be a moral one; or it may be a physical one; or it may be both moral and physical; but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and never will. . . . Freedom is not a gift, freedom is won through relentless effort.
>
> Frederick Douglass
> August 4, 1857

The dominant motif in the Black-American experience is the struggle for freedom: freedom from slavery, freedom from

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[1] Ibid., pp. 96-97.

political and economic bondage, freedom of self-determination, and freedom to participate fully in American life. Many scholars argue that this struggle is not just the dominant motif of black experience, but also the essence of black religion. W. E. B. DuBois wrote:

> Freedom came to him [the free Negro leader as] a real thing and not a dream. His religion became darker and more intense, and into his ethics crept a note of revenge, into his songs a day of reckoning close at hand. The "Coming of the Lord" swept this side of Death, and came to be a thing to be hoped for in this day. Through fugitive slaves and irrepressible discussion this desire for freedom seized the black millions still in bondage, and became their one ideal of life. The black bards caught new notes, and sometimes even dared to sing,--
>
> "O Freedom, O Freedom, O Freedom over me!
> Before I'll be a slave
> I'll be buried in my grave,
> And go home to my Lord
> and be free."
>
> For fifty years Negro religion thus transformed itself and identified itself with the dream of Abolition, until that which was a radical fad in the white North and an anarchistic plot in the white South had become a religion to the black world.[1]

Cecil Cone, a black theologian, cites this passage as "typical of Dubois's tendency to reduce black religion to a political ideology and his failure to see those elements in it that transcend political activity."[2] Dubois's bias is not surprising. He was a sociologist, not a theologian, and Cone is right. Black religion cannot be reduced to political ideology. The image of freedom described in this survey has three-dimensions: the spiritual, the political, and the intellectual.

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[1] W. E. B. DuBois, The Souls of Black Folk (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publication, Inc., 1961), pp. 147-48.

[2] Cecil Wayne Cone, The Identity Crisis in Black Theology (Nashville: The African Methodist Episcopal Church, 1975), p. 21.

It is evident that blacks would be concerned with attaining their freedom. It is equally clear that the church, as the sole black institution during slavery and the only viable institution for a long time after the Civil War, would also be concerned with freedom, but there is much debate over the stance the black church has taken. Many claim that it is too otherworldly, while its defenders say that it has maintained a balance between this-worldly and otherworldly concerns. There is a pronounced tension here.

Joseph Washington in Black Religion passes this harsh judgment on the black religious institution, "The churches are foremost in their attempt to negate reality." He also sees that Negro folk religion, which he distinguishes from the black church, has its own "genius" that confronts the reality of oppression. "The Negro folk religion is fundamentally and unequivocally dedicated to freedom, expression, independence, and the rise of Negroes to equal status in the society."[1] James Cone argues that the impetus of black religion is toward liberation. After discussing his work, I will return to examine the this-worldly/other-worldly polarity in black religion.

James Cone, the most polemic and prolific of the contemporary black theologians, argues in God of the Oppressed that God is and always has been on the side of the oppressed, that blackness is the ontological symbol of oppression in America, and that the reconciliation of blacks and whites can occur only after liberation.

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[1]Joseph R. Washington, Jr., Black Religion (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), pp. 294, 297.

Liberation is both a prerequisite for and an act of freedom. Referring to the Old Testament he argues that YAHWEH "is the God of history whose will is identical with the liberation of the oppressed from social and political bondage." This is the uncompromising message of the Old Testament and one that advances through the New Testament. Jesus' primary identification is with the poor, the suffering, and the outcast. The freedom he brings them is not apolitical or otherworldly: it encompasses worldly liberation and is "more than historical freedom."[1] The loyalty of blacks to the Bible emerged in America when it was discovered that it spoke to their experience in slavery. No matter how the slave master abridged the Bible, he could not hide its basic message of freedom for the oppressed. The slaves' ability to see behind the corrupted Word they were taught was an act of critical intellectual freedom. Their reinterpretation of the biblical message and its incorporation into black religion was a creative act. The creation of spirituals was such an act. Within bondage, blacks exercised this freedom and their minds resisted slavery.

In The Spirituals and the Blues, an earlier book, James Cone seeks the themes of black life as they are heard in black music and finds they call unequivocally for freedom. "The divine liberation of the oppressed from slavery is the central theological concept in the black spirituals." Biblical images occur and

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[1] James H. Cone, God of the Oppressed (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), pp. 65, 80.

reoccur: Moses and the Exodus, Daniel in the lion's den, the river Jordan, the Promised Land, the land of milk and honey. Black slaves wanted freedom from bondage, but freedom was not forthcoming, so they sought freedom from bondage and freedom-in-bondage. To achieve a sense of dignity is a triumph for the oppressed. Yet, held in bondage the slender hope for freedom was not enough to sustain one's sense of dignity; that power must reside elsewhere. The question that remains is how did they claim freedom-in-bondage? How did they nurture their self-esteem? "The essence of ante-bellum black religion was the emphasis on the somebodiness of black slaves."[1] How could they affirm themselves? How could they experience this somebodiness? How could they seize control of their lives? Nat Turner rebelled; others fled on the underground railroad; but the vast majority had to kowtow to their masters and risk internalizing the docile slave image. They had to hide their dignity to survive.

The slave's struggle was to affirm "both his being and his being-in-community, for the two are inseparable." Remaining in community was difficult; a mother, father, or child could be torn away at any moment. Family was at best a tentative state for the slave and always the most painful loss. "That was why most of the slave songs focus on going home."[2] Home was the affirmation of the need for community whether in this life or the

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[1] James H. Cone, The Spirituals and the Blues (New York: Seabury Press, 1972), pp. 34, 17.

[2] Ibid., pp. 68, 65.

next. The meaning of freedom was as much copporate as it was individual. It meant more than individual liberty; it meant the freedom to live in community, to have a family.

Freedom is the central motif in black religion, but it is not the center of black faith. Preston N. Williams in an essay, "Black Church: Origins, History, Present Dilemmas," concedes "the primacy of freedom and equality"[1] in the thoughts of the black people, but he insists that the religious quest is broader. Black religion must give a reason for living even under the condition of slavery. In this quest for meaning, freedom alone is not enough. Freedom is the means, not the end. Freedom drives toward something. Unfortunately, the concept of freedom has posed a stumbling block for many black theologians in that it became the end of religion.

This is the thesis of Cecil Cone in The Identity Crisis in Black Theology. He points out that most black theologians have mistaken the object of faith in black religion. His brother James is one of the misguided, and he asks him where his confessional commitment lies. "Is it to the black religious experience, or to the black power motif of liberation with a sidelong glance at the black religious experience?" James Cone in overemphasizing liberation is proclaiming a form of henotheism, making a finite, socio-political experience the object of trust and loyalty. What is needed is a transcendent focus of faith. Thus, Cecil Cone

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[1]Preston N. Williams, "Black Church: Origin, History, Present Dilemmas," Andover-Newton Quarterly, vol. 9, no. 2 (November 1968), p. 112.

argues that the true focus of black faith is the all-mighty God and the conversion experience that marks this encounter. This is an ecstatic experience after which one places one's ultimate faith in God, and it is as one of God's children that one is somebody. "The dignity of man is created by God."[1]

God is the central focus of black religion. It is to Him that the slaves turned. On Him they relied, and in Him they found solace. Freedom is a by-product of the slaves' relationship to God. Their connection to Him insured and affirmed their dignity. This was the only relationship the master was powerless to sever. On the auction block and in death the slave triumphed because this freedom-in-bondage was essentially spiritual; it was a feeling, an inner-knowledge and peace; and it was inviolable.

McClendon, using the life of Martin Luther King, Jr., comes to a similar conclusion about black religion. He focuses on King's life in three times of crisis and finds that King prayed in these moments. He prayed not as a public utterance but as "the inner dialogues of a man whose last resource was not himself but God." Through the life of King, McClendon finds the essence of black religion, "a religious experience engraved in spirituals and sermons and frenzy alike, lies at the heart of that religion, and that experience is an experience of God and self at one."[2] God is the center of black faith and spiritual freedom is the means

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[1] C. Cone, Black Theology, pp. 122, 43.

[2] McClendon, Biography, pp. 75, 82.

to and the by-product of the ecstatic experience of one's relationship to God.

It is important to note that in the black spirituals "statements about God are not theologically distinct from statements about Jesus Christ."[1] There is a distinction, but it is not a matter of theology. It is a matter of the experience of his presence.

> In the spirituals God is experienced as Almighty and Sovereign and is often removed from the day-to-day affairs of people. But Jesus is experienced as a comforter in time of trouble who is readily available and always at hand.[2]
>
> "I'm a chile of God wid my soul set free,
> For Christ hab bought my liberty."[3]

To know this gave the slave a freedom that bondage could not suppress. Knowing dignity vis-a-vis his connection to God and having the support of his brother Jesus, the slave met live. In this internal freedom, slaves found strength and confidence, and knew freedom would become the external reality as well. This was the source of black hope. Frederick Douglass, in his autobiography, writes of how he was led to hope by his chief religious instructor, his Uncle Lawson:

> He fanned my already intense love of knowledge into a flame by assuring me that I was to be a useful man in the world. When I would say to him, "How can these things be? and What can I do?" his simple reply was, "Trust in the Lord." When I would tell him, "I am a slave, and a slave for life, how can I do anything?" he would quietly answer, "The Lord can make you free,

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[1] J. Cone, Spirituals, p. 47.

[2] C. Cone, Black Theology, p. 36.

[3] J. Cone, Spirituals, p. 48.

> my dear; all things are possible with Him; only have faith in God. 'Ask, and it shall be given you.' If you want liberty, ask the Lord for it in faith, and He will give it to you."
>
> Thus assured and thus cheered on under the inspiration of hope, I worked and prayed with a light heart, believing that my life was under the guidance of a wisdom higher than my own. With all other blessings sought at the mercy seat, I always prayed that God would, of His great mercy, and in His own good time, deliver me from my bondage.[1]

I have been focusing on slave religion, but the tones set in this experience, where Christianity met an African world view under the conditions of slavery, were strong. The continued existence of the black Americans as an oppressed group has sustained this drive toward freedom in our age. But it is in modern times that the always present tension between this-worldly and otherworldly religion became more pronounced. Many accuse the church of having become compensatory and otherworldly, but Cecil Cone insists that

> they fail to grasp the meaning of the other-worldly language in the black religious experience. In the black religious experience the talk about heaven, God and freedom has a double meaning. While it is true that it refers to life after death, it also refers to life here and now, the future in this life. That is, God through his gift of grace has allowed his people to experience a "foretaste of glory divine." This enables them to endure oppression and gives them the necessary strength and insight to participate with the divine in the final destruction of oppression here on earth.[2]

Despite the intended "double meaning" of this otherworldly language, and perhaps because of it, there is an undeniable tension between a this-worldly and an otherworldly focus. There is an

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[1] Frederick Douglass, Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, rev. ed. 1892 (London: Crowell-Collier Publishing Co., 1962), pp. 91-92.

[2] C. Cone, Black Theology, p. 21.

ebb and flow in which otherworldly concerns have often surged forward. The surge of otherworldly religion came as a reaction to further disillusionment. For the slaves the millenium was heralded with the Emancipation Proclamation, established in Reconstruction, and died at the hands of Jim Crow. The former slave now found himself struggling for the political freedom that was supposedly already his. The goal of freedom was less tangible than before but no less elusive, and the double meaning of freedom spoken from the pulpit became more ambiguous. While the fight for political freedom was taken up by secular organizations, the black church became increasingly deradicalized. Gayraud Wilmore in Black Religion and Black Radicalism writes that in later years the church was caught between those embittered by an "unjust God" and those educated Negroes who envisioned themselves as above the black preacher. The church retreated.

> Their churches turned inward to spiritual needs of a deprived and oppressed people who found emotional release from the victimization of the white world in the ritual and organizational effervescence of Black church life.[1]

The spiritual freedom that once gave the slave strength to carry on in bondage was mutated so that it now invited the freedman to escape this worldly plight. When participation in this world was no longer of concern, political freedom became inconsequential. Still, the impetus toward freedom, if superseded for a time, remained. It reemerged in Jesse Jackson's litany "I am somebody," which harkened back to the slave's struggle to

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[1]Gayraud S. Wilmore, Black Religion and Black Radicalism (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1972), p. 226.

affirm his dignity. It reappeared in Martin Luther King, Jr., the black Moses who went to the mountain top and saw the Promised Land. To motivate the Civil Rights movement he drew on the rich biblical tradition and particularly upon Exodus. From the Old Testament, he called forth the story of God and man acting in tandem upon history. The black quest for freedom did not die, it merely smoldered.

When the hope for political freedom was rekindled in the black soul, it was in no small part due to the ascendancy of the democratic faith in the United States. In a sermon, "The Death of Evil upon the Seashore," Martin Luther King, Jr., intertwined the images of the biblical and American traditions. He held forth Thomas Jefferson as a man tortured by the unbearable paradox of slavery in the midst of freedom. He evoked the story of the Afro-American whose singular experience ties him to this country.[1]

The black experience in America has been penetrated by the American ideal of a free democarcy. Blacks fought in the War of Independence and every other American war. Once freed, they understood that this was their heritage now. They took their seats in the Reconstruction legislatures. When ejected, they fought their way back into the political system. The back to Africa schemes did not win them. DuBois understood that blacks participated in the foundation of this country, and that slaves unwillingly sustained the nation as it grew with their labor and

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[1]Martin Luther King, Jr., Strength to Love (New York: Pocket Books, 1963), pp. 77-87.

their lives, but beyond this, he found that the black American had given an even greater gift:

> One cannot think of democracy in America or in the modern world without reference to the American Negro. The democracy established in America in the eighteenth century was not, and was not designed to be, a democracy of the masses of men and it was thus singularly easy for people to fail to see the incongruity of democracy and slavery. It was the Negro himself who forced the consideration of this incongruity, who made emancipation inevitable and made the idea of a democracy including men of all races and colors.[1]

The black American has had a hidden symbiotic relationship to this basic American ideal. Knowledge of this American ideal gave the slave and later the sharecropper and the slum dweller grounds for hope, while his hope, transformed into action, has put the American democratic faith to one of its greatest tests. When King spoke the words "I Have a Dream" during the March on Washington he united a biblical vision with the America ideal to proclaim the coming fulfillment of the American faith.

> I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.[2]

In summary, freedom has been and is the dominant image in the black American experience. But in the context of black religion, freedom is the means, not the end. The object of faith in black religion is God. Black religion is congruent with H. Richard Niebuhr's description of the churches of the disinherited. The ecstatic spiritual rapport with God, the reliance upon His

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[1] W.E.B. DuBois, The Gift of Black Folk, 1st pub. 1924 (New York: Washington Square Press, 1970), p. 67.

[2] Cited by Coretta Scott King, My Life with Martin Luther King Jr. (New York: Holt, 1969), p. 239.

grace, the absence of complex doctrines and creeds, and corporate redemption in the salvation of the black people are all elements in black religion. In our time one can see the waning of these characteristics. The lives of Ethelred Brown and Lewis McGee dramatize this transformation of the black culture.

In the following chapters as I study these two black Unitarians we will watch for the image of freedom as it appears in their lives. In black religion we have seen how freedom emerges as a three-dimensional experience. Spiritual freedom has primacy, but must hold this-worldly and otherworldly concerns in equilibrium. When otherworldly concern is paramount, black religion plunges into escapism, and when this-worldly concern dominates, God, the source of power, is forgotten. Increasingly in the modern world, political freedom has vied with spiritual freedom for the loyalty of black people, and the American democratic faith strengthens the appeal of political freedom as the object of faith. Finally, intellectual freedom, while always present and active, seems to be exercised primarily in the service of the other two.

Now I will turn to Unitarianism to see to what degree it fits Niebuhr's typology of middle class religion and to find the dominant images in the literature of that tradition.

Unitarianism

> I call that mind free which
> masters the senses,
> And which recognizes its own
> reality and greatness.
>
> William Ellery Channing
> "Spiritual Freedom"
> May 26, 1830

H. Richard Niebuhr points out that middle class religions have a tendency to be more philosophical, abstract, and formal than those of the disinherited. Unitarianism is an example of this. In searching through Unitarian literature, I found a dearth of images. No grand story of suffering emerges, but rather, philosophical discourses, lifeless histories, and theological sermons. In examining those seemingly lifeless histories, however, I found the images lay in plain sight. I was led to them by an exploration of the dominant concepts of Unitarianism, and it is there that I will begin.

Earl Morse Wilbur, in his two volume history of Unitarianism, writes that there are three guiding principles in the liberal faith: complete mental freedom, reason, and tolerance. The three are co-equal, each relying on the other to sustain it, but of the three, mental freedom is most evocative of human sentiment. Men had reason, they never really understood tolerance, but they struggled for a greater freedom of mind: freedom to exercise their reason, freedom to seek the truth, freedom to declare that truth, and freedom to live within its realm. The dominant concept in the liberal church is mental freedom.

> I call that mind free which
> jealously guards its intellectual
> rights and powers,
> Which does not content itself with
> a passive or hereditary faith.

Freedom Moves West is the title of Charles Lyttle's history of the Western Unitarian Conference. Therein he states that "freedom of thought, sovereignty of ethics [and] spiritual democracy" are the chief Unitarian principles, and in the American

move west Unitarianism was first identified with the advance of intellectual culture. He describes this spread of Unitarianism westward, and tells how the Western Conference stood stalwartly for intellectual freedom in religion against the theologically conservative and denominationally all-powerful New Englanders. In the past, mental freedom in the Unitarian church was not boundless. Freedom Moves West relates how its limits were expanded. Lyttle writes in conclusion, "Free Religion . . . guarded[ed] the mind of man from bondage. [Our task is to continue] to go forth against authoritarianism in all its ominous forms; polical, economic, religious . . ."[1] The freedom that is foremost in the heart of the Unitarian is of the mind, not that of the body, for the enslavement they struggled against was mental, not physical. Political freedom is practically an afterthought for Unitarians; it is assumed.

> I call that mind free which protects itself against the usurpation of society. And which does not cower to human opinion.

To better understand the reason for this Unitarian attitude toward mental freedom, it is instructive to examine the religious perspectives of the Unitarian's forebearers. Americans generally abide by the myth that the original Puritans were driven out of England. This is not true. "It was an act of will . . . They [came] of their own accord" to establish 'a citty on a hill.' They sought not so much to escape political oppression as to establish

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[1]Charles H. Lyttle, Freedom Moves West (Boston: Beacon Press, 1952), p. 275.

a convenanted community--a model of God's will. At its inception this community was made up of free individuals. It relied upon a limited reason in interpreting and following God's Law, but detested the Arminians who were thought to have gone too far in the "exaltation of human reason."[1] These early Puritans had no intention of tolerating doctrines that varied from those of the Puritan elect. Indeed it was, as Sidney Mead asserts, only in adjusting to the political and religious realities of colonial America that they "placed their feet unwittingly on the road to religious freedom. Thus, they came upon religious freedom not as the cheerful givers their Lord is said to love, but grudgingly and of necessity." Religious freedom in America was a compromise. It was not a tenet of any tradition save the Baptist and the Quakers, and few people brandished biblical passages justifying it. Little commitment was given to religious freedom as an active value as long as each denomination was left to go its own way. The men to whom it fell to make "sense theoretically out of the actual, practical situation which demanded religious freedom" were "the effectively powerful intellectual, social, and political leaders." They "were rationalist" and "gave it tangible form and legal structure."[2]

It is no wonder then that while there are intellectual concepts, Unitarianism has a lack of imagery. Finding little

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[1]Perry Miller, Errand into the Wilderness (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956), pp. 4, 56.

[2]Sidney E. Mead, The Lively Experiment (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), pp. 39, 36.

justification within the Bible (the deuteronomic writers were wholly intolerant of other religions), it was articulated, as by Thomas Jefferson in the "Statue of Virginia for Religious Freedom," in philosophical and legalistic terms. Religious freedom was part and parcel of the freedom of the mind the Englightenment had glorified.

Americans did accept religious freedom grudgingly. However, comparatively little ambiguity of feeling existed concerning political and economic freedom. The colonists rose up when their economic and political freedom was threatened. The War of Independence reasserted that freedom, but then its deeper meaning lapsed into the American subconscious once again. Jefferson, seeing this, wrote:

> From the conclusion of this war we shall be going downhill. It will not be necessary to resort every moment to the people for support. They will be forgotten, therefore, and their rights disregarded. They will forget themselves but in the sole faculty of making money, and will never think of uniting to effect a due respect for their rights. The shackles, therefore, which shall not be knocked off at the conclusion of this war, will remain on us long, will be made heavier and heavier, till our rights shall revive or expire in a convulsion.[1]

To our credit, we have not gone only downhill. Blacks, women and labor unions have all risen up and demanded their rights, but each of these revolutions subsided in the achievement of a higher standard of living. Each has acquiesced as their stake in the status quo increased. People are most concerned with their

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[1]Thomas Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia, ed. with Introduction by William Peden (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1955), p. 161.

freedom when it is threatened or lost. At other times they quickly lapse into other pursuits. They plunge into the one-sided exercising of economic freedom little remembering the cost at which that freedom was bought or the responsibility it entails. Freedom becomes a by-word for economic enterprise.

Religious freedom is of little concern for most Americans, since, generally, people have been left to believe as they would. Without a state religion many of the battles for religious freedom have been intra-denominational. This was particularly true for the Unitarian movement where religious freedom and complete mental freedom became synonymous.

> I call the mind free which resists the bondage of habit, Which does not mechanically copy the past, nor live on its old virtues.

Complete mental freedom for William Ellery Channing is "resisting the bondage" of biblical literalism. His concept of freedom, however, is discursive and abstract, or, as in his "Baltimore Address," left as an assumption upon which the case for Unitarian Christianity is stated. Emerson, in his "Divinity School Address," laces his discourse with pastoral and heavenly images, but in calling for a new spiritual freedom, he is already pushing past mental freedom. In claiming God's imminent presence, he is not mechanically copying the past, but breaking new ground for mental and spiritual freedom. For both of these men, freedom is more present in deed than in word, more present in their persons than in any concept they use.

> I call the mind free which sets
> no bounds to its love,
> Which, wherever they are seen,
> delights in virtue and sympathizes
> with suffering.[1]

Channing was concerned with freedom, both mental and physical. He was in the forefront of the fight for both rational religion, which implied a free mind, and for abolition, which demanded freedom for black people. It fell to Theodore Parker to eloquently make a radical call for total human freedom. His sermon on "The Transient and Permanent in Christianity" pushed what was then the acceptable bound of freedom on religious thought to its limits. Elsewhere, his dramatic tale of sitting up nights writing his sermons with a gun on his desk and a sword at his side so that he might protect the runaway slaves he harbored in his home left no doubt about how highly he prized freedom. Parker was not alone, but he was in a small minority who passionately fought against slavery and for mental freedom.

Sentiments for freedom from human bondage find expression in our current hymnal, Hymns for the Celebration of Life:

> Let all who live in freedom, won by sacrifice of others,
> Be untiring in the task begun till everyone on earth
> is free.[2]

The vast majority of our hymns address spiritual and mental freedom as in Samuel Longfellow's "O Life That Maketh All Things New"

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[1] William Ellery Channing, "The Free Mind," Hymns for the Celebration of Life, Unitarian Universalist Hymnbook Commission, ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966). (Responsive Reading no. 420.)

[2] Kenneth L. Patton, "Let All Who Live in Freedom," Hymns for the Celebration of Life (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966). (Hymn No. 171.)

> One in the freedom of the truth,
> One in the joy of paths untrod,
> One in the souls perennial youth
> One in the larger thought of God.[1]

Likewise, Charles Lyttle's lyric, "Church of the Free Spirit," vaunts the concepts of Truth, Good, and Agape:

> Bring, O Past, your honor, bring, O Time your harvest
> Golden sheaves of hallowed lives and minds by Truth made free.
> Come, you faithful spirits, builder of this temple
> To Holiness, to Love and Liberty.[2]

Our hymns tend to extoll abstract human virtues. We pay lip-service to a spirituality we are hard pressed to find in our congregations. We also honor God, our forbearers, and occasionally Jesus. We celebrate life. When we want concrete imagery we evoke nature--her seasons, woods, and oceans. We praise the heavens, its stars, sun, and moon. We rarely turn to the Bible, which is not surprising, since the Exodus was not primarily about mental freedom, and Eve's use of freedom in the Garden of Eden is viewed as the eternal cause of sin. Jesus did not proclaim an end to intellectual oppression; he used his freedom to reinterpret the Law. Mental freedom was not his foremost concern, rather, a new social order and spiritual rebirth were his primary concerns. We honor him, not because his proclamation was that of intellectual freedom, but because he led a moral life. We count him among our prophets because, as H. Richard Niebuhr points out, our self-sufficiency makes us task- and achievement-oriented.

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[1] Samuel Longfellow, "O Life that Maketh All Things News," Hymns for the Celebration of Life (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966). (Hymn No. 54.)

[2] Charles Lyttle, "Church of the Free Spirit," Hymns for the Celebration of Life (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966). (Hymn No. 254.)

We need Jesus as an example to follow, rather than as a comforter to lean on.

The call for intellectual freedom is simply not the central message of the Bible; it is at best found implicitly. It was probably the least of the concerns of biblical authors or the many audiences it has addressed. More often these people were seeking answers to basic questions of existence. They were trying to preserve a community identity, assert their right to be, understand their enslavement, discover meaning in life, and overcome the fear of death. At most, intellectual freedom has played a supportive role, but it was suppressed when it confronted the shibboleths of a tradition.

In applying the typology of freedom--spiritual, political, intellectual--that evolved in reviewing black religion, to the Unitarian situation, the order is reversed. Intellectual freedom is foremost. The men and women who have pushed beyond the belief structures of their religious communities are Unitarian representatives of freedom: Francis David debating at the Diet of Torda, Joseph Priestly fleeing from Manchester, Theodore Parker ostracized by almost every minister in Boston. Michael Servetus and Francis David pursued it at the cost of liberty and life. The political freedom upon which the freedom of speech depends runs a close second, while spiritual freedom is the Unitarian step-child. It is not absent--Emerson was its eloquent advocate--but it has rarely emerged as the cutting edge of the movement.

The great heroes in the Unitarian tradition are men in whose lives we can see the merging of freedom's three dimensions.

Theodore Parker, as an advocate of the free mind, an abolitionist, and a transcendalist, is the model of this union. Others uphold mental and political freedom. Priestly was attacked, not just because of his religion, but because he supported the French Revolution. In John Haynes Holmes, intellectual freedom and social concern are inextricable. Holmes, a pacifist and a socialist, helped to found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the American Civil Liberties Union. The close tie between the intellectual and the political is also seen in A. Powell Davies, who extolled democracy over against both Communism and McCarthyism.

This last hero, A. Powell Davies, brings the imagery of the American democratic faith to bear upon his testimony. In Man's Vast Future: A Definition of Democracy he appeals to images of the American and French revolutions, of Justice Holmes, of Abraham Lincoln, and of that government of, by, and for the people. Indeed, the foundation of this nation was an exercise of this dual freedom of intellect and politics. The constitution was a creation of the intellect, and its establishment, an act of power. Some of our religious forbearers were instrumental in the founding of the United States. Thus, our connection with the ideal and images of American democracy is deep. We have resources that address freedom on its most inclusive levels, but the predominant vision of freedom in the Unitarian eye is that of the individual mind. Niebuhr, in his description of middle class religion, gives a penetrating analysis on this:

> The religious ethics of the middle class is marked throughout by this characteristic of individualism. Such an ethics is capable of producing a real heroism of self-discipline and, in its insistence on personal responsibility, the courage of resistance to the authority of state and church when these conflict with the imperatives of individual conscience. But this morality is incapable of developing a hopeful passion for social justice. Its martyrs die for liberty not for fraternity and equality; its saints are patrons of individual enterprise in religion, politics, and economics, not the great benefactors of mankind or the heralds of brotherhood.[1]

Niebuhr's charge is encapsulated in the title of Vincent Silliman's popular hymn "Faith of the Free." There is an ambiguity hidden in these words. Are we the "Faith of the Free," meaning the church of the free--that is, the church that celebrates the free mind and individual conscience? Or are we the faith of those who are free--that is, those who are both politically free and free from economic oppression as the middle class. In the double meaning of "Faith of the Free" and in its lyrics, this hymn epitomizes the Unitarian image of freedom.

> Faith of the larger liberty
> Source of the light expanding,
> Law of the church that we shall be,
> Old bondage not withstanding;
> Faith of the free! By thee we live-
> By all thou givest and shall give
> Our loyalty commanding.
>
> Heroes of faith in every age,
> Far seeing, self denying,
> Wrought an increasing heritage,
> Monarch and priest defying.
> Faith of the free! In thy dear name
> The costly heritage we claim:
> Their living and their dying.

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[1] Niebuhr, Denominationalism, p. 87.

Faith for the people everywhere,
Whatever their oppression,
Of all who make the world more fair,
Living their faith's confession:
Faith of the free! What e'er our plight,
They law, they liberty, thy light
Shall be our blest possession.[1]

Niebuhr's description of the churches of the middle class seems applicable to Unitarianism. Niebuhr's "real heroism of self discipline" can be seen in the phrase "Heroes of faith in every age, far seeing, self denying." His idea of "the courage of resistance to the authority of state and church" appears as "wrought an increasing heritage/Monarch and priest defying." Niebuhr claims that for the middle class, striving, rather than grace, predominates. The "faith of the free" is something "we live" and "we claim"; it is "our blest possession." It is not so much a gift as a goal we strive toward. The individualistic character of the middle class permeates Unitarianism.

When we compare the dimensions of freedom in black religion and Unitarianism, we find that their order is reversed. Intellectual freedom dominates in liberal religion; it is in only a limited, supportive role in black religion. Spiritual freedom is paramount in black religion, but leads to an ecstatic otherworldly escapism when it becomes imbalanced. Intellectual freedom, when it becomes overemphasized in Unitarianism, floats off into dissociated intellectualism and esoteric escapism. In neither of these situations are the active qualities of the spiritual and the

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[1]Vincent Silliman, "Faith of the Free," Hymns for the Celebration of Life (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966). (Hymn No. 257.)

intellectual brought to bear upon the world. Political freedom often emerges as a strong force in both traditions. In Unitarianism political concerns occasionally take over at the expense of free dialogue, while in the black tradition political concerns have often meant forsaking God and church. In both traditions there are a small group of people who have managed to hold these freedoms in symbiotic relationship. Finally, spiritually in both Unitarianism and black religion is manifested in a sense of connectedness. In black religion it is the source of integrity grounded in a vertical connection to God and a horizontal link with community and family. In Unitarianism this connectedness is more imminent, and its end is to lift the individual out of his separation from the world. Herein, the individual is freed from the sense of isolation that middle class life generates.

In the next two chapters, I will discuss the lives of Egbert Ethlred Brown and Lewis A. McGee, in light of these distinctions between black religion and Unitarianism. Their efforts to bridge the gap between these two traditions were not entirely successful, but they are instructive.

CHAPTER II

EGBERT ETHELRED BROWN IN JAMAICA AND HARLEM

Egbert Ethelred Brown represents only the Unitarian half of our tradition. The relationships of both the Unitarians and the Universalists to the black community were at best tentative, and there is little documentation that indicates any deep or consistent involvement. However, the Universalists apparently were the first to missionize blacks. In 1897 two black Universalist ministers organized a church in Suffolk, Virginia. One of the ministers, the Rev. Joseph F. Jordan, DD., had been a student at St. Lawrence University. There were "fifty families in [Jordan's] parish, twenty-three church members [and] a sunday school of 44." Besides the church, he operated a school which had 129 pupils, and published a monthly paper, "The Colored Universalist."[1] Jordan and the Universalist mission in Suffolk offer an interesting subject for study. The more explicitly Christian and spiritual tendencies in Universalism would evoke quite a different response from the black community than Unitarianism. Intriguing as this topic is, it is not within the scope of this effort.

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[1] "What the Universalist Church is Doing, 1907 to 1909," (n.p., n.d.), p. 49.

The Universalists, like the Unitarians, were no more outspoken about race than the other white denominations, but there were exceptional Universalist individuals. Benjamin Rush was a pioneer in the organization of the Society for the Abolition of Slavery in 1790. Rush is also important because he helped finance and support the efforts of Richard Allen in 1793 to establish an African Church in Philadelphia.[1] This movement later became the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the first of the black denominations. Other Universalists, like Elhanan Winchester and later Adin Ballou, spoke out against slavery.

The Unitarians were well represented among the abolitionists in men like Theodore Parker, William Ellery Channing, and Samuel J. May, but the movement as a whole could never be persuaded to take a stand, nor did the Unitarians ever try to spread their message among blacks. Their mission work was done through the Society for Propagating the Gospel among the Indians and Others in North America. This society, which was organized in 1787, administered funds for the benefit of "Indians and Colored people," but worked only in connection with established institutions.[2] Apparently, Unitarians felt it was enough for non-white people to embrace Christianity. The underlying paternalism in the Unitarian attitude toward blacks becomes even more apparent as one looks at the life of Ethelred Brown.

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[1] George Hunston Williams, American Universalism (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), p. 51.

[2] American Unitarian Association, Unitarian Yearbook 1912 (Boston), p. 130.

Jamaica: A Mission Aborted

It was early in 1920 when Ethelred Brown with his wife Ella boarded a steamer bound for New York, New York. Behind him upon that tropical island Jamaica, which had once been the hub of the slave trade and was still covered with plantations worked by the poorly paid descendants of kidnapped Africans, Brown left all hope of establishing a Unitarian mission. After eight years of struggle, his hope for a church lay broken. His children were farmed out to relatives, debt was pressing in on him, and he was sailing for New York dreaming of another chance to bring Unitarianism to the black community.

Egbert Ethelred Brown, born in Falmouth, Jamaica, B.W.I. on July 11, 1875, to James and Florence Brown, was the eldest of five children. Later in his life, when Ethelred reflected back upon the youthful inclinations that propelled him toward the ministry, he retained "a distinct recollection that as a child [he] liked to make speeches."[1] He recalled organizing "little services with his brothers and other youngsters."[2] He also remembered that:

> There was, coincident with my childish experiments in making speeches, an abnormally religious temperament. In all other respects I think I was a normal boy, but at times I was seized by a religious fervor which I now know was abnormal. My favorite hymn was, "O

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[1]Egbert Ethelred Brown, "A Brief History of the Harlem Unitarian Church" (unpublished sermon delivered in the Harlem Unitarian Church, September 11, 1949), p. 1. All other references to Egbert Ethelred Brown will read simply Brown.

[2]"HARLEM PASTOR FOUNDER OF COMMUNITY CHURCH WORKS SEVEN DAYS A WEEK AS ELEVATOR BOY," Home News, New York, N.Y., October 1, 1922, p. 5.

> paradise 'tis weary waiting here." I sang it often, and as I sang, my face was bathed in tears. Why should a boy have chosen a hymn so other-worldly?

This is a question Brown did not answer, but he did go on to write, "I somewhat outgrew the abnormal religiousness of my youth."[1]

It was not always clear that Ethelred would enter the ministry. "His parents and friends predicted for him a place either in the pulpit or at the bar,"[2] and in school, Ethelred set himself up as prosecuting attorney in a juvenile court. This led him to entertain the idea of becoming a lawyer. His father, however, who was an auctioneer, was at the time unable to finance his education. In 1894 at the age of 19, Brown placed third in an island wide examination to enter the civil service of Jamaica. In 1899 he was promoted to first clerk of the treasury. He worked there until 1907, when on the eve of another promotion, he was suddenly dismissed. Brown wrote that his dismissal occurred under "peculiar circumstances," ones that he called "tragic," "cataclysimic" and "providential." He did not say exactly what happened. His eldest daughter, though, recalls overhearing her uncles talk of it among themselves. According to them, Ethelred was sending his wife to Kingston for singing lessons, supporting four children, and paying high rent. He had taken money from the treasury with the intention of paying it back, but before he could afford to do so, the missing funds were

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[1] Brown, "Brief History," p. 1.

[2] Home News, p. 5.

discovered. His father and brothers paid the debt, and he lost his job, but he was not prosecuted.[1] The dismissal precipitated a personal crisis for Brown, who at the age of 32 had settled into a financially secure position. The sudden loss of his job came to represent a turning point in his life. It made him reassess his life direction, and culminated in his resolution to become a minister.

As Ethelred assessed his life, the argument he addressed to himself was this:

> You ought to have been in the ministry long ago. When your brother sailed for Africa [four years earlier] you knew then beyond doubt that you were called to the ministry, but you resisted the call because your position in the Civil Service was financially secure. Now God himself in his own way has deprived you of the security. Your duty is clear.

Ethelred Brown's decision to enter the ministry was not a capricious one, nor can we reduce it to sibling rivalry. He felt he had been "called." His was not a sudden turn to religion, for he had been an active church member for most of his life. That he became a Unitarian he attributes to two childhood traits and the events of a particular Easter Sunday:

> I was an inquisitive youngster and a truthful child. I was disposed to ask questions. I remember very distinctly the question which I asked my teacher after the scripture lesson on the falling of the walls of Jericho. "Why," I asked, "did God waste so much time when he could have brought down the walls on the first day?" My teacher was horrified. So much for my inquisitiveness. From accounts I heard later in life I have come to the conclusion that as a child I told the truth instinctively, or if you prefer

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[1] Dorice Leslie (nee Brown), Taped interview in Jamaica, New York on December 4, 1978.

the term, automatically. These two characteristics--inquisitiveness and truthfulness--had much to do with the choice I ultimately made to enter the Unitarian ministry.

I was a choir boy of the Montego Bay Episcopal Church when the first ray of light broke through my Trinitarianism. It was Easter Sunday. We did not as usual sing the Athanasian Creed: it was recited alternately by the priest and the congregation. The strangeness of the Trinitarian arithmetic struck me forcibly--so forcibly that I decided then and there to sever my connection with the church which enunciated so impossible a proposition. By a strange coincidence on the afternoon of that very day I was introduced to Unitarianism by means of a distinctive Unitarian sermon--Channing's Baltimore sermon at the ordination of Jared Sparks. I followed that up by reading other Unitarian literature and as a result I became a Unitarian without a church. For some years I attended no church, and then on a Sunday morning in 1895 I was drafted to take the place of the sick organist of the Montego Bay Wesleyan Methodist Church. On that day I began four years of service as organist of that church. On my transfer to Spanish Town in 1899 I was placed in charge of the choir of the Wesleyan Church of that town. Thus for nearly twelve years I forgot my Unitarian theology as I was engaged in the service of organist of two Trinitarian churches. Then came 1907--the year of decision.

He writes of the decision that loomed before him:

With that call came a very urgent and important question, namely this--into the ministry of which denomination should I enter? All the doubts and questionings which were lulled to rest during the years of my active service in the Wesleyan Methodist Church were reawakened. The conviction deepened that I could not honestly be a Methodist minister. Circumstances very soon created a conflict and forced a decision.

The African Methodist Episcopal Church of America had recently started work in Jamaica. After many interviews I was persuaded by its resident Representative to apply for admission into the ministry of that church. I did; but I had not well posted my letter of application when my outraged conscience violently protested. Four days later another letter was posted, strangely addressed--"To any Unitarian Minister in New York City," seeking information as to the possibility of entering the Unitarian ministry. That letter ultimately reached the Rev. George Badger, then Secretary of the Fellowship Committee of the American Unitarian Association who referred it to President Franklin Southworth of the Meadville Theological School.

> The mail which brought a reply from the Bishop of the AME Church which was practically an acceptance, brought also a reply from President Southworth. The latter informed me that the school did not conduct a correspondence course, and that therefore I would have to come to Meadville. And that as there was no Unitarian Church in America for colored people, and that as white Unitarians required a white minister he was unable to predict what my future would be at the conclusion of my training. The issue was clear; the conflict was short, but sharp.
>
> On the one hand was the acceptance into the ministry of one church with the opportunity to begin my ministry at once, and on the other hand there was the imperative of years of training away from home, with no certainty as to the future. I decided that I was not compelled to be a minister of religion at all; but if I did enter the ministry I was under moral and spiritual compulsion to be a minister only of that church in which I would be absolutely honest. I therefore withdrew my application to enter the ministry of the African Methodist Episcopal Church and continued my correspondence with President Southworth. That correspondence ended with my acceptance as a special two-year student of the Meadville Theological School.[1]

Still, the practical problems that lay in the way of his getting to Meadville were formidable. Brown said that his letters requesting assistance from the AUA received encouraging responses, but one AUA official later wrote: "Strong effort was made to dissuade him because it seemed so uncertain whether or not he could ever find a parish, but against all counsel he went to Meadville."[2] Regardless of what was really said, this was the first hint of a thirty year battle with the AUA that was to follow. Brown prepared to leave for America and in a Christian Register article he recalled what happened:

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[1]Brown, "Brief History," pp. 2-3.

[2]Louis C. Cornish to Kenneth McDougall, October 26, 1921, Unitarian Universalist Association Archives, Brown File.

> "I cannot accept your present until I tell you the purpose of my visit to America. I go to a theological school to be prepared for the Unitarian ministry. And, in case some of you may not know what is the distinctive teaching of Unitarianism, I may say that a Unitarian is one who denies the doctrine of the Trinity and the deity of Jesus Christ." Thus in July, 1908, at the close of a Christian Endeavor meeting in the Montego Bay Wesleyan Methodist Church did I briefly make what I believe was the first public Unitarian pronouncement in the Island of Jamaica. The candle of Unitarianism was lighted--lighted, I hope, never to be put out. But the words which lighted it fell like a bomb on the quiet community, and men and women were amazed at "this strange teaching." At once I felt the consequences of my act. I was forthwith forbidden to perform my duties as organist in the church where for thirteen years I had led its singing and from the pulpit of which for eight years I had preached. And, although a little band of Christian Endeavorers, led by the minister, did give me a present and a word of cheer and good-will on the eve of my departure, the present of the church was withheld and the prayers of the members were unuttered.[1]

This was only the first of the many trials Brown would face over the years. His enrollment at Meadville also meant that his wife and children had to depend financially on Brown's father and on the little money that Ethelred sent them from America. Given the obstacles he faced it is remarkable that he became a Unitarian minister at all. Brown's tenacity stands out in his account of his effort to get to Meadville:

> In August 1908 I sailed on a fruit boat from Montego Bay, my home town, for Baltimore, Maryland, intending to proceed from Baltimore to Richmond, Virginia, to serve as an accountant for a colored building contractor until the end of September when I would leave his employ to enter the Meadville Theological School. Such was my intention, but thus it was not to be. Having secured my appointment as an accountant before entering America, and having so informed Immigration officials, I was declared a contracted alien and was ordered deported. After an absence of two weeks I was again in Montego Bay, no longer a Wesleyan Methodist but a self-declared Unitarian.

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[1] Brown, "A Story and an Appeal," Christian Reader, vol. 90 (May 4, 1911), p. 493.

> I was back in Montego Bay to receive infull the results of my apostasy. Of all that I suffered in those early days I dare not write.
>
> Under the law I could not return to America until the expiration of one year after deportation. During the year of waiting I established a Unitarian Lay Center in Montego Bay. Open air meetings were held at which the gospel of Unitarianism was preached. [This was done amidst a storm of pulpit criticism and newspaper controversy.] September 1909 arrived. My passage for my second trip to Meadville by way of New York was booked. Again I was disappointed. My father who had promised to finance my passage withdrew his promise at the eleventh hour. I was booked to sail on Tuesday. On Saturday evening I said good-bye to my fellow clerks, but to the surprise of all I was at my desk on Monday morning. The boat that was to have taken me to America took a letter to President Southworth explaining my second failure to present myself at Meadville.
>
> Two failures were not enough to kill my desire to go to Meadville. My employer who flattered me by his determination to keep me from going to America and who influenced my father to refuse to aid me increased my salary. I saved the increase and awaited September 1910.
>
> The third attempt to enter Meadville was successful. I arrived at last, and in September 1910 I was duly enrolled as a special student of the school. The two years which I spent at Meadville were years that I shall ever remember. The happy days of genuine comradeship will ever remain as a pleasant memory.

Ethelred Brown became the sixth black to attend Meadville; he followed by forty years Alfred Amos Williams, an AME minister who enrolled at Meadville in 1870.[2] Yet, Brown was unique because

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[1] Brown, "Brief History," pp. 3-4.

[2] There have been 10 black students at Meadville Theological School: Alfred Amos Williams, 1871, African Methodist Episcopal ministry; James Cortland Palmer, 1874; African Methodist Episcopal Zion ministry; Robert Miller Henderson, 1877, AME ministry; William Preston Ross, 1878-1880, AME ministry; James Thompson Simpson, 1909-1910, AME ministry; Egbert Ethelred Brown, 1910-1912, Unitarian ministry; Alvin Neely Cannon, 1943-1944, a Unitarian but never settled; Lewis Allen McGee, 1946-1947, Unitarian ministry; Mwalimu Imara registered under Renford Gaines, 1964-1968, Unitarian ministry; Mark Douglas Reed, 1974-1979, Unitarian ministry.

he was the first black student who was an avowed Unitarian. Meadville was a haven for Brown. There, as a Unitarian, he was only one among many. His course work proceeded well, and the intellectual life was stimulating. Brown had fond memories of Meadville Theological School and said he never experienced prejudice there. Jokingly, he wrote that at Meadville there was discrimination in his favor. Other students shoveled snow; he was excused from that task. However, as would be expected, people were influenced by racial stereotypes. Once when Brown did something extraordinarily well, someone said to him "you must have some white blood in you."[1] Still, this was a special time for Brown, and he later recalled those days as an "inspiring memory" that sustained him through the disappointment and disillusionment he would later face.

In a deceptive way Ethelred Brown happened upon Unitarianism at the right time. The vitality which Samuel A. Eliot brought to the presidency of the American Unitarian Association was moving the denomination forward. Eliot's own early experience with missions in the Northwest and his successful ministry in Denver was the foundation upon which he proclaims the AUA "a missionary Association."[2] It seems natural that Brown's hopes and visions

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This information was compiled from the "General Catalogue of the Meadville Theological School 1844-1944" and the UUA Directory.

[1]Leslie, interview.

[2]David B. Parke, "Patterns of Power: Universalist and Unitarian Leadership Styles Since 1900," KAIROS (Brewster, Mass.: Spring 1976), p. 10.

would be caught up in the spirit of the Eliot administration. One can well imagine the dreams that Ethelred and his fellow students concocted and the high hopes they held for their ministries. Later Brown would lament that the AUA officials were not like the men he knew at Meadville.

The Meadville Quarterly Bulletin reported on "a service of unusual interest" when in June of 1912, acting in proxy for the small Unitarian group in Montego Bay, Meadville ordained Brown.[1] Of this event and of his return home Brown wrote:

> With befitting and imposing ceremony I was ordained a Unitarian Minister in the Meadville Unitarian Church and solemnly "set apart" to do the work of a Unitarian missionary. After visiting a few of the larger Unitarian Churches in this country and presenting my cause, and after lodging with President Southworth, who consented to act as treasurer of the "Jamaica Building Fund," all the money collected from these churches, I sailed in July 1912 with the hopes born from association with men of vision and missionary enthusiasm for my homeland, and immediately after arrival in the small town of Montego Bay, began my work as a Unitarian Missionary.[2]

In April of the next year the AUA sent a retired minister, the Rev. Hilary Bygrave, to Jamaica to evaluate the situation, for, besides the mission in Montego Bay, another group had gathered on the island in Alexandria. In Bygrave's report one can find important insights into the circumstances under which Brown worked. One also gets a glimpse of the writer's racial

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[1]Meadville Theological School, Quarterly Bulletin, vols. 5-6, 1910-1912; June, 1912; School Notes, p. 18.

[2]Brown, "A Statement: Presented to the Special Committee Appointed by the American Unitarian Association to inquire into the circumstances leading to the removal of my name from the official list of Unitarian Ministers," New York City, December 14, 1931, Brown file.

attitude. I will present a large part of Bygrave's report because it provides the image of the Jamaican movement to which the directors of the AUA gave credence, and upon which they based their recommednation:

> Montego Bay has a population of some 7000 inhabitants, the vast proportion of the people here, as at Kingston and everywhere else, being colored, the shades varying from absolute blackness to a whiteness indistinguishable from the English or American type.
>
> The Rev. E. E. Brown is pronouncedly black, which is somewhat of a handicap to him in his work, since those of his race who are fortunate enough to approach absolute whiteness are too proud "to sit under" any minister save "a white gentleman." He is fairly well educated, seems endowed with tact and great common sense, and is a speaker of considerable eloquence and force.
>
> I think it is matter for regret that on his return to Jamaica from the Meadville Theological School Mr. Brown did not begin his work at Kingston, where his opportunity would have been ten times larger. [The population of Kingston was ca. 70,000.] But he has struck his roots in Montego Bay, which is moreover his native place. Here he was born and brought up, and here the greater part of his life has been spent. I am happy to report that after careful investigation, there is no blot or stain upon his record or character. Like other prophets, like our Master himself, he suffers from the fact that one's native place is none too eager to honor native talent. . . .
>
> From the American and British & Foreign Unitarian Associations Mr. Brown receives five hundred dollars per annum. He earns a like amount yearly, by serving in some clerical capacity in one of the principal commercial houses, under the control of some Jewish gentlemen, who have sympathy for him and for the Unitarian cause.
>
> So far as the establishing of a Unitarian Church is concerned, Mr. Brown has not proceeded very far, nor is likely to under present conditions. The Sunday gathering, and all other meetings, are held in his house, and number from 10 to 25 people. Mrs. Brown conducts a small Sunday School, furnishing five children of her own. As opportunity and means allow Mr. Brown gives "a lecture" on some week evenings in the Town Hall, when he usually has a large audience.
>
> On Sunday afternoon April 13th I preached in the Town Hall to about 60 people, and again in the evening to fully 300. On the following Monday and Tuesday evenings I spoke for

an hour on each occasion to quite 300 people, and on each occasion another hour was spent in answering questions, which I had invited from the floor. In every case the major part of the audience was composed of males, and the larger proportion of them were young men. Some of the questions put to me were foolish enough from the Unitarian point of view, but on the other hand, many of them were eminently sensible and searching, indicating a remarkable degree of intelligence and up-to-dateness in recent lines of thought in science, philosophy, and religion.

. . . I took it for granted that I was voicing the sentiment of the American and British & Foreign Unitarian Associations when I said to Mr. Brown and Mr. Walker [Walker had gathered the group in Alexandria.] . . . with a great deal of positiveness, that no more Unitarian money would flow into Jamaica--other than what was now being sent--until the infant cause at Montego Bay was on surer and stronger footing.

Mr. Brown and his friends succeeded in convincing me that the one thing necessary to their making good in the community was a modest place of worship. About eighteen hundred, or at most two thousand dollars would provide a building of sufficient size for this purpose, over and above the price of land; and for that I think there is a sum more than sufficient in the hands of the President of the Meadville Theological School.

Had the two Associations had any adequate knowledge of the social religious conditions of Jamaica I think they might well have hesitated before commissioning Mr. Brown to plant our flag there. But to drop, or curtail the work there at the present time, would cause shame and confusion to Mr. Brown, and would make the Unitarian name a scoff and by-word in Jamaica.

If we want to do a bit of genuine humanitarian work for a quite intelligent class of distinctively colored people, seventy-five years removed from slavery, but still quite poorly paid in the matter of wage, with no thought of ever getting anything but love and respect in return. I urge that in some way, the cause there be given this further impetus to a more assured success.

. . . I should suggest that the united grant made by the two Associations should be lessened yearly for a period of three years, ceasing entirely at the close of the third year. . . .

In regard to Mr. Walker I make no recommendations, not that he is not entirely worthy so far as I could discover, but from the simple fact that his lot is cast in a much smaller place than Montego Bay. Alexandria is 30 miles from the

> railway. . . . Mr. Walker took the trouble to come to Montego Bay to attend our meetings there. He came evidently hoping that I could ordain him to the Unitarian ministry and promise him aid toward the construction of a place of meeting. I told him it was not in my power to do either, and tried to make him see the facts as I saw them, and urged him to use his strength and abilities in efforts looking toward the social uplift of his race as well as in the spread of the Unitarian faith. I laid great emphasis on this phase of work in conversation with Mr. Brown and I trust that the proper official will strongly impress upon him that he must make good along some line of social effort or uplift as well as in the matter of gathering a congregation of Unitarian believing souls.
>
> In spite of the fact that Jamaica is celebrated for its rum, very little of which by the way stays on the Island, intoxication would not seem to be a very prevailing vice. So far as I could see the native population are a quite sober people. Sexual irregularities, nay sexual excesses and predial larceny [the theft of land] are the great vices of the people.
>
> If this report should come to the notice of any members of our household of faith, who are as much, or even more interested in social uplift effort than they are in our distinctively religious work, I trust they may feel moved to send some contribution to me or to Mr. Foote to aid this spirited young man in his work.[1]

There are ambiguities in the position Bygrave took. He did not find the prospects in Jamaica promising and thought that it was unfortunate that Brown was allowed to take up this mission at all. He advised that it be viewed not so much as a religious endeavor, as a "genuine humanitarian work" for "the social uplift" of the Negro race. Still, he held out some hope for the mission by offering to accept contributions for Brown, and he said he was convinced of the importance of building a house of worship. Yet he recommended "that the united grant made by the two Associations

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[1] Hilary Bygrave, "Report in regard to Montego Bay, etc. Jamaica B.W.I." April 24, 1913, Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School, AUA archives, Papers of Samuel A. Eliot, Correspondence, Bygrave Hilary.

should be lessened yearly for a period of three years," and stopped at the end of that period.

Given the mixed nature of Bygrave's report, it is difficult to understand the letter he received from Brown in June 1913. Brown wrote:

> In the face of your report and your strong recommednations I make bold to ask you for the sake of our work to arrange to do this. [Brown wanted Bygrave to present his case before the churches of Boston.] Your word will mean a good deal.

He went on to plead for the recognition of the uniqueness of his circumstance. He called the "experiment . . . an exceptional child," and he concluded the letter thus:

> Why has your report not been published? Can't you send a few lines to the Register?[1]

Brown made a great deal of Bygrave's report. Brown, who was a prolific letter writer, probably persisted in writing Bygrave. In a letter written to Samuel Eliot some two years later, Bygrave made a point of the fact that he was avoiding Brown, who was visiting the States and petitioning the AUA for further support. Moreover, it seems that Brown was claiming Bygrave's unqualified support of his mission, but Bygrave went on to say in this letter to Eliot, that to the best of his recollection he did not "give an unqualified approval of him and his work." Bygrave recalls rather that he recommended

> drop it, unless you are prepared to whole-heartedly permanently support the first and only Negro church in the world, since Mr. B being coal black himself could not hope

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[1]Brown to Bygrave, June 27, 1913, Correspondence-Bygrave.

> to secure the cooperation of white people, and what was sadder still not even the presence of the whiter people of his own race.[1]

Here, a disturbing element in Brown's character is evident; he heard and saw what he wanted, and often that did not correspond with reality, but rather reflected his strongly held hopes. Right then, he wanted the mission in Jamaica to succeed, and it was therefore expedient to claim Bygrave's full support, but a decade later when he was settled in Harlem, he wrote, "His report was not enthusiastic, and yet he recommended the building at once in Montego Bay of a $3,000 church."[2] Because of Brown's willfulness the officers of the AUA found it extremely difficult to communicate with him, and, as time passed, tensions between Brown and the AUA mounted.

Brown's account of what occurred in the years following Bygrave's report shows that the report only signaled the beginning of the controversy between Brown and the AUA:

> I very soon learned that the men who directed the affairs of the AUA were not like the men at Meadville. . . . They were "business" men. I worked in Montego Bay for two years and was transferred by the AUA to the City of Kingston, the metropolis of the island of Jamaica. After working in this city for only 18 months, and at the very moment when all Jamaica was being stirred by a newspaper controversy which was then proceeding in the leading city paper, and when we were actually using the money collected by me in America to build a church on a lot of land donated to us, to the surprise of all Jamaica, by the son of the Episcopal Bishop of the island, the AUA suddenly withdrew its grant on the grounds that results were not satisfactory.[3]

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[1]Bygrave to Eliot.

[2]Brown to Walter R. Hunt, March 14, 1926, p. 5. Brown file.

[3]Brown, "A Statement," p. 1.

However, his accusation was not wholly accurate. The initial three year commitment from both the British & Foreign Unitarian Association and the American Unitarian Association had ended. The B & FUA found the whole venture unwarranted and Brown "not the type of man to entrust with the organization and control of a Unitarian Church. He acted again and again from impulse and involved himself again and again in financial and other difficulties . . ."[1] After terminating their aid in January 1914, they did not renew their grant. Meanwhile, Brown pressed onward in his efforts to win the support of the AUA.

> At the urgent and insistent advice of my wife, I used a portion of the Association's parting gift of one hundred dollars to pay my way to Boston. For nearly six weeks I pleaded my cause. Dr. Wendle was my friend in this fight. A Special meeting of Boston ministers met and the fight was against Dr. Eliot, then President of the AUA who surprised all present by his undisguised opposition to the work in Jamaica, an island of Negroes.[2]

* * *

It is necessary to outline in detail the racial attitudes that Brown met in Eliot and Louis C. Cornish, the secretary of the AUA. Their attitudes toward the Negro race will reveal the obstacle they posed for Brown: their view of blacks was so limited, they never seriously considered that Unitarianism could be grasped by them. Here I will develop these opinions and show how they undermined Brown's mission from its outset.

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[1] Dr. Copeland Bowie, Secretary of the B & FUA at the time of the Jamaican mission, to Mortimer Rowe, October 23, 1930.

[2] Brown, "A Statement," p. 2.

Brown's daughter, Dorice, once made this raw assertion in a letter to the AUA: "So you seem to think we are some sort of savages."[1] Indeed, Eliot had expressed such an opinion after visiting Cuba, "a Paradise the devil reigns," as a young man. He wrote: "the lower classes--negro and Chinese and various half breeds--are more nearly brutes than anything I have ever known." However, he had managed to form a more benevolent opinion of the blacks he met while staying with a friend who owned an orange grove in Florida:

> As to the darkies I can't get enough of them. Our men are above average for they can read and write; but such' happy-go-lucky, merry, shiftless rascals as they all are! I never get tired of listening to them. I've seen a good deal of them for they work best with a white man bossing them all the while, and I have had that duty several times.[2]

Here Eliot's attitude was clearly paternalistic. Blacks were viewed almost as children who both intrigued him and needed his supervision. On the same trip he had the opportunity to teach at Hampton Institute, and later in his life he was a board member at Hampton and at other major southern black schools.

To be fair to Eliot, I must point out that in 1933 he preached a sermon entitled, "The Blight of Prejudice," and in it he said, "Race prejudice has not a single scientific leg to stand

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[1] Dorice Brown to the Members of the Unitarian Association, Boston, August 9, 1918. Brown file.

[2] S. A. Eliot, Arthur C. McGiffert Jr., Pilot of the Liberal Faith: Samuel Atkins Eliot 1862-1950 (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), pp. 21, 20.

on. Negro inferiority has no scientific justification." Here it seems that his attitude had matured, but, in the next sentence by invoking Booker T. Washington, he asserted, "that thrift, skills, intelligence and character are the fundamental things for the race to secure."[1] Surely blacks needed education and skills, but to say they needed intelligence and character seems to contradict his previous statement. He explicitly said that blacks still lacked intelligence and moral judgment. Minimally then, I would forward the guess that Eliot's underlying bias was that blacks simply were not ready for what Brown was attempting to do.

"The Blight of Prejudice" of which Eliot spoke is ironically most apparent in the attitude Cornish showed toward Ethelred Brown. It peppers his correspondence with people who wrote inquirying about Brown's work. In one letter he wrote, "Mr. Brown is a negro and has the facility of speech and lack of foresight which sometimes go with the negro temperament."[2] Elsewhere he advises:

> I am told that [Brown] shows the emotional temperament of his race and perhaps a weakness in judgment. . . . I have lived much among negroes and am inclined to be very sympathetic with their temperamental peculiarities. They are very loveable people and often very child-like. It would be at once unjust and misleading to judge Mr. Brown as you would an Anglo-Saxon.[3]

In a biography of Louis Cornish written by his wife, we find an experience that contributed to the formation of his attitude toward Negroes:

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[1] Ibid., p.

[2] Louis C. Cornish to William S. Jones, June 25, 1918, Brown file.

[3] Cornish to H. Fisher Short, November 23, 1920, Brown file.

> Because he was small and sickly [Cornish] was no match for the big, rough boys in the public school and had to use his wits to survive. Among the boys was one called "Commodore," a tall and strong Negro who was backward in his studies, and so was in class with much younger boys. With him Louis Cornish made a pact. He would drive Commodore to school so many times a week in the pony cart and in return Commodore would fight boys who attacked little Louis. The plan worked admirably, and the two became fast friends.

She also recounts an event from his adult life that is emblematic of his attitude toward blacks:

> They were motoring from Boston to Cambridge at the crowded hour when a driver from behind ran into their car. Louis Cornish's annoyance flared, but on getting out and finding that the offender was a badly frightened Negro, his mood instantly changed to one of compassion and he seemed anxious only to put the other at ease.[1]

Why the sudden change of attitude? Was it because he believed this man was backward like his friend, Commodore, irresponsible like Brown, and child-like as the Negro race is temperamentally? It is apparent that Cornish did not recognize blacks as peers, but rather, in his mind, unconscious racial bias, cultural narrowness and paternalism held sway. It is not surprising, then, that he treated Brown in the manner he did and continued to do so in the ensuing years.

Such racial attitudes were pervasive in this era and it was natural that AUA officials were infected by them. This prejudice appears in Bygrave's report in comments like: "those of his race who are fortunate enough to approach absolute whiteness." The attitude is implicit in Bygrave's astonishment at the intelligence and knowledge of the Jamaicans who questioned him after

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[1] Frances E. F. Cornish, Louis Craig Cornish: Interpreter of Life (Boston: Beacon Press, 1953), pp. 5, 93.

his addresses. Why should this be, unless he had expected little? The stance he took that is most indicative of the power of racial prejudice was his recommendation that the work in Jamaica be viewed more as a "genuine humanitarian effort" than as a mission. He appealed to those Unitarians who were "more interested in social uplift effort than they [were] in . . . religious work." He seemed not as concerned with blacks becoming Unitarians as he was with their becoming civilized. The spirit of his plea was the same shown in "The Society for the Promulgation of the Gospel among the Indians and Others" and in the financial support the AUA gave to schools like Hampton and Tuskegee. His belief was that blacks must be uplifted morally and intellectually so that they could participate in the great white culture.

In implementing this discussion of the racial attitude that predominated among AUA officers, I will look at Brown's response. First, he did not hesitate to uphold the obvious condecension with which they treated black people; he used it to accomplish his ends. His cooperation followed a pattern familiar among blacks, a survival tactic. With some justification, Brown saw himself as the "suffering servant." He wrote of how he had been wronged and deceived by the AUA, how the AUA had committed itself for "a long period of years," how the officers were too businesslike in their objectives for growth, how the church was desperately needed, and how the Jamaican mission should be viewed as an "exceptional child." His plea fed the directors' sense of paternalism and their guilt over the conditions under which blacks lived. It evoked their sympathy and their altruism.

How easy to strike these chords in this privileged class of Bostonians who saw that it was their moral obligation, noblesse oblige, to help the downtrodden black race. Their reward was the righteous feeling of guilt-soothing philanthropy, but with this, they did not acquire a sense of conviction, commitment, or understanding. Rather, they were caught feeling that they should help to improve the black race's condition without having faith in the worth and ability of the very people they were striving to help. They sought to bring Unitarianism to people whose maturity of mind they doubted--a tragic dilemma born of cultural arrogance and destined to fail.

* * *

Perhaps it reflects favorably upon Eliot and Cornish that they stood by their convictions in regard to the financing of the Jamaican mission rather than giving in to the impotent and fickle feeling of guilt. Nevertheless, they failed in their initial attempt to cut off Brown's funding, and Brown returned to Jamaica with what he thought was a long term commitment. His narrative continues thus:

> We won at that meeting. I later appeared before the Directors of the AUA and there won again with the result that the grant was re-voted and I returned to Jamaica (Parenthetically I may say here that I believe that victory was in effect a loss. I do believe that the President of the AUA never forgave me for all I said and for the friends I won, and his policy from then on was one of opposition, which it is clear, the Secretary [Cornish] now President approved). On my return to Jamaica I found that the strange un-missionary action of the AUA in closing a mission after only 18 months of work created a most unfavorable impression and gave the orthodox ministers room for well taken criticism. We, however, started

> in again and not only regained lost ground but moved forward. Our membership was not large (but is this so unusual for the Unitarian churches?) But we were making friends even among orthodox ministers--white and colored--some of whom even went the length of lecturing in our hall on such topics as "The Modern Bible," "Agnosticism" and "Evolution," the last named having been given by no less a dignitary than the Lord Bishop of Jamaica. And then in the hour of our satisfaction, without rhymes or reason, as a bolt from the blue, the American Unitarian Association once again, in November, 1917, with Dr. Eliot as President and Dr. Cornish as Secretary, finally withdrew its support.[1]

Here, the shock with which Brown experienced the AUA's withdrawal of financial support from the Jamaican movement indicates a great difference in outlook. In the letters that Brown and his wife wrote to Boston pleading for a renewal of financial aid, it is apparent that they expected their mission "to be treated as an exceptional child," that "it was to be financed for a long series of years," "that the Association, as every other missionary body here has done and is doing, would support them until they grew;" that they "never expected [nor promised] 100 members in 4 years or a subscription role of $500,"[2] that in Jamaica it took 300-400 members to support a church, that other churches gave support without expecting immediate results, that the combination of ministry and work that Brown had to follow was unknown in Jamaica and therefore hurt his efforts, and that the group was small because the social consequences of being a Unitarian were hard. In one letter Brown quotes a comment from a prominent Jamaican that summarizes his feelings about the AUA:

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[1]Brown, "A Statement," p. 2.

[2]Ella M. Brown to L. C. Cornish, March 29, 1918, Brown file.

> No missionary Association could have done any less, and dozens have done infinitely more.[1]

The whole issue of mission work was viewed quite differently from 25 Beacon Street. The AUA had become increasingly selective in the use of its funds. Eliot, who spent a great deal of his time traveling in support of AUA extension efforts,

> followed in the established practice of most of the large home missionary societies of the other denomination, [made] annual grants to churches which were unable to support themselves financially. It was not long before Eliot became disillusioned with this traditional 'subsidy system.'"

Eventually he declared, "I do not believe in subsidizing churches. That policy is pauperizing and demoralizing." In the preceding statements it is evident Eliot had broken from the practices of the other mission societies. It was upon those practices that Mr. Walker, who had started the group in Alexandria, and Brown had built their expectations. It can thus be understood why Brown thought the AUA was too concerned with numbers and money, but his utter amazement at the AUA's withdrawal was a reflection of his insensitivity to the denominational mood and his unwillingness to face the precariousness of the Jamaican situation.

This was the general attitude toward home missions that had developed in the AUA, and it held sway for the foreign missions as well. In fact, early in Eliot's administration the AUA had sent a man "to Cuba to investigate the feasibility of work there. He recommended against establishing Unitarian churches. . . ." In 1913 the first Unitarian Missionary Conference was held.

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[1] Brown to Cornish, April 26, 1918, Brown file.

It was poorly attended, and Eliot explained this as being "indicative of the prevailing opinion that foreign missionaries are more or less of an impertinence as well as a waste of effort and money."[1] In addition to this, the denomination was finacially hard pressed due to World War I.

Given this pragmatic approach to mission work and the racial attitudes that informed the AUA's decisions, it becomes even more difficult to comprehend why its officers gave Brown any money or encouragement. Indeed, they gave him very little of either. In considering the whole course of events this becomes increasingly clear. They discouraged him from attending seminary. Then shortly after his ministry had begun, Hilary Bygrave advised Brown that it was ill-conceived. Less than a year later they transferred him to Kingston, which meant he must start over again. Eighteen months after that, the AUA cut off the funds for the Jamaican mission, and the congregation consequently lost the church they had been constructing. To get his grant reinstated, Brown had to abandon his work for two months to travel to Boston. Two years later, the AUA once again withdrew its support. There was no duplicity intended on the part of the AUA; lacking a real commitment to Brown's effort, they withdrew when the situation continued to seem impractical. From their perspective they had given Brown an adequate chance and had made significant expenditures in Jamaica, but any Jamaican watching this process of fits and starts would have little confidence in the sincerity of the Unitarian denomination. It seems that it was largely Brown's single-mindedness that sustained him as the AUA waivered and then

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[1] S. A. Eliot, Pilot of the Liberal Faith: Samuel Atkins Eliot 1862-1950 (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976, p. 107.

balked in its support. Brown writes of his situation and of his final years in Jamaica:

> It should here be noted that I agreed to leave Montego Bay in 1914 where I was an accountant to a large firm. . . . [Brown had told Bygrave that within five years it would hopefully pay him enough to keep him without aid] On a gentleman's agreement, that if the work in Kingston showed it would be permanently backed by the AUA I gave up a good position on this understanding and in 3-1/2 years I was deserted and left in a large city disillusioned and discredited. For a little over two years I struggled on against great odds [with meager help from the English Alliance of Unitarian women] and then decided to come to this country.[1]

Written eleven years after Brown came to America, this narrative does not convey the anger, the disillusionment, the agony, and the disgrace that Brown and his family must have felt. It does not mention that when Brown had visited Boston earlier he had offered to remain in the United States to work in the black community there. Nor does it tell how his plea-filled letters received a simple copy of the AUA directors' resolution withdrawing his funding along with a short expression of condolence. To carry on his mission in Kingston, he found a position as a junior master in the Wollmer School at a salary of sixty pounds a year. He worked there and continued the mission until January 1920 when he decided he would have to move to America to remedy the financial difficulties that plagued him in Jamaica.

Brown's financial situation brings out one last element in the abortion of the Jamaican mission. In a letter written in August 1918, Brown's eldest daughter appealed to the AUA for

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[1]Brown, "A Statement," p. 2.

financial aid: "My father owes now about $150 for our schooling and for rent. He will be sued for these . . ."[1] Presumably he weathered that crisis when a month later he acquired the position at the Wollmer School. However, in January 1920, Brown himself wrote:

> After two years of vain effort to get my feet back on the commercial ladder, and after frantic efforts to make ends meet. I am now practically a bankrupt, owing nearly 120 pounds, and am at this moment facing public disgrace and ruin.
>
> My salvation is to leave for New York as early as possible. My health, my reputation, my future usefulness all demand this.[2]

These two incidents and Brown's earlier experience at the treasury indicate that he was chronically going into debt by living beyond his means. Perhaps he saw himself as the "exceptional child" whose excesses were to be tolerated.

It seems that the life style of his expectations could not be realistically met by what he was able to provide. Still, he did not compromise his standards. He went into debt. The B & FUA, having seen his fiscal irresponsibility, had withdrawn their support early, and the AUA often expressed concern about where the money was going. (Cornish once estimated that $8000 had been given Brown.) Yet, Brown only infrequently gave an accounting of it. Apparently he used the funds as his needs demanded. At one point while he was receiving an AUA subsidy, he was sending his own children to private school, and, with them, in return for

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[1]Dorice Brown to AUA Directors, August 9, 1918, Brown file.

[2]Brown to Cornish, January 12, 1920, Brown file.

the help his brother had given him when he had difficulties with the Civil Service, he sent his brother's daughter. In Jamaica there was probably no other schooling for his children, something he stressed rigorously and valued highly, if he did not pay for it. Brown, who had middle class sensibilities, if not means, must have seen many people living in abject poverty, and he felt that he was asked to bear the inequities of a situation different from that of any other Unitarian minister. He knew the situation was unjust, he knew that many American Unitarians were prosperous, and yet he, who had forsaken much and suffered much for the Unitarian cause, had to pay the price alone.

Brown's idealism--his expectation of a better world, of an education for his children, of an enlightened religion for blacks--and his inability to come even close to bringing this about because of racial prejudice and social intransigence, are truly tragic. It reoccurred time and again in his life. This man possessed a vision, and he never ceased following it. It was his vision and hope that took him to New York City and Harlem, the black Mecca.

HARLEM: A DREAM PURSUED

In a two story brick house off a short street on a drab gray day in mid-December, I sat facing Ethelred Brown's eldest child. On the outskirts of Jamaica, New York, where the bus turns around and heads back again, I listened to Mrs. Dorice Leslie, as she spoke of a life in which she had often closed her eyes hoping she would open them to find she had been in a

dream. It hadn't been; and now her seventy-ninth birthday lay just three days away. She is the last of the Brown children. Ethelred too, had survived all his siblings, his wife and most of his children. He had the tenacity to hold on after everyone else was gone. He held on to life and to his dream of building a temple of liberal religion in Harlem. He held on to that dream until the last.

Dorice sat retrieving memories of her father. She would pause, then her animated voice would run on for a while, stop, and let out a sigh. She was happy that someone had finally taken interest in her father's life story, but many of the memories still pained her. She remembered that twenty-four years earlier he had been growing sicker for over a year, but still his arms had been firm, and his face didn't show his age. Slim in his youth, Ethelred had become stocky with age. He wasn't tall, somewhere around 5'8". His skin had turned darker with age. He had always been a dignified man who carried himself well, no matter how hard the times. He never looked raggedy; his suit was always pressed. He didn't have many close friends, for he was always busy reading or writing or going to a meeting. He was a bespectacled, scholarly man, who was personable, but not charismatic. What most people who knew him saw was a public man. He didn't often betray his private sorrow.

At the age of eighty-one he had sat in a hospital, and when the doctor asked him to stay he protested that he had a meeting in Boston to go to. The doctor prevailed. Dorice came often to see him never knowing how long it would be. John Haynes

Holmes also visited him once. On February 17, 1956, after four weeks in the hospital, Egbert Ethelred Brown died. Dorice remembered that a little while before he went into the hospital, he had written to someone: "I hope 1956 will be the destiny of the church."[1] It was to be the year of his destiny, and he, in a real sense, was the spirit of that church; without him it languished. He had come a long way since he had embarked from Jamaica in 1920, exactly 36 years earlier. He had hoped to build a Unitarian church, but what he left was less tangible. He touched lives, promoted radical causes, exposed others to a broad spectrum of issues, affected the tenor of his time in some small ways, but left no temple of liberal religion in Harlem.

When he and his wife arrived in Harlem in March 1920, it was the home for 200,000 blacks. The "Great Migration" of Negroes north, in which two million people had come to work in the defense industries, had peaked in 1915. In 1905 when the great influx of Negroes into New York had begun, black realty companies had leased and bought buildings in Harlem to rent to blacks. Harlem's whites had fought to keep them out, but were overwhelmed, and then fled. There had even been a Unitarian church in Harlem, the Unity Congregational Society,[1] but it was probably unwilling and unable to adjust to a black Harlem. It moved and became the Westside Unitarian Church in 1921.

Harlem was transformed, and the community where Brown arrived was the center of the black world:

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[1] American Unitarian Association Yearbook 1921-1922 (Boston), p. 150.

> In the history of New York the name Harlem has changed from Dutch to Irish to Jewish to Negro; but it was through this last change that it has gained its most widespread fame. Throughout coloured America, Harlem is the recognized Negro capital. Indeed, it is Mecca for the sightseer, the pleasure seeker, the curious, the adventurous, the enterprising, the ambitious, and the talented of the entire Negro world; for the lure of it has reached down to every island of the Carib Sea and penetrated even into Africa. It is almost as well known in the white world, for it has been much talked and written about.[1]

Brown arrived in Harlem during "an extraordinary era--the fabulous twenties." This was a period of exceptional creativity known as the "Harlem Renaissance" in which "Negro artists poured out a stream of poems, plays and musical composition."[2] Moreover, there was all kinds of institutional fervor, from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, to Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association, to the Communist Party. Into the midst of this surging community, two men walked seeking their destinies: the one was Brown, the other Paul Robeson.

It is an interesting coincidence that Ethelred Brown arrived in New York City a month after Paul Robeson. Robeson, a young man who had just graduated from Rutgers, was already famous as an All-American football player. He came to study law at Columbia University. Robeson lived in Harlem, and he quickly became a vital part of the Harlem Renaissance.

When Ethelred Brown came to the black Mecca, Harlem, he was forty-five. The previous eight years he had struggled unsuccess-

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[1]James Weldon Johnson, Black Manhattan (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1930), p. 1.

[2]Lerone Bennet Jr., Before the Mayflower (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1962), p. 297.

fully to establish Unitarianism in Jamaica. He came to Harlem to start anew.

Paul Robeson would quickly leave the law profession to become the foremost black entertainer in America. He would be acclaimed throughout the world, but subsequently, he became infamous in his homeland, when he used his art to make radical political statements. He became an eloquent spokesman for all oppressed peoples. Like Brown, he made a mid-life change of direction, and rededicated himself to a cause that would bring him long years of persecution and suffering.

Brown's suffering had already begun in Jamaica. Yet, he had decided on the ministry as his calling, and he was determined to pursue it for the rest of his life. He writes of his intentions: "I sailed from the Island of Jamaica determined to establish a Unitarian church in Harlem, and all that mattered to me in March 1920 was that the venture should be launched with out delay." Brown set about his calling, but unlike Robeson, whose success was astronomical and whose fall, deep, Brown's path would be a slow climb out of obscurity.

Upon arriving in Harlem, Ethelred Brown brought together a group of people, mostly Jamaicans, to form the Harlem Community Church. It was so named "primarily in recognition of the marked interest shown at that early stage of the venture by the Rev. John Haynes Holmes, minister of the Community Church of New York." For many years Holmes and Brown hoped to create some sort of affiliate status for the Harlem church. This never came to pass, but Brown's association with Holmes was a lasting one. Holmes

proved to be one of Brown's main supporters in his continuing battle with the AUA. On his arrival Brown's relationship with the AUA officials was strained; so, understandably, he took up his new mission without pursuing any financial support from the denomination.

Like Saul of Tarsus, Brown had to work at his trade while he preached the gospel. In Jamaica, Brown's ability to find suitable employment outside enabled him to carry on his church work, but in New York this was not to be true. It was not uncommon to find black college graduates working in the post office; underemployment was the rule, not the exception. Even Paul Robeson found that he couldn't practice law because the American Bar Association discriminated against Negroes. Later Robeson quit a position as a law clerk when a secretary refused to type for him. Likewise, Brown found himself unable to find a position as an accountant, the work that had been his mainstay in Jamaica. In the "History of the Harlem Unitarian Church" Brown lists his succession of jobs and the recurring financial hardships he faced during his first twenty years in New York:

> I worked as an elevator operator at a downtown hotel for 5-1/2 years, being at the church only on alternate Sunday evenings. Following this I was a speaker for the Socialist Party for three years. Then followed a period of real hardship, and then there came a break in my favor when in 1929 I secured the position of Office Secretary of "The World Tomorrow," in which position I continued to work until the magazine ceased publication in July 1934. Then followed another period of hard times. The Rev. Dale DeWitt, Regional Director of the American Unitarian Association, . . . discovered me in 1937 as a recipient of public relief. He set out at once to seek relief from this unsatisfactory condition, and succeeded in securing an appropriation from the AUA of $50.00 a month which I received from November 1937 to July 1939--a period of 21

> months. When I reached my 65th birthday on July 11, 1940, I became eligible for a pension which I received, and am still receiving. The above is the financial story of the minister of the Harlem Unitarian Church from March 1920- to July 1940--a period of 20 years.[1]

Brown's struggles to maintain his family in a racist society were trying enough, but unknown to him, the AUA was hampering his church work as well. In October 1921, a year and a half after Brown arrived in Harlem, Louis Cornish wrote the following letter to a Mr. McDougall who had requested information about Brown:

> I speak I believe with no anti-negro feeling. . . . It is only fair to say that there are those who [in reference to Jamaica] claim Mr. Brown was frankly dishonest. I prefer another interpretation. I do not think he ever used any money with conscious dishonesty, but as his need was pressing--I think he has nine children and his salary was small--with true negro reckoning there was always a bright tomorrow when he could pay the debts of today. . . . There are those who believe that he deliberately tried to deceive, but I believe the negro has an extraordinary histrionic vein, and what a man expects to accomplish and what he is actually doing blend happily into reality.
>
> He wrote me a few weeks ago asking for hymn books for his Community Church at Harlem, which I am afraid you will find exists only on paper. He preaches there once a fortnight, and I suspect that the congregation as in Jamaica is made up largely of his household.
>
> . . . I frankly counsel that you give him no encouragement whatever in the way of financial assistance or promise of help to his church.[2]

This letter did not stop Mr. McDougall from speaking at the Harlem Community Church, but Brown reported that his address, calling for closer affiliation to the AUA, was not well received.

Brown had hardly begun when his effort was being undermined. Cornish may have been correct in his suspicion about

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[1] Brown, "Brief History," p. 5.

[2] Cornish to McDougall, October 1921, Brown file.

Brown's use of the funds, but I am reluctant to accept his judgment, cloaked in racial innuedos as it is. He dismissed Brown's personal idiosyncracies as racial afflictions. He claimed Brown had nine children, later he said thirteen, when there were only six. Finally, the church, which he speculated was made up of Brown's household, actually had an average membership of thiry during its first three years, and an income of $730, of which Brown only received $68.56. This was the attitude of the man with whom Brown would have to deal over the next sixteen years, first as the administrative vice-president and then, as the president of the American Unitarian Association. It is no wonder that Brown should rage at ". . . the remarkably strange antagonism of the AUA to religious work among Negroes."

In 1925 Brown found himself confronted by the AUA in a "Catch 22" situation. George F. Patterson, the secretary of the fellowship committee, wrote to ask if there was any reason they should not strike Brown's name from the ministerial rolls. They charged that, since he was employed in a position other than as a minister, and since his church was "not in sympathy with the Unitarian spirit and purpose,"[1] they would remove his name unless he proved otherwise. Outraged, Brown sent back a letter stating that he couldn't engage in a full-time ministry because the church did not have the wherewithal to pay him and the denomination would give him no support. He was forced to work full-time in other capacities in order to minister in his remaining time. The

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[1]Brown to George F. Patterson, May 19, 1925, Brown file.

second charge was simply fallacious; he was and had always been a Unitarian minister. Having heard from Brown, the committee took no action.

Brown always insisted that his position as an "elevator boy," which he rightfully felt was beneath his dignity, projected a poor image and indicated such an indifference toward him on the part of the denomination that it seriously hurt his effort to form a viable church. He persevered in his mission, and was fortuitously discovered by the Socialist party late in 1925. He became one of their speakers. He may have been brought to the attention of the Socialists by some of the members of his church who were among the small group of left wing radicals in Harlem. After finding this job, Brown had more time for his church. He could preach every Sunday. Then, other problems arose, for although in one place he wrote that he worked for them for three years, in a letter written in November 1926, he reported "my engagement with the Socialist Party is at an end." Presumably this was because the campaign was over. I surmise that he worked for them preceding elections for three years. In the same letter he continues, "I hesitate to return to the former unsatisfactory arrangement."[1] The problem he faced was how to continue his church work without returning to a job as a menial laborer that not only hampered him but was odious to him as well.

Earlier in 1926 Brown had written Samuel A. Eliot asking for support of the fledgling church in Harlem. Eliot referred

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[1]Brown, Appeal to Unitarian Ministers, September 15, 1926, Brown file.

the matter to the Rev. Walter R. Hunt, the AUA field secretary in New York, and also suggested that Brown appeal to his friends and neighbors in New York. In response to a second letter, Eliot tersely repeated that the matter was in Hunt's hands and that he would not acknowledge further communication from Brown. Brown then sent several letters to Hunt. The first appealed for aid so that he might devote himself full-time to the Harlem Community Church, which now claimed a membership of 85 and expenditures totalling $1,128.30. In a second letter sent two days later, Brown, in a confessional manner, laid out the history of his relationship with the AUA, hoping that once Hunt understood his plight Hunt would assist him: ". . . so much of the past, the present and the future is wrapped up in this work and so much of this work's future is in my own hands I have decided to give you a view of the personal." Brown then recounted his trials and suffering in Jamaica. Finally he added:

> Something I have never mentioned even to my friend John Haynes Holmes, my poor wife has never recovered from the disappointment. [She couldn't understand and] today her mind is deranged and her talking--rambling, incoherent--is of the church that ruined us.[1]

These letters brought no support from the American Unitarian Association. Faced with their indifference, the end of his engagement with the Socialist party, and a mentally ill wife, Brown decided in 1926 to write directly to other ministers in the denomination. He requested their financial assistance.

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[1]Brown to Walter Hunt, March 14, 1926, Brown file.

Many ministers responded to Brown's solicitation by saying they thought it was the AUA's province to support his efforts. Others sent small donations, and one wrote: "The AUA finds money to support our work among Finns, Icelanders, Italians and other foreign populations and yet it seems they can find no funds to foster a work among Afro-Americans."[1] No, Brown's appeal did not elicit funds from the AUA. Rather, in February 1928 it became the issue around which the fellowship committee, for the second time, considered dropping his name. Patterson, the secretary of the fellowship committee, revealed his attitude toward Brown in a letter to another Unitarian minister: "He is continually soliciting our churches . . . he actually lives by begging for a cause that is generally recognized as beginning and ending in himself and his family."[2]

This time the removal of Brown's name was only circumvented by the strong intercession of John Haynes Holmes. Holmes wrote a letter challenging the committee's right to remove Brown's name, and asking if they were taking this action because of his race. Holmes then listed a large number of men whom he knew were no longer involved in the Unitarian ministry and yet whose names remained in the yearbook. Heedless of Holmes's arguments and despite the absence of specific guidelines that forbade solicitation, the committee only relented once again because Holmes guaranteed that Brown would cease soliciting Unitarian churches.

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[1]Brown to S. A. Eliot, November 28, 1926, Brown excerpted this in the letter to Eliot, AUA Archives, Harvard, "Bro" file.

[2]George Patterson to Fred Lewis, March 8, 1928, Brown file.

Feeling stymied by the AUA officials in his attempt to get financial aid and attacked by the fellowship committee, Brown wrote directly to the directors of the AUA, listing his grievances. Among them were the AUA officials' unresponsiveness to the needs of the Harlem church, the fellowship committee's two attempts to take his name off the ministerial rolls, and the response of the Committee on Ministerial Aid to one of his personal appeals. This last appeal for money arose pursuant to a court case in which Brown was found in arrears in his rent payments. He had appealed to the AUA and then found that, unbidden by and unannounced to him, they had referred his name to a public charity organization in New York City--a situation he found particularly embarrassing and highly unethical. He called it a "deliberate attempt to humiliate me." The AUA officials' intent had been to render him assistance without seeming to lend denominational support to his cause or to appear to accept responsibility for his well-being, Brown's interpretation was that they had done all these things "to punish the man in charge because he is stubbornly carrying on the work instead of quitting as they desire."[1] Brown's letter concluded by saying he was certain these things were done without the directors' knowledge and that they would do their best to rectify the situation.

Dealing with the AUA was only one problem among many for Brown. He was also hard pressed by a home situation that was in a state of crisis. It is hard to exaggerate the pressure Ethelred

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[1]Brown to AUA Directors, November 5, 1928, Brown file.

was under. His second son, who was an alcoholic and was eventually committed to an asylum, had once taken Brown's one good suit, his preaching suit, and pawned it. His wife had not been able to cope with the poverty, the trials, and the disappointments. She had played the piano at the church for a time, but when she began making mistakes some of the men said she could not continue. She did little at home and would spend her time wandering about the streets. At times she had gone down to Holmes' Community Church dressed improperly, and another time she had dozed off there. Finally, Holmes had to tell Brown to try and keep her from coming to Community Church. The duty of nursing his wife and tending to the household chores fell to Brown while his daughters helped him as much as they could.

In the fall of 1928 Brown resumed writing letters of solicitation to his Unitarian colleagues. Holmes sent this response to an inquiry about it from Patterson:

> This letter which you sent me signed by Mr. Brown is similar to the one which has come to me. . . . In answer to your inquiry I can say that I heartily disapprove of Mr. Brown's writing to his fellow ministers in this fashion, that I have warned him against it, and that he has agreed not to do it. I am sorry that he has resorted to this practice again.
>
> On the other hand, and most emphatically, I want to say that Mr. Brown is in a real distressing condition of misery. His plight is sad beyond words. He has no employment, his wife is feeble-minded and a dreadful case, his oldest son is out of employment, and his second son is in the insane asylum. The man needs help in the worst way and if any of the brethren want to help him out, the money will not be wasted. I am sending Mr. Brown a Christmas donation from this church.[1]

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[1]John Haynes Holmes to Patterson, December 24, 1928, Brown file.

Now Brown's situation turned from bad to worse. In March 1929 Brown's eldest son, Howard, committed suicide. Dorice, Brown's daughter recalled the events of that day:

> Howie was living at home then. I was at home then too. Oh! Father felt so guilty because he didn't know he was so sick like that. Howie was working all the time but he had gotten quiet and didn't want to go about looking for a job. That morning father must have said, 'Why are you sitting here like a bum? Why don't you go out and find a job? Later father went out to get a paper and when he came back. . . . Can you imagine how he felt because he was the last person who spoke to him. To come back up and go into the bathroom. I don't know how he didn't faint. Its not an easy thing to see and father had to witness it alone. Nobody was there. He had to take him down by himself. He was alone. He cried and cried and cried.[1]

Prior to this suicide the members of the Harlem church had drafted a general appeal for money to help Brown, who they knew was in grave financial difficulty. Now they hurriedly added a note about the death of Brown's son, wrote "urgent" across the top, and sent it. The appeal received a generous response from Holmes and a few others, but it also provoked this letter about Brown, sent from the AUA headquarters in New York to Walter Hunt in Boston:

> Here is another one! It seems as though something ought to be done to make this man understand that until he gets out and does some real work to support his family he has no chance of any help. No wonder his son committed suicide, he must have been the only wise one in the family.
>
> Everyone around here reports a very good Easter congregation and much interest as a result of the advertising material.

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[1] Leslie interview.

[2] AUA, New York (writer unknown) to Walter Hunt, April 1, 1929, Brown file.

This man's anger blinded him to the irony of his own letter. His callous reference to the death of Brown's son provides a curious parallel to the Easter event. Then remarkably, he went on to attack Brown's solicitations while lauding the positive results of his own advertising.

This letter is representative of the prevailing hostile sentiments about Brown at the AUA. Shortly after his son's death Brown discovered that a special committee had been established by the directors to review his situation. He quickly wrote the Rev. Frank Wicks protesting that he had not been informed. In addition, Brown requested assistance from the Ministerial Aid Fund, but not even a word of sympathy was offered. Earlier Brown had written to tell Cornish, now the president, of his son's death, and now he wrote Wicks:

> I lied to my wife a moment ago. Poor soul! She asked me if Dr. Cornish had not sent a word of sympathy. I told her he had. But (would you believe it?) he has not.
>
> . . . No wonder my poor boy became an Atheist and then gave up the fight.[1]

By this time Brown was being viewed as a nuisance, not simply by a few AUA officials, but by the board of directors as well. Brown himself had heard third-hand through the psychiatrist attending his wife "that[he had] made [the AUA Directors] so mad by [his] insistence in throwing the responsibility for [his] work up to them that although they now knew that they [had] done wrong they dare not go back on themselves."[2] On May 23, 1929, after studying

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[1]Brown to Frank Wicks, April 12, 1929, Brown file.

[2]Brown to John H. Lathrop, January 9, 1929, Brown file.

the situation the directors told the fellowship committee to drop Brown's name. This action provoked a series of angry appeals from Brown charging them with racism.

It was not until two years later that another committee was established to look into the circumstances surrounding the removal of Ethelred Brown's name from the ministerial rolls, and, for the first time, Brown was given a chance to present his side of the story. The committee in its report of April 1932 found all parties at fault. The committee's findings were these:

1. There were no rules of the Fellowship Committee under which Mr. Brown could have been dismissed. . . .

2. The Committee finds conclusively . . . that the Fellowship Committee . . . dropped him . . . because he was a nuisance to the denomination. . . .

3. The Committee finds that Mr. Brown . . . agreed unequivocally to cease his solicitation. . . .

4. The Committee finds . . . from the admission of Mr. Brown at the hearing that Mr. Brown did not keep this promise . . . and that although there were mitigating circumstances in some instances, the objectionable solicitation continued.

5. The Committee finds that Mr. Brown is wholly sincere in his work and is making a very real endeavor to found a liberal church for the negroes in New York, but the Committee is forced to the conclusion that Mr. Brown is nevertheless entirely irresponsible.

6. The Committee finds that the Fellowship Committee was unwise in that it did not give Mr. Brown a hearing and that it did not follow its own rules in dealing with Mr. Browns case, but the Committee further finds that the Fellowship Committee was supported in every instance by the Board of Directors and the Board of Directors were equally at fault.[1]

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[1]Report of the Committee appointed to Review the Ethelred Brown Case, February 8, 1932, Brown file.

In the end the committee was split in its recommendation as to whether or not to readmit Brown into fellowship. The board, however, sustained its earlier decision. Brown, who never saw the full report, received only a short note announcing the decision and no explanation whatsoever. Again, Brown fired off a number of angry letters. Finally, in 1934 Brown enlisted the help of the American Civil Liberties Union to win back his fellowship. Faced with this challenge by "a Jewish lawyer of the type we might expect to be active in the affairs of the [ACLU]," [1] as one AUA official commented, on May 8, 1935 the fellowship committee grudgingly readmitted Brown. The readmittance was contingent upon Brown's commitment not to solicit Unitarian ministers or churches.

Times had changed, Louis Cornish's presidency would end in 1937, and already, new men held sway at 25 Beacon Street. In January 1937 Charles Joy, administrative vice-president of the AUA, spoke at the Harlem Unitarian Church to a group of eighty. He found that there were forty-five active members and he recommended that the church's application to become a member of the AUA be accepted. He wrote, "I was much impressed with the quality of the group." [2] However, when he returned to Boston and tried to get an appropriation for the church, to his surprise "Louis [Cornish] would not consent. He seems to feel very bitter

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[1] Letter (writer and receiver unknown), March 1934, Brown file.

[2] Charles Joy memorandum to Administrative Council, February 1, 1937, Brown file.

about it all, and so blocked it. Louis even questioned the accuracy of Brown's statement that he was getting relief."[1]

Brown was receiving public relief, but this had not been the case between 1929 and 1934 when he worked as the office manager for the World Tomorrow, a magazine which represented the views of socialist and pacifist religionists and liberals. Among its editors were Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul H. Douglas, among its contributing editors were John Haynes Holmes, H. Richard Niebuhr, Norman Thomas, and A. J. Muste. Brown worked with the World Tomorrow[2] until publication ceased in 1934. Then at the age of fifty-eight and in the middle of the Great Depression, he was without a job. He got by for a while on the recently received share of his father's estate and on the money the editors of the World Tomorrow had collected for him. Those were hard time.

> During the Great Depression, North America, in the words of Lester Granger, "almost fell apart." There was a bitter bit of poetry: The Negro, Last Hired and First Fired. Business tightened their belts and bade their Negro employees good-bye. Matrons cut their budgets and domestics went home and looked at empty larders. By 1935 about one out of every 4 negroes in America was on relief. The need in urban areas was appalling.[3]

Brown was among those on relief. He was jobless, as were his two youngest children who had come into employment age during the depression.

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[1] Charles Joy to George C. Davis, March 2, 1937, Brown file.

[2] The World Tomorrow merged with the Christian Century in 1934.

[3] Bennet, Mayflower, p. 299.

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Until now I have focused on Brown's personal crises and on his running battle with the AUA. To capture all the dimensions of his character, one must look beyond his home life and beyond the confines of the denomination. Two other important elements must be woven into the fabric of his life story--his political involvements and his guidance of the religious life of the Harlem Unitarian Church. As we continue to progress through his life, I will weave these two strands into his story because within them are the essence of the message Brown brought to Harlem and that community's response.

Throughout crisis and hard times Brown's work with the church never ceased. The church was small and raising money was never an easy matter. "Negroes, however intelligent and cultured, are poor, because in America they are elevator men and porters."[1] Brown told this to the affluent white Unitarians, but they never really understood him. Brown's church was like many other black churches. "Studies have shown that while there were large, community-conscious congregations most black churches were small, ineffectual and the problem of paying the Minister's salary kept these congregations struggling for survival."[2] It is a tribute to Brown that the Harlem church lasted as long as it did. Had his salary been foremost in his mind, it would not have existed at all.

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[1]Brown, "A Statement," p. 6.

[2]Wilmore, Black Radicalism, p. 228.

One of these "large, community-conscious congregations" was the Abyssinian Baptist Church where Adam Clayton Powells, Sr. and Jr., ministered. It was one of the few liberal orthodox churches in Harlem, and with 15,000 members was one of the largest. The Powells were active in social reform, and the younger Powell, who was a graduate of Union Theological Seminary, was theological liberal. Brown was known and respected in Harlem as both a political radical and a religious liberal. Sharing these common interests with the Powells, Brown, during the late 30's, was frequently invited to preach at their church.

From his youth onward Brown had a strong sense of justice. Dorice had heard that, as a child, Ethelred had been disturbed by the presence of maids at home and he had told his parents not to be so harsh on them. In Harlem, this concern for others continued and blossomed. He would fire off a letter after coming across a news article that described an incident of segregation, discrimination or police brutality. On one occasion he wrote a letter of protest to the police department. Dorice recalled that "they sent a big inspector down because they were ready for trouble. Father was ready. But when the officer saw the place, the humble apartment in which the man sat who had written such a letter he was shocked."[1]

Brown was very active in Harlem, and he saw civic involvement as central to his ministry. He was a member of the Harlem Job Committee. This committee reached an agreement with the Uptown

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[1]Leslie interview.

Chamber of Commerce in which its members promised to hire blacks for one-third of its white collar jobs. Strangely, one of the founding members of the Harlem church, Frank Crosswaith, who was the head of the Harlem Job Center, denounced the plan. Such disagreements were not uncommon among members of the Harlem church. Brown had other causes. For example, he thought it was important to promote cooperative rather than profit-making enterprises. In an article in the Amsterdam News, Harlem's major newspaper, he challenged Harlem's leading churches to start a cooperative store.

Shaking black churches out of their complacency was another one of Brown's endeavors. In a letter to the editor of the same paper, Brown wrote:

> The Negro . . . has too much of the wrong kind of religion . . . The kind which encourages him to transfer his interest from here and now to some existence in some otherworld, [which embraces] servile contentment instead of provoking rebelious discontentment, . . . which destroys his personal responsibility by leading him to believe in the possibility of escaping punishment for his wrong doing.
>
> [What is needed is] a religion of the present and the practical profoundly concerned with this world. . . . The virtue of discontentment is a necessary preliminary to making this earth a place wherein dwell justice and peace and love. . . . [Every man must] shoulder his own responsibility [and] every man must work out his own salvation.
>
> Our colored ministers must . . . cleanse their religious meetings from the over emotionalism which dangerously borders on fanaticism . . .[1]

Brown protested against churches which focused on otherworldly concerns rather than on bringing justice into this world. People

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[1]Brown, Amsterdam News, n.p., n.d.

knew him and his letters and statements frequently appeared in the Harlem newspapers.

Brown was also concerned about his homeland, Jamaica. He was chairman of the Jamaican Benevolent Association, vice-president of the Federation of Jamaican Organizations, one of the founders and president of the Jamaican Progressive League. As such, he would on occasion help people having difficulty at the immigration office of the New York port. His greatest honor was having his way paid to Jamaica when he went to represent the Progressive League before a British commission studying Jamaican independence. When he arrived one old friend said, "Oh Egberg! Don't come back here starting trouble."[1] They knew what kind of man he was and respected him because he would stand up to white authority.

Brown's concern went beyond causes. He befriended a prison inmate, carried on a long correspondence with him, and on at least one occasion visited him. Dorice remembered that once at Christmas time she walked into the bedroom and found him hiding a present for the prisoner. Brown had so little that giving to this man was like taking away from himself, and Brown knew Dorice was not happy about that.

It had slowly dawned on some of the Unitarian ministers that Brown was a significant figure in Harlem. In 1939 John H. Lathrop, minister of the First Unitarian Congregationalist Society of Brooklyn, wrote to A. Powell Davies, who was the

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[1] Leslie interview.

chairman of the Committee Unitarian Extension and Church Maintenance:

> But the potency of our movement is not in the numbers and finance of our gathering there. Mr. Brown carries the Unitarian flag with wide reaching influence throughout the community. He would be easily worth supporting if he had no Sunday night of his own. . . . He brings his influence to bear in all sorts of ways under the Unitarian banner, as he does, for example, in some of the negro newspapers.[1]

When Lathrop wrote this in 1939, Brown's fortunes within the denomination had already changed.

Beginning in 1937, with the advent of Frederick May Eliot's administration, events had turned upward for Ethelred Brown. With the support of Dale DeWitt, the AUA field representative in New York, Brown began to receive the financial and moral backing he had desired for so many years. It was then for the first time that the Harlem Unitarian Church came under the watchful eyes of the Committee on Unitarian Extension and Church Maintenane. Brown made quarterly reports to this committee which gave him guidance and financial aid, but this ended suddenly when World War II began in 1939 and the AUA found itself hard pressed financially. This time, however, the loss of support was more financial than it was moral. A year later, Brown turned sixty-five and became eligible for the minister's service pension, which helped sustain him until the end of his life. His 65th birthday fell in the same year as the church's twentieth anniversary, and both occasions were marked together by a celebration at which the denomination was well represented.

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[1] John H. Lathrop to A. Powell Davies, April 24, 1929, UUA Archives, Harlem Unitarian Church file.

The favorable attitude of the AUA toward Brown was, in part, due to the changed racial attitude of the new generation. It was also indicative of a change in political sentiments. In his "Brief History of the Harlem Unitarian Church," Brown asks this question: "What relationship if any did the fact that the foundation members of the church were socialists bear to the early trials of the movement?" The answer has far-reaching implications and while he left it unanswered, I cannot. Richard B. Moore, Grace Campbell, W. A. Domingo, and Frank Crosswaith, who in 1920 were charter members of the church, were also among "the most prominent of the very few Negro Socialists, or sympathizers of the time."[1] They were involved in the split between the Socialist and the Communist parties. Moore and Campbell went with the Communists, while Domingo and Crosswaith went with the Socialists. Brown was aligned with the Socialists, and besides being one of their speakers, may also have been considered as a candidate on their party ticket. The strategies of the two parties were different. The Socialists sought a legal, nonviolent transformation of society; the Communists looked toward a social revolution, but both groups made basic errors in their efforts in Harlem. The Socialist, Eugene Debs, unable to grasp the uniqueness of the black situation or the racist mentality of America, said, "We have nothing special to offer the Negro." The Communists, on the other hand, energetically wooed blacks, but "failed to understand that Negroes, perhaps more than whites, were

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[1] Harold Cruse, The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1967), p. 40.

fundamentally American in the sense that they aspired to equality, or at least, to getting ahead within the existing institutional structure rather than through any radical reorganization of society."[1] Indeed, the theoretical and tactical differences with which this small group of Negro political activists were absorbed held little meaning for the destitute blacks in Harlem.

Yet "in subsequent years this split among the Negro Socialists was the root cause of more destructive rivalry in Harlem civil rights and labor politics than the record reveals."[2] This was evident in what happened to the Harlem church. Brown recalled, there "then occurred what may be rightly called a communist invasion, and with this began our troubles. The standard of our meetings deteriorated; the discussions fell from the high level attained and became irrelevant, abusive and vulgar."[3] Brown circumvented the situation by shifting from the typical forum-type service to a more distinctly religious service.

The identification of Brown and some of the founding members of the church with radical political stances obviously influenced the church's appeal within Harlem especially since the Negro community was essentially conservative. It likewise made it suspect to some of the earlier AUA officials. Patterson once wrote to Lathrop, who inquired about Brown, "[One] person attended his

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[1]Wilson Record, The Negro and the Communist Party (New York: Athenum, 1971), pp. 19, 118.

[2]Cruse, Crisis, p. 40.

[3]Brown, "Brief History," n.p.

meeting and reported it as a Bolshevist gathering."[1] Meanwhile, several Unitarian ministers who were fellow Socialists, after receiving Brown's appeals for money in which he announced that he was at present a speaker for the Socialist party, cautioned him that such statements could be counterproductive. One wrote:

> Most of our ministers are rather conservative and what you call the distasteful and incongruous work of an elevator operator appeals far more to them as honorable than addressing crowds for the Socialist Party.[2]

The situation of the Harlem Unitarian Church was complicated further by the tensions between the West Indiana and American Negro communities. This issue does not often emerge in Brown's own writings, but when it did, he was concerned that these two communities would overcome the prejudice they harbored toward one another. Harold Cruse in The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual writes that there were a number of reasons for this bias. Primarily, it was that "the islanders presented a threat of competition for the jobs available to blacks."[3] The ways in which this general situation effected the church are not clear. Dorice Leslie said that there were not any problems in this regard, but Ben Richardson, a black Harvard Divinity student who preached there, said, "there was a schism between the American Negroes and the West Indian Negroes."[4] G. Peter Fleck, a member of the New

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[1] G. F. Patterson to J. H. Lathrop, November 20, 1930, Brown file.

[2] Brown to Eliot, November 28, 1930, Brown file.

[3] Cruse, Crisis, p. 120.

[4] Randall S. Hilton, Secy. Ministerial Fellowship Committee, Summary of Interview with Benjamin Richardson, April 26, 1954, UUA Archives, B. Richardson file.

York Extension Committee, who visited the church late in Brown's life, found the congregation to be largely Jamaican.[1] It seems that this was an issue. In looking at Brown's sermons one does not find him using American Negro writers as a resource but rather white Unitarians. This is particularly strange since Brown resided in the midst of the Harlem Renaissance and it leads one to believe that he did not appreciate the black American psyche.

Yet this issue, was just one among many that Brown faced. There were other struggles that he was involved in. Brown may have worked for Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association when he first arrived in Harlem. At least one of his church members, W. A. Domingo, was a Garvey supporter. Yet, at some point, Domingo, R. B. Moore, F. Crosswaith, and Thomas Potter, all members of the Harlem church, became Garvey's "bitterest and most persistent opponents."[2] Brown shared their sentiment and this led to a catastrophic Sunday evening service in January 1928. It made the headlines of the Amsterdam News: HARLEM PREACHER HIT ON HEAD AT SUNDAY SERVICE. The article read:

> . . . The Rev. Mr. Brown began his address about 8:30 and told his audience that Marcus Garvey was a good Propagandist, a crowd collector and a money getter, but a bad leader. "While I do not approve of deportation as such, I heartily approve of Marcus Garvey's deportation, which was better for America in general and the Negro in particular," said the Rev. Brown.

Summary of interview with Benjamin Richardson, April 26, 1954, UUA Archives, B. Richardson file.

[1] G. Peter Fleck, telephone interview, February 1979.

[2] Cruse, Crisis, p. 46.

> At this junction a native African Garveyrite rose to defend his leader. The Rev. Brown allowed him 20 minutes in which to speak. He defended Garvey with such eloquence that he threw the church in an uproar, mostly against the pastor.
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> The minister then announced that he would allow anyone in the audience who purported to speak for Garvey of the U.N.I.A. 10 minutes, or would prolong the speaker's time 10 minutes. A woman in the audience demanded that the speaker's time be prolonged indefinitely, which the Rev. Mr. Brown would not grant. Thereupon a number of alleged Garvey adherents stalked out of the church uttering unkind expletives.
>
> "Now that the rowdies are leaving," said the pastor, "we may continue with the discussion." Rowdies? The crowd became infuriated and one man turned to strike down the reverend but someone restrained him. "I will not tolerate this disorder!" thundered the Rev. Mr. Brown "The meeting is closed."
>
> The minister picked up his prayer book and retired to another room, which was unlighted. As he stepped inside he felt a staggering blow on the head and turned and saw a man fleeing. He turned on the light and saw himself covered with blood. The police were called, but no arrest was made. The assailant had escaped.[1]

One finds it hard to imagine this scene or the "communist invasion" occurring in the context of a worship service. Yet, they are instructive. They show that there was a strong political element, an element we found in both Unitarianism and black religion in the first chapter, incorporated into the religious life of Harlem Unitarian Church. Political freedom emerges as a central part of Brown's ministry and as a significant part of the lives of a number of the church members. While Brown railed at the black churches in Harlem for pursuing otherworldly concerns, he endeavored to make the connection between religion and politics

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[1] Amsterdam News, January 11, 1928, front page.

intimate. However, this is not a harmonious union, and it points to a central uncertainty in the life of the church. Brown and the members of the church seemed to be caught between wanting a political dialogue and a religious worship service. Thus they were unable to establish a consistent liturigal framework for worship. Brown saw the changes as experimental. He wrote that services were modified from year to year, always with the hope of attracting new people. Over the years they varied between a traditional religious service with hymns, prayers, scripture readings, doxology, sermon, and benediction, and a forum situation with a strongly secular orientation, which included a brief service before the sermon and a discussion afterward. The church's letterhead called the church "A Temple and a Forum." But it was largely the forum element upon which the reputation of the Harlem Community Church was built. It drew people through the quality of its speakers and dialogue. Yet, its success as a forum also opened it to the kind of disruption described earlier. Moreover, it left some members desiring a service that was more religious in content and format.

In 1930 Mr. Albury, a member of the Harlem church, came to speak with Walter Hunt, the AUA's New York representative. He complained that the church was too "Atheistic," and that Brown and the majority had absolutely no desire for anything religious. He claimed the tendency was to make their service purely secular with addresses and discussions. This left Mr. Albury and 20 or 25 other members feeling unrepresented in the church. Hunt, who was trying to keep Brown and the church

at arms length, could offer him no assistance.[1]

The church continued shifting its pattern of worship. In 1938 when Dale DeWitt had begun working with the church he reported:

> Brown has had a rather difficult problem making a transition from the forum, which had very little organization behind it but was fairly well attended, to an organized church. Some people who were only interested in the Forum have been lost and the church attendance has not been so large.[2]

In May 1939 A. Powell Davies made this report to the Unitarian Extension Committee:

> The Harlem Unitarian Church lost ground, so far as attendance is concerned, when 2 years ago the nature of the service was changed, and the forums abandoned. Mr. Brown felt mistakenly, that this was necessary in order to secure support from the AUA.[3]

However, this had helped to put the church on sounder organizational ground. Then, true to form services changed again. Members began having forums once a month and eventually went back to the old forum style meeting every week. Later there was one forum a month again until 1946 when the forum meetings were ended. Reflecting upon the church's constantly changing pattern of worship, Brown wrote, "In all honesty it must be recorded that this phase of our work with its changes and with our uncertainty

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[1] Walter Hunt, Memorandum of conversation with Mr. Albury October 15, 1930, Brown file.

[2] Dale DeWitt, AUA Regional Director, memorandum on the Harlem Unitarian Church, March 4, 1938, HUC file.

[3] A. Powell Davies, Recommendations-From the committee on the Field of the Metropolitan Conference to the Church Extension Dept. of the AUA, May 10, 1939, HUC file.

as to what was best was the least creditable of all."[1] This oscilation between a traditional worship service and a forum betrays ambiguity in their religious self-understanding. In Brown's sense of religious purpose and members' statements, a group of unreconciled, although not unreconcilable, commitments are evident.

One of Brown's basic urges was to "emancipate [the Negro] from the emotionalism and superstitution and otherworldliness of the old time religion."[2] Brown's beliefs, in Unitarian fashion, were stated at times in the negative, as in this description of the church which appeared in one newspaper: "It has been aptly described as a church-forum where the honey-in-heaven and harassment-in-Hades type of religion is not tolerated. There are no 'amen corners' in this church, and no 'sob sister bench.'"[3] Here, are stated, as in the letter to the editor of the Amsterdam News,[4] the sentiments that Brown was trying to counteract in his challenge to orthodoxy in Harlem. Yet, Brown was not simply a reactionary. In that same letter he called for a religion that vaunts personal responsibility for the world, for he had formulated a positive religious view point.

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[1] Brown, "Brief History," n.p.

[2] Brown to Hunt, March 12, 1926, Brown file.

[3] "Rev. Ethelred Brown is Symbol of Radicalism in Pulpits in Harlem," The Daily Gleaner, January 20, 1934, Schomberg Collection, New York City Public Library.

[4] See footnote 1, p. 88.

In one sermon, "Jesus of Nazereth the World's Greatest Religious Teacher was a Unitarian," he wrote, "The religion of Jesus was a religion of character and service, all growing out of a personal intimate communion with God--a religion of the spirit."[1] For Brown, this religion of the spirit was manifest in service to humanity. Elsewhere, answering the question of faith, he said, "I have faith in the inherent goodness and rightness of man; faith in the power of truth and faith in the redeeming force of a spiritual religion destined to grow from strength to strength."[2] These only encapsulate a part of Brown's religion. He was typically Unitarian in much of his theology, believing in the oneness of God, discipleship to Jesus, and the goodness of humankind. Salvation lay in character and service. He quested after truth using all the resources available to him, both secular and biblical.

Brown's beliefs are also reflected in "The Statement of Purpose of the Harlem Unitarian Church which reads:

> This Church is an institution of religion dedicated to the service of humanity.
>
> Seeking the truth in freedom, it strives to apply it in love for the cultivation of character, the fostering of fellowship in work and worship, and the establishment of a righteous social order which shall bring abundance of life to man.
>
> knowing not sect, class, nation or race it welcomes each to the service of all.

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[1] Brown, "Jesus of Nazereth the World's Greatest Religious Teacher was a Unitarian," sermon, Spingarn Collection, Howard University.

[2] Brown, "My Faith--Then and Now", Christian Register, vol. 116, p. 715.

In this statement there is a dual commitment to service and truth, with unity of purpose: to serve humanity through the development of character. This leads one to expect Brown's sermons to fluctuate between the services which were often political and other-directed, and the development of character which would tend to be personal and spiritually inner-directed. Brown's sermons did play back and forth between these. In sermons like "The God I Lost, and the God I Found," "The Search For Truth," "Humanism," and "Marriage," Brown emphasized religious issues. Less frequently he preached sermons like "Police Brutality in Harlem" and "The Court Faces the People." These sermons, if explicitly political, are implicitly religious in their concern for others. Brown often left the socio-political topics to his guest speakers, who included men like Lester Granger and Roy Wilkins. Those who wished the service to have greater religious content and those who prefered a secular bent, created a tension which caused an oscilating worship pattern.

With all of Brown's emphasis on the intellectual and the political in religion he did not forsake the spiritual-emotional element. The religious was not abandoned for the secular. He delivered an address to the Unitarian Metropolitan Conference on May 16, 1954 entitled "Making Religion more Satisfying Emotionally." There he quoted Alfred North Whitehead as saying:

> Intellect is to the emotion as our clothes to our bodies. We could not well have civilized life without clothes, but we would be in a poor way if we had only clothes without bodies.

Brown believed that emotion was central to religion. For him music was one way of introducing it into the worship service.

Music always played an important part in Brown's life. From the time he taught himself to play the piano and then taught his children, from the time he was an organist for the Methodist church until he played for his own services in Harlem, he treasured music. His sermons were peppered with words from hymns that had inspired him throughout his life. Emotion was present in music for Brown, and emotion was that which made a sermon qualitatively different from a lecture. Knowing that this was a missing element in many Unitarian churches, he exhorted his Unitarian brethren to reclaim the emotional dimension of religion.[1]

In emphasizing the emotional and spiritual in religion, Brown was caught between those who desired a worship service that was devotional and those who wanted it to be intellectual. Mr. Albury complained in 1930 that the church was too secular, while in 1938 Hodge Kirnon, a long time chairman of the board, felt Brown put too much emphasis on worship. Brown found himself playing to both sides and satisfying neither. It was the devotional element that brought in the stable group, the loyal people who pledged, while the intellectual element brought in the numbers and the notoriety.

The dualisms of the secular and the religious, the intellectual and the devotional are not absolutes. Ideally, we should range across them all, but for some reason we became stuck demanding one thing and not realizing how intimately it is connected to the other. In the first chapter we saw that both

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[1]Brown , "Jesus of Nazereth."

black religion and Unitarianism have difficulty embracing equally the spiritual, intellectual, and political aspects of religion. Although he tried, Brown found it difficult to encompass all aspects, and the shifting pattern of worship at the Harlem Unitarian Church is indicative of this dilemma.

The obstacles before the Harlem Unitarian Church, which were always great, loom even larger in other areas. The church never had its own space to gather in; it rented a hall or the chapel at the YWCA for its Sunday evening service. There was no other common time or space for them. They had little success at starting a Sunday school, although one existed for several years in the late 1930's. For a time the Laymen's League had organized the forums, and of course, there were church officers, but this single-function church was an exception in the black community, where the church was traditionally the social center, the fulcrum, of black community life. In comparison, the Harlem Unitarian Church must have seemed to relate tangentially to the lives of its members. It seemed to be held together largely by the political and intellectual interest of its members. I submit that despite Brown's pastoral endeavors, the church, in its very nature, did not address the broader spectrum of human needs of its members. This is reflected in the financial situation of the church. In the "Brief History of the Harlem Unitarian Church," Brown reported the shocking fact that "in this matter of finances it may fittingly be recorded that for some reason or other the members of the church paid no regular subscription until the year begun October 1, 1935."[1]

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[1]Brown, "Brief History," p. 88.

shows a lack of commitment. Despite Harlem's depressed economy people would have contributed if the church had been an important enough element in their lives. The weakness of these intellectually and politically spawned commitments was seen in loss of membership when the church moved away from the forum format.

Who was drawn to the Harlem church? We know there were initially the left wing radicals, that there were many Jamaicans, but also Negro Americans. On a number of occasions Brown mentioned people who had forsaken organized religion until they found the Harlem church. The overwhelming impression is that people came for political and intellectual reasons. Large crowds gathered to hear prominent speakers like John Haynes Holmes, but since the attendance at these services was not reflected in a growing membership or budget, we must assume that the bulk of these people were not committed to the liberal gospel or to the church community. One wonders whether or not the situation in Harlem paralleled that in Jamaica. Bygrave reported he was impressed by the intelligence of the 300 people who came to hear him. Interestingly, these were mostly young men--a group from which one is least likely to build a church community. John Lathrop made a similar observation about the makeup of the Harlem church in 1934, and indeed, the membership rolls of the Harlem Unitarian Church show many more men than women. This church was an institutional anomally, for church is traditionally a women's haven.

In my estimation, this peculiarity is what broke all hope that the Harlem Unitarian Church might have become a viable

religious community. By 1940 it had achieved some financial stability, and the membership had grown to fifty-three, but in 1941 the membership suddenly dropped to twenty-three, and from then on it averaged around twenty-five. What had happened? There is no institutional crisis recorded in Brown's papers, but in August 1941, Pearl Harbor was bombed, and the United States entered the Second World War. Young men were drafted or enlisted in the Armed Forces. I am inclined to think that the sharp drop in membership reflects the fact that a significant part of Brown's congregation were young men.

* * *

Although the church membership never returned to its old level, not even after the war, Brown never seemed to take note of this while he persisted in his efforts to maintain a temple of liberal religion in Harlem. In 1940 at the age of sixty-five, Brown felt as if his life was just beginning. Living on his pension, which was later augmented by an additional $400 per year from the Society for Ministerial Relief, he could work unhindered for the church, and he looked forward to the future. Other people had different ideas. There had long been an undercurrent of thought that Brown simply was not the right person. This was never candidly told Brown, and the people who expressed this opinion did so without clarifying their comments. It is difficult to know whether they were simply responding to his failure--from a middle class perspective where success is the measure of a man's worth--or whether they saw something in Brown's personality that hampered his efforts. I will return to this question later.

Other people agreed with the opinion that A. Powell Davies expressed:

> He himself is very popular. It is felt that he has not yet had much of a chance. . . . My net judgment is that Brown is doing a pretty good job of paving the way for the kind of successor you will eventually be able to appoint.[1]

This became the hope of many, including Brown. Someone had even proposed that Brown's pension be granted on the condition that he step aside for a younger man. If Brown heard of this, he did not mention it. However, it was clear that at sixty-five Brown was not yet ready to step aside. DeWitt, who was earnestly seeking a successor, did not wish to set up a competition. The question was how to effect a transition. Brown was not opposed to this idea, and forwarded the notion himself in a letter to Everett M. Baker, the AUA executive vice-president, in March 1940 when applying for his service pension.

> [The Harlem Unitarian Church] will continue as long as I am able physically and mentally to carry on . . . . That will lie for about ten years more. . . . I would work to the end that at the time of enforced retirement it would be my great privilege to hand over to my successor a well established and growing church.[2]

Ten years was longer than DeWitt had in mind, and longer than the likely candidates were able to wait. At the time there were two young, potential candidates: Jeffery Campbell was a Universalist and a graduate of St. Lawrence; Benjamin Richardson was an unaffiliated liberal who graduated from Harvard Divinity

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[1] A. Powell Davies to George C. Davis, May 10, 1939, Brown file.

[2] Brown to Everett M. Baker, March 4, 1940, Brown file.

School. Although on different occasions, both had spoken at the Harlem church, and it was thought that one of them might move into a position as Brown's assistant, upon his visit to the Harlem church, Richardson "discovered that Brown had no intention of leaving . . ."[1] Moreover, out of respect, he did not want to intrude on Brown's ministry. Nor was it clear to him how one could move in and work with Brown. In the absence of a building, the man himself had become the foundation of the Harlem Unitarian Church, and Brown's ministry to the community was not easily handed on. White Unitarians, viewing this from outside the black community, did not understand the nature of Brown's relationship to Harlem. As it turned out the man was irreplacable.

The passing years did not dim Brown's hopes for the church. An article written by Brown entitled "I Have Two Dreams" appeared in the Christian Register in 1947. The dreams he offered the denomination were of genuine interracial churches in America and a Unitarian church in Harlem. His was not simply wishful thinking; Brown had already begun work on both these goals.

> On October 1, 1944 at the opening of the season 1944-45 it was publicly announced that the Harlem Unitarian Church was a inter-racial church. For the full season the white ministers of the Metropolitan Conference preached for us on alternate Sunday evenings and brought members of their congregations with them. The Rev. John Haynes Holmes, Minister of the Community Church, enthusiastically approved of what we had done and asked to be enrolled as an honorary member. The Rev. Donald Harrington, Associate Minister of the Community Church . . . and his wife enrolled as members. We enrolled later a white woman, both of whome have since left New York. It was in many respects an inspiring and revealing season.[2]

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[1] See footnote 4, p. 93.

[2] Brown, "Brief History," n.p.

During the previous summer in 1944, the Rev. Howard Thurman became co-minister of the "Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples." Located in San Francisco, this church was integrated at its inception and saw itself as an experiment. Whether the similar experiment in Harlem occurred as a response to this, or whether their simultaneous emergence as interracial churches was coincidentally a sign of the changing times, is not known. In any case, the experiment in Harlem was less successful, and an angry letter from Brown to the "Negro Religious Liberals" appeared in the Amsterdam News. Brown wrote that on a number of Sundays he had found many whites, but few Negroes in attendance, and he castigated Harlem's liberals for being so unresponsive. At the end of the 1944-45 season the church went on as it had in previous years. However, from then on there were usually only a few white members. One Dutch immigrant was particularly involved, and a number of other people came from the Community Church out of a sense of duty.

A year after this season had passed a controversy arose when Harrington, Holmes' successor at Community Church, began advertising in New York's black newspapers. Brown saw this as unfair competition while Harrington's desire was to reach out to the whole city. In response to Brown's protest, which Harrington heard through DeWitt, he promised Brown that he would only advertise the Community Church's morning service and not the evening one so there would be no conflict. It is not hard to imagine Brown's resentment toward this large church, which, by the year of his death, was already one-fifth black.

The attraction some blacks felt for Community Church highlights another obstacle with which Brown had to contend, black racism. Prejudice within the black community went beyond the West Indiana-American Negro conflict; it included distinctions between class and skin color. Oppressed people subconsciously accept the values of their oppressors. In our society that has meant that "White is Right." Upper class and light skinned Negroes, often the same group, preferred to attend a major white religious institution like Community Church rather than to listen to an old, dark Jamaican in a small YWCA chapel. The situation was not unlike the one Bygrave observed in Jamaica. Harold Cruse also attested to the fact that middle class Jamaicans had "the deepest of skin color phobias."[1] This is also true of the American Negro but perhaps to a lesser degree. This ingroup class and color prejudice was a factor when a group of well-known black professionals, while forming a committee to aid Brown, would not join the church.

Brown, however, was not daunted by the small success he had at creating an interracial church or by ingroup prejudice. He persevered in pursuit of his second dream, building a Unitarian church in Harlem. I also note that his own class consciousness prevented him from starting a church in a storefront as was the common practice--an unfortunate inhibition.

> In January 1946 the church boldly launched a campaign to secure $15,000 to purchase a house to be transformed into a church building. The campaign was opened with a Recital

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[1]Crise, Crisis, p. 428.

> on January 27, given in All Souls Unitarian Church. . . . This was followed by a Rally held in the Harlem YWCA on Sunday evening, May 5. Both functions were successful. Unfortunately the year 1947 passed without any effort in behalf of the Building Fund. In 1948 the 1946 pattern was followed. Again our efforts were crowned with success. The net result of these special efforts is that at this date our Building Fund has to its credit the sum of $1980.00. We have a long way yet to go, but when we remind ourselves that on January 1946 we had not a cent we are not discouraged. In fact as we start the season of 1949-50 on this Sunday morning, September 11, 1949, we are buoyed with a strange optimism which emboldens us to look forward to 1950 as our year of destiny--the year on which the corner stone of a Temple of Religious Liberalism will be laid.[1]

1950, like 1956 and every year in Brown's eyes, was to be the year of destiny! It would never be his destiny to build a church in Harlem. Year to year the building fund grew slowly; five years later it has reached $3089.00. Earlier, Brown had appealed to the AUA for assistance, but they told him "that under the present circumstances they did not believe it was advisable to grant"[2] his request. The "present circumstances," which the committee did not share with Brown, were "Mr. Brown's age . . . and the fact that in all his years in Harlem he has never made the slightest dent on the community and today has a very tiny group of interested Negro Unitarians."[3]

Unknown to Brown on another occasion in 1950, a Mrs. M. L. Ogan had asked Holmes whether it would be wise to contribute $3000 she had received on an insurance policy that came to term.

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[1] Brown, "Brief History,"

[2] G. C. Davis to Brown, October 22, 1947, Brown file.

[3] G. C. Davis to John Fisher, October 22, 1947, Brown file.

Cautioning her, Holmes wrote of Brown's years of trial and little success. Finally, he advised her that if she really understood the risk and was intent on giving, she should use the money as a grant to be matched, that would revert to her estate if unused.

Brown's time had come and gone. A number of the larger urban churches were becoming racially integrated. In 1947 Community Church, having begun integration prior to 1920, called a black associate minister, the Rev. Maurice Dawkins. In the same year the Rev. Lewis A. McGee began the Free Religious Fellowship, a predominantly black Unitarian church, in Chicago. Later, Ben Richardson became McGee's successor. When the denomination set up the Commission on Unitarian Intergroup Relations in 1952, Dr. Errold D. Collymore and the Rev. Howard Thurman were its black members. Brown faded from sight and from mind. Today, many people still recall seeing him at May meetings, and a few remember hearing him speak. Many Unitarians had seen him, fewer knew him, and none were close enough to him to understand the drive that kept him going until he died in 1956.

* * *

It seems that time conspired against Ethelred Brown. How could any one man, who was more often undermined than helped by the very people he turned to for support, overcome the effects of two world wars, the Great Depression, black and white racism, classism, black Christian orthodoxy, a woeful family life and his own personal idiosyncracies? It was too much to ask Brown to hammer success out of this, but not enough to keep him from trying.

There is an important question to consider: What drove Brown on when his hope of building a church in Harlem was threatened time and again? The trait most characteristic of Ethelred Brown was the relentlessness with which he pursued his dream. In a 1911 issue of the Christian Register, Brown wrote an article entitled "A Story and an Appeal" in which he recounted his early struggle to establish a Unitarian Church in Jamaica. He concluded with these words:

> The call is distinct and clear: the field is fertile and promising. Are we to heed the call and enter the field?
>
> By the uniqueness of the whole situation . . . by what has been attempted and done, by what is now being done, by what may be done, in the remembrance of our inheritance the intellectual and spiritual freedom we prize and enjoy, I make this appeal in confidence that it will call forth the response which I venture to say it deserves.[1]

Striking out on his new venture in Jamaica, Brown had been full of hope and ready to meet the future. It was to be a future that brought unthought of trials and painful failures. Yet, in 1950, after almost 40 years of struggle which left him with a congregation of twenty, Brown could still write John Haynes Holmes this note:

> Dear Dr. Holmes,
>
> I am constrained to invite you to rejoice with us. At the close of yesterday's service we enrolled three members--2 young men and one young woman. Knowing our long heart-rending history you will be able fully to appreciate why for us that was a joyful and thrilling incident.

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[1] Brown, "A Story and an Appeal," Christian Register, vol. 96, no. 18 (May 4, 1911).

> Can it be that after years of trusting toil and patient waiting the days of harvest are at hand? Can it be? Even though I am happy I hesitate to answer even to myself. Enough is the joy of this hour.[1]

The many years of toil gave a measure of caution to his words, but hope he held still burned brightly. What kind of a man was this that could so tenaciously follow a dream?

There are two facets of Ethelred Brown that make his drive and his resilience understandable. He followed his laudable ideals, and was driven by a tragic obsession. He refused to be sentenced to a mundane life as a menial laborer so that he might live comfortably while betraying himself and his mission. The mission of which he never lost sight was the delivery of liberal religion to the black community. A short article appeared in the New York Times on August 11, 1948. It was entitled, "Harlem Pastor Defends Idealism," and it read, "A defense of idealism was made yesterday at the Unitarian Church of All Souls . . . by the Rev. Ethelred Brown, pastor of the Harlem Unitarian Church. As guest preacher at the morning service, Mr. Brown said that men who visualized better days are believed that visions may become true were really 'practical.'" For Brown these words were not mere verbiage; they were rather the princple by which he led his life. The sermon was his testament.

Nevertheless, the price for his idealism was high, his victories, few, and the effect on his life, almost ruinous. Brown's daughter Dorice once lamented, "We suffered more than he

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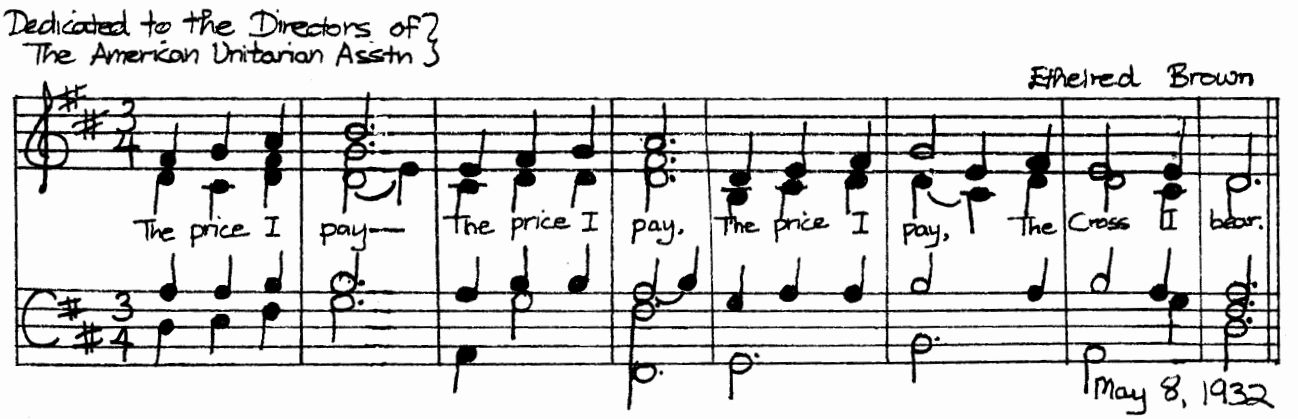
[1]Brown to John Haynes Holmes, April 24, 1950, Library of Congress, Holmes Correspondence.

in our way . . . but he just didn't want to give it up."[1] The needs of Brown's family seemed to be secondary to his mission. Energy that needed to be used to insure their well-being was used in furthering the liberal religious cause. It seems that family life crept up on Brown in the natural course of event, but Brown's commitment, indeed his spiritual marriage, was to the ministry. His priorities were not so different from those of many ministers. Family often comes second in their lives, but the conditions are rarely so appalling as they were for Brown's family.

Brown sent this song to the directors of the American Unitarian Association after they refused to reinstate him as a fellowshipped minister:

The Price I Pay
(Tune: Hunt)



Brown suffered, but his suffering was qualitatively different from that of his family. For him, suffering and failure were not incongruous with hope and faith, but rather the essence of it.

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[1] Leslie interview.

Failure did not impair his sense of self-worth nor subdue his high expectations. In his ministry and idealism he found a resource that sustained him through all the tragedy he knew. "The Price We Pay" was also the title of Brown's sermon in which he alluded to Emerson's saying, "There is a law of compensation and it works." His conclusion was this:

> Choose, my friends, but know in choosing, that you shall be paid for what you have done--no more, no less; and know also that the law never changes and that to obtain the object of your choice you must always pay the price. Choose, then, my brethren, choose. What will you have? Pay the price and take it.

For Brown, his own suffering had meaning, and, finding meaning in his life, he was sustained. What meaning was there for his family to discover through their suffering? Was it their cause? their calling? Ethelred Brown, like Carl Wollenda, the high wire artist, watched his family plummet from the tight-rope which is life, and then continued on himself, adamantly refusing to give up the only life he knew--indeed not knowing how to give it up.

There is a selfish zeal in Brown that made his family's needs secondary and kept him from giving the church over to younger hands that might have been able to sustain that community after his death. It appears that neither the church nor his family was foremost in Brown's mind, but rather his need to fill the ministerial role and forward his cause. In a way the extent of his suffering, to which the AUA contributed, chained him to the ministry. He could not discount his entire life's work by forsaking the cause for which he had suffered. He was trapped

both by his old pain and his ever blossoming hope.

Brown's personality was similar to Eric Hoffer's "True Believer":

> The burning conviction that we have a holy duty toward others is often a way of attaching our drowning selves to a passing raft. What looks like giving a hand is often a holding on for dear life. Take away our holy duties and you leave our lives puny and meaningless. There is no doubt that in exchanging a self-centered for a selfless life we gain enormously in self esteem.[1]

It is probable that much of Brown's self esteem was tied to the prestige he felt as Unitarianism's single vanguard in the black community. Yet, despite his personal failing, Brown did bring the Unitarian message to Jamaica and Harlem, and was heard. He had been enlightened by liberal religion, it freed him and, in the beginning, made him unique. In the end, he had to cling to the cause which he had invested his life.

> When of my own free will I entered the ministry I swore to remain a minister for richer for poorer for better for worse until death. That oath I have kept for forty years. God helping me I shall keep it to the end.[2]
>
> Egbert Ethelred Brown

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[1] Eric Hoffer, The True Believer, Perennial Library Ed., 1966 (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), p. 23.

[2] Egbert Ethelred Brown, Address delivered at the celebration of the 40th anniversary of his Ordination, November 30, 1952, Brown file.

CHAPTER III

LEWIS McGEE AND THE FREE RELIGIOUS FELLOWSHIP

In this chapter I turn to the experience of Lewis McGee in his effort to install Unitarianism in the black community on the south side of Chicago. I will compare and contrast McGee's experience to that of Brown in order to gain a broader perspective on, and to raise further questions about, the impact of the Unitarian message on the black community. While using McGee in this way, I have tried to allow his story to dominate, saving the analysis for the fourth chapter.

During the latter years of Ethelred Brown's ministry in Harlem, another black Unitarian church was gathering in Chicago. One Sunday morning early in 1947, Lewis and Marcella McGee met Harry I. Jones as they were all leaving the Chicago Ethical Society. In the ensuing conversation they expressed concern that in the great black metropolis of the south side of Chicago with over 275,000 blacks, people did not know about liberal religion. The outgrowth of their talk was a meeting of black men and women to discuss religion. Lewis McGee, one of the initiators of this discussion, was, at the time, a student at Meadville Theological School.

Lewis was fifty-four when he entered Meadville, and the odyssey that had led him to Unitarianism had been a long one. Born

on November 11, 1893 in Scranton, Pennsylvania, Lewis was virtually born into the ministry. His father, a former slave, was an African Methodist Episcopal minister, and it was natural that Lewis would become a minister. Lewis remembers that in his youth his family moved frequently. As a local pastor and then a district supervisor, his father was shifted from post to post by the bishop.[1]

Lewis graduated from high school in 1912. He spent one year at the University of Pittsburgh and then continued his education at the Payne Theological Seminary of Wilberforce University in Ohio, from which he graduated in 1916 with a B.D. A year later he was ordained as an elder in the AME church. Interestingly, McGee was an AME before he was a Unitarian, and Brown, who was a Wesleyan Methodist, was attracted to the AME church before he made his decision to become a Unitarian minister. This initial attraction to the AME church is significant. A relatively privileged class of Negroes, the aspiring lower middle class, were members of the black Methodist churches. Among these, "the AME showed continuing concern for higher education without sacrificing its commitment to spirituality."[2] A change of world view comes with increasing education and economic self-sufficiency. Thus, Brown and McGee are examples of how Unitarianism tends to appeal to the educated and the middle class. Both denominations share

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[1]Lewis and Marcella McGee, interview in Bethesda, Maryland, December 7, 1977 and subsequent telephone conversations and correspondence.

[2]Charles V. Hamilton, The Black Preacher in America (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1972), p. 92.

middle class values; the step from Methodism to Unitarianism is easier to make than some others. Such a change would be more in content than in style because AME worship is subdued in comparison to that of other black denominations, and the loss in the transition may be the element of spirituality which enriches black religion.

In 1918 Lewis joined the 92nd division of the Army as a chaplain. Upon leaving the Army he ministered to a string of AME churches in Ohio and West Virginia. These were small churches, and, as we often the case among black ministers, Lewis worked at another job to sustain his family. In 1927 he came to Chicago and was persuaded to remain and accept a position as a social worker for the Illinois Children's Home and Aid Society. Subsequently, he worked for a number of other social welfare agencies. While he was working he took courses at the University of Chicago, and Loyola University, and in 1936 he received a B.A. in social science from Carthage College in Carthage, Illinois. After graduation Lewis ministered to a church in Iowa for two years and then returned to Chicago, where he continued to work and minister to a succession of churches. In 1943 he once again joined the Army as a chaplain and left it in December 1945 with the rank of captain. In October of that year Lewis had married Marcella. It was a second marriage for both of them. After leaving the Army, Lewis attended an AME conference hoping to be assigned to a church. But the bishop would give him nothing adequate. When he had joined the Army, the church he left in Gary was a large and thriving one. In the meantime, he enrolled at Meadville in the spring of 1946, using G.I. bill funds.

Lewis's interest in Unitarianism was not a sudden one. He had first become aware of Unitarianism around 1920 while ministering

to an AME mission church in Collinwood, Ohio, outside Cleveland. Lewis recalls this sequence of events:

> I found it necessary to supplement my meager mission salary by being a mail carrier for Uncle Sam. One day, in the mail on my desk for delivery, I saw a magazine entitled the Christian Register. The word Christian caught my attention and I opened it and glanced at the headings of articles. I delayed delivery for a couple of days in order to read the contents. I liked it.
>
> Then my good Methodist conscience took over and at the delivery I range the doorbell and made my confession. The lady of the house, a good Unitarian, answered, "Why help yourself, read it all you want. I invite you to visit our church down on Euclid Avenue." At the first opportunity I did visit the Sunday morning service. There was a quiet dignity pervading the atmosphere. The hymns and readings were appealing. The sermon inspiring. I don't remember a word that was said but I was very much impressed and had a strong feeling, "This is the kind of church I would like to minister to." I guess I was one of those Unitarians who did not know it.[1]

He liked what he saw as the worshipful attitude of the congregation, and he appreciated the "dignity" with which the service was held because he had never been comfortable appealing to his parishoner's emotions.

McGee's enounter with Unitarianism served to reinforce some ideas he had already been forming in theological school, where he had been critcial of traditional, dogmatic religion. It was not, however, until 1927, when he met Curtis Reese and read his book, Humanist Sermons, that he began to think of himself as a Humanist. At that time Curtis Reese was the secretary of the Western Unitarian Conference, and when McGee spoke to him about the Unitarian ministry, he recalled that Reese responded, "If you want to become a Unitarian

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[1] Lewis McGee, "Why I am a Unitarian."

minister you'll have to bring your church with you." In 1927 it was still out of the question for a black man to minister to a white church. This difficulty did not stop McGee. In ensuing years he served the American Humanist Association as a field representative and as a member of the board of directors from 1941-1951.[1]

Time passed and the racial climate slowly changed. In the Army during World War II, Lewis had been a chaplain in the 95th division. The military had begun to integrate its troops when he was in Belguim during the last stages of the war and continued under executive order in February 1946. Lewis felt that there was no reason that the church could not be integrated as well. He came home with the conviction that if one could risk life for his country, one could give life in service to one's ideals. He felt that his life would be less than lived unless he had access to a free pulpit.[2] He knew he was interested in having an interracial church and a free pulpit. He was attracted to Unitarianism and thought it would be sympathetic to his ideals. In spring 1946 he was interviewed and admitted into Meadville.

While traveling in the summer before class started, he stopped to visit the Rev. Everett M. Baker, the minister of the First Unitarian Church of Cleveland. Later Baker wrote to Wallace Robbins, the President of Meadville, that he had been favorably

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[1] Marcella McGee, personal letter, quoting from the Free Mind, the bulletin of the American Humanist Association, September 1953.

[2] Lewis and Marcella McGee, interview.

impressed by the couple, but "I did not encourage him to think that there is much opportunity for a Negro minister in our fellowship."[1] The question of placing Lewis McGee had arisen. Lewis felt, with good reason, that he had Robbins' support. Yet, Robbins was candid about his chances; "I told him that because of his age and race the prospects would be very slight. He accepted that judgment [and] entered whole-heartedly into the life of the school."[2] Robbins held out the hope to McGee that they could secure him a position as an assistant or associate in a large urban church, but McGee always thought Robbins was reluctant to forth-rightly say why he could not have his own church.

Robbins worked to find him a job. Hearing that the Universalist Church in America had a position, he wrote its president, Robert Cummins, about McGee's skills as a minister and social worker. Cummins responded that he was interested. "We have had splendid work for Negroes in Suffolk, Virginia. It is now modernized. We are proud of it--a social service project. A grand opportunity for a church there, and it is this that I have in mind."[3] The institution of which Cummins wrote was the one that a Negro Universalist minister, Joseph Jordan, had founded at the turn of the century. Lewis never followed up on this employment possibility because he felt himself to be a Unitarian and because the Free Religious Association (later changed to Free Religious Fellowship) was beginning to germinate.

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[1]Everett Baker to Wallace Robbins, September 28, 1946, Meadville/Lombard Theological School, Lewis McGee file.

[2]Robbins to George Davis, May 2, 1947, McGee file.

[3]Robert Cummins to Robbins, March 8, 1947, McGee file.

The Free Religious Fellowship had begun with a chance meeting outside the Ethical Society and Harry Jones' suggestion that a group of people interested in liberal religion

> meet at his home for a general discussion. Three such informal meetings were the result, out of which grew the plan to hold regular meetings at more public place. One of the large rooms at Abraham Lincoln Center, 700 E. Oakwood, was secured and five meetings were held in the Spring, at 4 P.M. on the second and fourth Sundays of April and May, and the third Sunday of June 1947. A mailing list was prepared, notices sent out announcing the topics for discussion and some twenty different persons attended one or more meetings.
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> The topics presented, in order, were "Why Make a New Approach to Religion," "The Liberal Way in Religion," "Liberalism Faces a Hostile World," "What is Unitarianism" and "Free, for What?" In each case [McGee] led off with a twenty minute talk and then asked for questions or discussion. These gatherings were marked by a growing interest which became more and more sharply defined toward the possibility of a Unitarian Fellowship.[1]

When Lewis McGee found that people were interested in the liberal religious perspective, he approached Wallace Robbins and Randall Hilton, the secretary of the Western Conference, to see whether a survey of black Chicagoans would not be in order. "Feeling the challenge as I do, I am writing you to help me find the answer to a direct question. It is this: 'What is the Unitarian Church prepared to do in response to this challenge?'"[2] In response to McGee's letter, Robbins wrote to George Davis of the Department of Unitarian Extension and Church Maintenance. Davis replied that he had already spoken to Hilton and that they should go ahead with the project.

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[1] Lewis McGee, "Study of the South Side Negro Community of Chicago, Ill." Commissioned by the American Unitarian Association, submitted Spring 1948.

[2] L. McGee to Robbins, April 30, 1947, McGee file.

Why was the American Unitarian Association more responsive to McGee than it had been to Brown? Times had changed and the denomination had been activley looking for ways of addressing the black community. Brown had been receiving support for the last ten years, but, given his long, fruitless effort in Harlem, the denomination was not inclined to put money into Brown's enterprise. Lewis McGee offered the fresh chance they were looking for.

Lewis was hired by the AUA to survey the Negro community of Chicago's south side to determine whether or not there was any potential for a black Unitarian church. This was the second time such a survey had been proposed. In 1945 the Chicago Unitarian Council had made a similar proposal for a survey that was never commissioned,because it was to be carried out by another black Meadville student, Alvin Neely Cannon, about whom the faculty expressed strong reservation. They found him to be a personable but an unwilling student. Robbins and James Luther Adams were concerned that the first attempt to address Chicago's black community not fail and that, with Cannon, it would be a risk. They also questioned the advisability of the surveyor becoming the first minister. This question should have applied to McGee as it had to Cannon two years earlier, for it put pressure on the surveyor, not just to determine, but to prove the viability of a church. In one sense, the report was unnecessary, because even as he began his research, the group that had been gathered earlier that year at Harry Jones's was gaining momentum. The existence of this group, in the end, was the strongest argument for establishing a church. Still, the fact that a study was commissioned set McGee

apart from Brown. Brown marched into Harlem to found his church regardless of the circumstances; McGee had the foresight to look as he leaped and to know that a substantial report would help to legitimize denominational support.

The momentum the FRF gained in that first year was due to the energies of a core of people. Marcella McGee's family was well established in Chicago; they were also members of the church and had many connections. Marcella herself made contact with people through her job as librarian at the branch of the public library that was housed in the Abraham Lincoln Center. A number of people involved at the center were among the early members. Harry I. Jones was also a central figure in the formation of the FRF, for, besides organizing the initial meetings, Jones knew many people through his community and political activities. These early members made up a mailing list, and they in turn went out to call on their friends personally. William Gough, another member, recalls that Jones and George Walker, Marcella's brother, had come to see him and asked him to visit their group. He and his wife, Geneva, went once but were not impressed. The following Sunday they did not attend, but again Jones and Walker visited to tell them that, on the coming Sunday, Kenneth Patton was going to speak. Mr. Gough had heard of Patton, who had won some notoriety in the black community. On October 5, 1947 the Rev. Kenneth L. Patton, minister of the Unitarian Church of Madison, Wisconsin, spoke at what was the first regular Sunday meeting of the Free Religious Fellowship, 125 people attended, and the Goughs, after hearing him speak on "One Race, One World," decided to join.[1]

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[1]William Gough, interview, February 9, 1979.

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Patton's activities just prior to and following his address to the FRF give a sense of the racial climate across the country, as well as in the denomination in 1947. Earlier that autumn, before speaking to the FRR, Patton, "after quietly delivering a radio talk on the subject of the 'myth of race,' suddenly found [himself] on the front pages of the nation's press." His comment that he intended to "resign from the white race" caught the public ear, and he was dazed by the ensuing reaction. The response Patton received from his radio talk was overwhelmingly supportive, but the one letter in eight that was antagonistic "reveal[ed] the bitterness and danger of racism in America."[1] These latter felt threatened and betrayed by what Patton had said. Some threatened him. The fear-induced distortions that confronted Patton from the minds of these racists were disturbing.

Patton's radio talk led to his further involvement. He was invited to tour Chicago with a photographer and journalist from LIFE magazine and a black couple. They tried to enter YMCA's, hotels, restaurants, and dance halls. At some places they were all admitted. At others, he was admitted only to find the black couple, who followed in separately, had been stopped at the door, and when he protested, they were all ejected. On several other occasions he would gain entry to some establishment and then announce that he

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[1]Kenneth Patton, "A Personal Experience in Brotherhood," The Christian Register, December 1947, vol. 126, no. 11, pp. 468-70.

was colored, at which point he was immediately ushered out. Patton also went to a real estate office and was offered a wide assortment of homes until he announced that he was a Negro. The homes were suddenly unavailable, and they gave him the address of another agency.

The whirlwind of activity into which this drew Patton continued. Ten days after Patton spoke to the FRF, he was to attend the AUA general conference in Washington, D.C. Donald Harrington had arranged with Homer Jack, the national secretary of the Unitarian Fellowship for Social Justice, to challenge the racial policies of the Mayflower, one of the hotels the AUA was using, by having Ethelred Brown reserve a room there. He was to room with Kenneth Patton, but a fortnight before the conference was to begin, Brown had a change of mind. He wrote:

> Dear Mr. Harrington,
>
> I appreciate your confidence in me that I would not hesitate to suffer personal embarrassment if by so doing I would help to strengthen the hands of others who aim to remedy a wrong, but after serious consideration of your suggestion a big question mark arises in my mind.
>
> Facing a few of the possible back-fires and the fact that the suggested personal illustration is not necessary to add force to any protest or anti-segregation resolution I have come to the conclusion that the proposal is, to say the least, of questionable value.[1] Therefore, I have decided not to attend the conference.

A resolution was submitted by James Luther Adams and Homer Jack that called upon Congress to enact civil rights statutes in the District of Columbia and declared the AUA's intention not to meet in D.C. until racial segregation there had ceased.

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[1] Ethelred Brown to Donald Harrington, October 2, 1947, UUA Archives, "AUA Integrated Conventions 1940's" files.

I have followed this tangent from the main storyline of the chapter for two reasons. First, this information provides a sense of racial discrimination in America then. "Jim Crow" was slowly giving ground. Blacks were pushing against the barriers of racism, and some Unitarians were in the forefront of this action with them. The way was being prepared for the stronger confrontation that was to come in the mid-50's. Secondly, as I have come to understand Brown's concern for social justice and his tendency to charge into the most difficult situations, I am perplexed at his refusal to join in the effort in Washington, D.C. The reasoning in his letter seems particularly vague, and I wonder what was left unsaid. There is a cautiousness there that I would less expect to find in Brown than in McGee. His gradual approach to Unitarianism, the exploratory meetings before the FRF was formed, and his report on the climate for liberal religion in Chicago's black community show Lewis was a cautious and thoughtful man. Robbins once described him in a letter to George Davis as "a steady methodical person, without ecstatic visions and ultra-radical enthusiasms."[1]

This is not to say that Lewis McGee was without hope and conviction. In the letter in which he proposed the survey to Robbins he wrote, "There is no [Negro] liberal church; I think there ought to be one."[2] Looking toward fulfillment of what was simply a hope, McGee's report concluded:

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[1]Robbins to Davis, May 2, 1947, McGee file.

[2]McGee to Robbins, April 30, 1947, McGee file.

> The Negro community on Chicago's South Side is now the home of approximately 275,000 or more people; there are large numbers of educated, cultured and prosperous people, many of whom can be considered as candidates for a liberal church; as the churches are classified at present, there is room in the community for a Unitarian church.
>
> In addition, the Free Religious Fellowship has a record over the past three months of growth and vitality which gives promise of being such a church in embryo.
>
> It seems that if the desire and the will and the energy which the task calls for are supplied, outstanding results will be achieved.[1]

While McGee was writing this study the FRF continued to gain momentum:

> By April 1, 1948, fifty persons or families had pledged to become members of an interracial Unitarian Church. On Sunday, April 25, 1948, the Rev. Randall S. Hilton, Secretary of the Western Unitarian Conference, presided at the official organization of the Free Religious Fellowship (Unitarian). In addition to the Rev. Hilton, the committee which represented the American Unitarian Association in supervising the work previous to the organization was composed of Dr. Curtis Reese, Dean of Abraham Lincoln Center and Dr. James Luther Adams, Professor of Social Ethics, Meadville Theological School. [Finally] on June 13, 1948, the Rev. Lewis A. McGee was installed as minister. The members of the first Board of Trustees were: Harry I. Jones, President; George Walker, Jr., Vice President; Mrs. Deborah Smith, Sec.-Treas.; Harry L. Manley, Haywood C. Philips, Mrs. Osbeth Adams, Mrs. Charlotte Charnock, John Forwalter, Mrs. Hazel Dingey.[2]

When Lewis McGee accepted the call to be minister of the FRF, he was in a different position than Brown had been. Lewis's children were grown and self-sufficient, as was Marcella's daughter. Both he and Marcella were employed, and thus he was able to work part-time for the church without too much financial hardship. Moreover, from the beginning of this endeavor he had the denomination's

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[1] McGee, "Study," p. 30.

[2] William Gough, unpublished history of the Free Religious Fellowship.

support. He did not have to waste his time and efforts struggling with the AUA. It was also a different era. Racial barriers were slowly breaking down and blacks had made economic gains during the war. At that same time Brown was still hopeful and mounting a building campaign in Harlem, but people had found, in Chicago, a fresh new hope.

With McGee as its minister, the FRF set out to increase its membership. It received publicity in the Chicago Defender, the major black newspaper, and in the Chicago Sun-Times. Now it decided to try something daring by contracting to bring the then famous "One World Ensemble" from New York City to Chicago. The Ensemble was composed of a Japanese-American soprano, a Scotish-Irish contralto, a Negro-American tenor, and an English-American basso-cantante. They combined artistic and cultural resources into a musical symbol of world harmony, and their repetoire encompassed the music of the world. The other Chicago-area churches helped the FRF by selling tickets to the concert. It was a daring endeavor and provided publicity, but it was also costly. The Fellowship did not fill Orchestra Hall and in the end ran a deficit of one hundred dollars.

As the FRF grew and their program expanded, they sought new quarters. In the beginning, the group had met in people's homes. Later, they had rented space successively at Poro House, the YWCA at 43rd and South Parkway, and the South Side Art Center. During these years the church membership grew from 67 to 98. They had a viable Sunday school with 4 teachers and 25 pupils, an Evening Alliance and a Laymen's League that sponsored a monthly dinner-forum.

In 1951 the FRF decided to move to the Abraham Lincoln Center because it met their need for more and permanent space, but when they moved, there was a strange reaction: 53 people dropped their membership in the FRF and, while another 12 joined, this left a drastically reduced membership of 57. It seems that something about the move to Lincoln Center precipitated this flight of FRF members. William Gough, a long time member, speculates that the major cause of this exodus from the fellowship was confusion over the center's name. The United States was in the midst of the "Red Scare." The FBI was combing the South Side investigating alleged black involvement in the Communist Party. In the Loop the Abraham Lincoln School was a sort of public forum that offered classes in politics, literature, and other subjects. A number of its teachers were Marxist. Gough conjectures that, given the climate of the time, people confused the Abraham Lincoln Center with the Abraham Lincoln School and therefore thought the church was moving into a communist hotbed.[1] The fact that Harry Jones and Jesse Reed, another FRF member, were socialist may have contributed to his confusion over the Abraham Lincoln Center. This involvement of members of both the FRF and the Harlem Unitarian Church in socialism is another significant coincidence. Why should these two groups have attracted socialists? I will return to this question.

Ironically, a few other members left when they moved into the Abraham Lincoln Center because they found it too church-like. The FRF met in the auditorium of the center which had been the home

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[1] Gough, interview.

All Souls Church that Jenkin Lloyd Jones had founded. In the Abraham Lincoln Center, built in 1905, Jones's dream of a great community center with an interracial, nonsectarian church at its heart came into being, but the church, All Souls, died in the years of the Depression. Curtis Reese, now the dean of the center, had revived services at All Souls. He succeeded in integrating the church, but, as the population of the neighborhood changes, attendance dwindled. The revived services finally ended in the early 1940's because the center, which received financial aid from the Community Fund, had to distinguish those funds that went to secular activities and those that went to sustaining the church. Now that the FRF had moved into the old home of All Souls, it would eventually take on its name as well. At the center they had rooms for Sunday school, for storage, and for meetings during the week. They worshipped in the auditorium with its organ and church-like atmosphere, the small group which gathered there were lost in the cavernous room.

One of the important goals of the FRF, from its inception, was to be an interracial church. It was a predominantly black group, but it always had white members and, for a time, Japanese members as well. Some of its white members were Meadville students. The most active of these, Mary Cleary (nee) Gibson, Hugo Leaming, who later became their minister, and Emil Gudmundson were all ordained by the FRF. There were other whites who attended services, and a number came from the First Unitarian Church of Chicago. Some of these, however, felt pulled between the two churches. Others gave the FRF their full commitment.

The efforts of the First Unitarian Church of Chicago to become integrated are of interest because of its close relationship to the FRF, and the fellowship's self-understanding is best seen in light of this relationship. The Rev. Leslie Pennington had long been involved in race relations and had frequently exchanged pulpits with black ministers in Chicago, but Pennington, while wanting an integrated church, "did not feel justified in going out deliberately to find Negroes who would consent to join a Unitarian Church."[1] In 1947 the recruiting of blacks to come "and teach brotherhood to our people,"[2] as John Haynes Holmes had done when he was on the board of the NAACP in 1909, was seen as tokenism. For Pennington, it was understood that blacks were welcome, but others wanted a distinct proclamation. The Evening Alliance, which included Muriel Hayward, Gladys Hilton, Margret Adams, and Dorothy Schaad, pushed for a church resolution that would clearly state that the First Unitarian Church welcomed people of all races. They knew that "'whites only' was never carved over the door of any white Protestant church in America; it was understood."[3] To dispel this assumption, they needed to make a public statement to the contrary. This was not an easy matter since there were people in the congregation who opposed

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[1] "Twelves Years' Persistence Achieves Integration After Chicago Church Overcomes Slow Start," Christian Register, vol. 135, no. 9 (September 1956): 26.

[2] Donald Harrington, "John Haynes Holmes and the Cry for Social Justice and World Peace," a sermon delivered at the Community Church of New York on March 16, 1965, p. 15.

[3] David M. Reimers, White Protestantism and the Negro (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 158.

integration altogether. James Luther Adams tells about a meeting of the board of trustees that went late into the night as they argued over whether or not to become an integrated church. Finally, in the early hours of the morning, one trustee, still recalcitrant on the issue of integration, was challenged with this question: "What is the purpose of the church?" and he blurted out, "To change people like me!" He and another trustee later left the church. In January 1948 a resolution was passed at the annual meeting, and in that same year the church received its first black member.

Randall Hilton recalls that McGee and Pennington at one time discussed the possibility of merging. This plan never came to fruition. One important reason was that Pennington was a theist, while McGee was a committed humanist.[1] Another reason was that the two churches appealed to different constituencies. First Church was an upper middle class church in a university community; and the FRF did not feel comfortable amidst the elitism and unspoken racism that naturally remained long after the resolution on integration was passed. Indeed, some members of the FRF passed by First Church on their way to gather in the congenial atmosphere of the fellowship. In addition to this tension, there lay differences in purpose because of the fellowship's sense of mission. Fern Gayton expressed it this way: "We had an obligation to stay where we were and cast down our bucket."[2]

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[1]Randall and Gladys Hilton, interview held in their home in Chicago, Illinois, February 7, 1979.

[2]Fern Gayten, interview held in her home in Chicago, Illinois, February 8, 1979.

Casting its bucket into the black community was one of the FRF's primary goals. The church tried to attract lower class blacks, however, it generally drew in educated people, most of them having received some college education and a significant group having done graduate work. Church members were postal clerks, social workers, housewives, teachers, doctors, railroad employees, a radio announcer, a parole officer, a secretary, and a lawyer. (Obviously, education did not always guarantee a good job for blacks.) Still, these people made up the black middle class, a group to which Unitarianism appeals. They were people experiencing some economic autonomy, moving toward a religion that focused on the worth of the individual.

Most of these people had been reared within Christian orthodoxy and had left it. The largest group came from the AME or other Methodist churches, but they found that science raised issues their churches did not answer, nor did they give an adequate answer to the oppression of the black people. These blacks were ready to hear the humanist perspective McGee offered and desired a community that would assist the inquiring mind. Moreover, these were people whose lives were no longer confined to the black community. Their broadening outlook required a religion that supported their quest but did not confine as orthodoxy did. They were committed, but also valued their lives outside the church; members of the FRF were involved in occupations, social action, and cultural events. Their money went to other priorities too; children's education, civic organization, concerts, and so forth. For them,

"church did not have to mean as much" as it did for their orthodox brethen. For some of them, "a church that was less highly organized was acceptable,"[1] and for others, it was desirable.

The involvement of FRF members in the Socialist party is an example of the broad kind of commitments that many church members had. Social action was a concern of the FRF, but it did not dominate the church as it often had in Harlem. Lewis McGee believed that religion included social action, but not to the same extent that Brown did. McGee was a member of the ACLU, the NAACP, the Independent Voters of Illinois, and was vice president of his community organization. He was involved, but his style was more low-key than Brown's. This may show a difference, in part, between the West Indian and the American Negro outlook. Harold Cruse speculates that this difference, in part, due to the majority status of the former in Jamaica and the minority status of the Negro in the United States.[2] Lewis had felt the weight of "separate but equal education," of "Jim Crow," of segregated army regiments, and of housing discrimination throughout his life. He knew how vulnerable the Negro was in America, and how accommodating he often needed to be just to survive. Brown did not confront prejudice until he was an adult. Their difference in styles is partially understandable in light of their different cultural experiences. Political commitments within the FRF, while important, never disrupted the life of the church as they had in Harlem.

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[1] Ida Cress, interview held in her home in Chicago, Illinois, February 8, 1979.

[2] Harold Cruse, The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1967), p. 128.

The Sunday morning service, which was the center of the FRF's church life, was much less elaborate than that of traditional black churches. The service was simple: hymns, reading, announcements, collection, and sermon. It was followed by a coffee hour at which people would discuss the sermon informally. Mr. Gough recalls a woman visitor saying: "I don't even feel as if I've been to church."[1]

In a sermon entitled "A Positive View of Liberal Religion," McGee summed up his understanding of the Unitarian message:

> Liberal religion is a religion of social concern, a religion of intellectual and ethical integrity, a religion which emphasizes the dynamic conception of history, and the scientific world view, a religion which stresses the dignity and worth of the person as a supreme value and good will as the creative force in human relations.[2]

Lewis McGee was thoroughly humanist in the content of his sermons. He preached on a variety of subjects of secular, religious, and social concern, and he avoided orthodox terminology. His humanism can be seen in sermon titles like "Have Faith in Man" and "We Choose Our Destiny." The centrality of humanism in McGee's theology is clear in these lines from a Lenten Mediation he wrote for the Chicago Sun-Times.

> Let us rejoice that we do possess the freedom and strength to exercise our minds and give play to our affections. Reason and love are the realities that give meaning to human life.[3]

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[1] Gough, interview.

[2] Lewis McGee, "A Positive View of Liberal Religion" a sermon delivered at the Orange County Unitarian Church on January 16, 1953, p. 4.

[3] Lewis McGee, "A Lenten Meditation," Chicago Sun-Times, February 17, 1951.

One would not have heard this pronouncement from any other black pulpit in Chicago; elsewhere, meaning was found through one's relationship to God. Lewis's sermons were well-reasoned, intellectual in content, and practical in intent. His style was restrained. Ida Cress said, "I can't conceive of Lewis getting extreme."[1] There was certainly no shouting at the FRF. In and out of the pulpit, Lewis was a quiet and caring man. If people did not throng to the FRF, it was in part because McGee, like Brown, was not a man of charisma. His proclamation was a sincere but reasoned discourse on the human condition. He was unwilling to push his religion on anyone. Fern Gayten, reflectiong upon the difference between the ministers of the FRF and more orthodox congregations said, "The kind of men who have been our leaders are not the kind of men who of themselves demand that kind of complete self-devotion. Our ministers have not demanded all our money or all of ourselves."[2] Lewis McGee was a caring, strong man, who worked methodically and with conviction to nurture the Free Religious Fellowship.

By June 1953, Lewis had built the FRF back up to a membership of 75. The program was running smoothly, and he felt it was time to make room for a younger man; Lewis was 60. He had established the idea and now felt the church was strong enough to grow with a good successor. There were several possible candidates at the time. The primary one was the Rev. Maurice A. Dawkins, who had been the

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[1] Cress, interview.

[2] Gayten, interview.

associate minister at the Community Church in New York City since 1948, but he turned down the offer when early in 1954 he was called to the Peoples Independent Church of Los Angeles, which was said to be the oldest and second largest Community Church in the United States.[1] The Unitarian denomination, with no substantial black churches, unwilling and unable to place black men in white pulpits, could neither attract nor keep black ministers. Their welfare demanded that they look elsewhere. Finally in June 1954, Ben Richardson, who had been viewed as a possible successor to Brown, was called to the FRF.

When Lewis left the FRF, he went to Yellow Springs, Ohio to become the administrative assistant for the American Humanist Association. In 1958 he was called to become Stephen Fritchman's associate minister at the First Unitarian Church of Los Angeles. In 1961 Lewis became the first minister of the Chico Unitarian Fellowship in California. This was the first time a black man was called as the senior minister of a white Unitarian church. In 1962 he was the interim minister at the Anaheim Unitarian Church. In 1963 he cam out of retirement at the urging of the Throop Memorial Church to become their minister of education. In 1965 he was installed as the first minister at Humbolt Unitarian Fellowship in Bayside, California, retired and became minister emeritus in August 1966. Lewis and Marcella currently reside in Pullman, Washington.

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[1] "Dawkins Called to Head Los Angeles Church," Christian Register, vol. 133, no. 5 (May 1954): 30.

Lewis was a black pioneer in a white denomination. He responded to the call to take Unitarianism into the black community. Although he and Ethelred Brown hardly knew one another, they shared this mission. Lewis' "Last Words" in the FRF newsletter were these:

> I request that the members of the Free Religious Fellowship give vital, active expression of their loyalty to the organization. To each I say, fortify your belief in it, attend meetings faithfully, support your elected officers, and rally to your minister. Several times recently I have been asked this question, "What of the future of the Free Religious Fellowship?" I have answered hopefully. No one is able to chart the future definitely, but of one thing I am sure. Fifty or more loyal members can assure that there will be a future and they will be the prime factor in shaping the future. Don't allow doubters and those easily discouraged to influence you!
>
> The foundation of the church is an active membership. . . . I challenge you to continue to make history.[1]

Lewis McGee was different from Ethelred Brown. Lewis was able to let go. He had come to Chicago, initiated, and nurtured the Free Religious Fellowship in cooperation with others, and he left it in the hands of its membership and moved on to other things. Lewis McGee had come and gone, while Brown held on tightly to the Harlem Unitarian Church.

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[1] Lewis McGee, "Last Word," FRF Newsletter, June 17, 1953.

CHAPTER IV

SEGREGATION IN THE AMERICAN UNITARIAN ASSOCIATION

THE BOUNDS OF UNITARIANISM

In chapters two and three we have reviewed the life stories of Ethelred Brown and Lewis McGee. We now should have a sense of the message that they brought to the black community. We have also seen glimpses of the images that embody their self-understanding, and we have witnessed the dynamics of intellectual, political, and spiritual freedom as implicitly enacted in the lives of their churches. With this data the fourth chapter will address two questions raised earlier: Why does de facto racial segregation prevail within the Unitarian Church? And why did Brown and McGee's efforts at establishing Unitarian churches in the black community meet such limited success? While answering the latter question I locate these two men within the distinctive traditions of black religion and Unitarianism outlined in the first chapter. Obviously, the cultural experiences that formed these religions were different, and the goal of this inquiry is to see specifically, through the lives of Brown and McGee, where they meet and part.

I begin with a review of the American Unitarian Association's response to black Unitarians. The different experiences Brown and

McGee had with the AUA show a change that took place over the first half of this century. In 1907 when Brown wrote to inquire about theological school and financial aid, denominational officials discouraged him. Unitarianism was associated with intellectual culture, and many Unitarians feared that it might be corrupted if embraced by the mass of common men, much less by the Negro. Earl Morse Wilbur writes that in 1860 "the Secretary of the Association complained that Boston Unitarians saw no reason for diffusing their faith, and it was reported that they did not wish to make Unitarianism too common."[1] Unitarian missionary efforts were half-hearted and often patronizing. Samuel A. Eliot expended great efforts to promote liberal religion, but he was highly selective. University towns were considered prime targets. In regard to foreign missions, Eliot had commented, after the first Unitarian Missionary Conference in 1913, "The prevailing opinion is that foreign missionaries are more or less an impertinence."[2] The AUA was not commited to mission work in Jamaica. They gave Brown support because they saw his work as a humanitarian effort and felt it their social responsibility to help uplift the Negro race.

At the core of the denomination's response was an attitude of elitism and racism. Eliot and Cornish saw themselves as the benefactors of this downtrodden race. They may have accepted that,

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[1] Earl Morse Wilbur, A History of Unitarianism: In Transylvania, England and America (Boston: Beacon Press, 1945), pp. 463-464.

[2] S. A. Eliot, Arthur C. McGiffert Jr., Pilot of the Liberal Faith: Samuel Atkins Eliot 1862-1950 (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), p. 87.

as human beings, their souls were equal before God and their rights equal before the law, but the white, educated upper class's moral and intellectual superiority was unquestioned. They extended themselves to Brown out of paternalistic reflex, but did not treat him like an equal. The deep resentment that Cornish felt toward Brown arose out of his perception of Brown as an ungrateful child. Cornish felt wronged by this man, who confronted his racist attitudes.

By the end of Cornish's administration in 1937, the attitudes of the officials of the American Unitarian Association had changed. They were interested in making inroads into the black community. Brown began receiving support, but the hopes of DeWitt, A. Powell Davies, and others were more than they could satisfy. A number of black ministers passed by, but there were no places to settle them. White churches were out of the question, and there was no money to finance a project in the black community. As the racial consciousness of the Unitarian ministry continued to evolve, ministers became more active in race relations. A few churches became integrated. By the time Unitarians began looking seriously at the black community, Brown was an old man. To him, they had given too little, too late. His time had passed. In Chicago, McGee, never knowing the details of Brown's courageous struggle, received denominational support as a matter of course. Beyond this, the denomination was at a loss as to how to initiate a relevant program.

The AUA board of directors established and mandated the Commission on Unitarian Intergroup Relations in 1952 and accepted

its report in 1954. The report was thorough and searching. The commission sent questionnaires to all Unitarian churches and received responses from 170 or about one-third of them. Of these churches 52 had Negro voting members and of this group, 13 had five or more Negro members.[1] Two of these were the Harlem Unitarian Church and the Free Religious Fellowship.

In defining the problem, the commission wrote:

> In all too many of the communications we have received, there is clear evidence that Unitarians are not brought to a test of their interracial idealism because many Unitarian churches cater to social classes which contain few or no Negroes. They are located often in neighborhoods or communities from which Negroes are generally excluded. Some churches, located in a neighborhood whose character has changed, face the decision whether to stay or to move out to a more stable suburb.

The commission had found that many of the churches which had no Negroes in their community (45) felt that the issue wasn't relevant for them. The commission also cautioned those people who thought they knew about blacks because blacks worked for them, that people in an employer-employee relationship seldom reach "a degree of understanding of each other as unique personalities." They found generally that the two communities were so isolated from one another that it was difficult to see how meaningful relationships could be built without a conscious effort.

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[1] "How 'Open' is the Unitarian Door?", The Report of the Commission on Unitarian Intergroup Relations, Christian Register (April 1954), p. 11. This report listed the following churches with five or more legal voting Negro members: Church of the Christian Union, Rockford; First Unitarian Society of Chicago; Free Religious Fellowship, Chicago; Arlington Street Church, Boston; First Church in Roxbury; Church of our Father, Detroit; Community Church, New York City; The Harlem Unitarian Church, New York City; White Plaines Community Church, New York; Unitarian

"There should be no special program for attracting non-whites . . .; Unitarianism, not interracial relations, was their objective." This was the opinion of a majority of the churches surveyed. Only twenty-four of the churches had taken specific action to reach out to the black community. Some had advertised in black newspapers, but those that were the most successful were visibly active in race relations in their communities. Knowing that this was the direction in which less active churches needed to move and, yet, faced with the issue of congregational autonomy, the commission determined that the denomination must take moral initiative. They recognized the need to exert leadership, but also the reality that "people, not organization, will have to do the job."

Viewing the denomination, the commission found the AUA was making significant contributions to race relations through its religious education curriculum, the Christian Register, Beacon Press, and the Harlem Service Camp of the Unitarian Service Committee. The commission formed its opinion into specific recommendations. They asserted that an "Open Door' policy is not truly one unless all perceive it to be so." Churches that did not want to make a special effort were settling for the status quo. (The Evening Alliance of the First Unitarian Church of Chicago had realized this six years earlier.) The commission proposed that statements declaring the churches openness to all people should

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Society of Cleveland; First Unitarian Church, Pittsburgh; and All Souls' Church, Washington. One integrated church omitted from the survey was the First Unitarian Church of Los Angeles.

be made at the congregational, district, and denominational levels; that committees for study and action should be formed; that churches should be ready to accept black ministers and regional organizations be ready to recommend them. The commission also made specific recommendations that the next general conference be held at Fisk University following the annual Fisk race relations conference so that Unitarians might conveniently attend both, and that a pilot project with an interracial ministry be created in the Durham-Raleigh-Chapel Hill area of North Carolina.

The report concluded:

> One can draw no other conclusion from the studies of this Commission than that the majority of our churches have ignored the human relations aspect of religion. While paying lip service to the religious ideals of brotherhood, they have sanctioned, often simply in indifference, a pattern of social organization which dooms men to a life in which full dignity and creative growth are virtually impossible. This is a particularly disturbing indictment of a church committed to freedom on all its various aspects. Almost no one will admit he denies the concept of equality of all men even though in practice he may deny it with every breath. We are tragically bound by an emotional straitjacket from which escape is possible only through the efforts of men and women of unusual courage, humility, and integrity who have the energy and vision to take the lead in demonstrating their strong beliefs in freedom and a new way of life. Such men and women are appearing in increasing numbers throughout our land. Unitarianism has a rightful place of leadership in this awakening; it can claim it boldly and courageously facing up to the social realities of the time.
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> "The Church that is to lead this century will not be a church creeping on all fours, mewling and whining, its face turned down, its eyes turned back . . . it will try things by reason and conscience, aim to surpass the old heroes; and, using the present age, will lead public opinion, not follow it."
>
> This prophesy of "The Coming Church," by Theodore Parker, reaches out to us from the past to emphasize obligations necessary for any church which would lead its community.

> . . . It is not enough to help the Negro, it is not enough to provide for him; it is the responsibility of the local church to welcome him, to respect him, to respect his dignity, and to treat him as an equal.
>
> . . . The call is for it to turn its face upward, its eyes forward, to accept the challenge and to move unflinchingly toward the development of a religious movement in which all may be participants without thought of racial or national origin. When that shall have been fully accomplished the obligations of the liberal faith shall have been fulfilled and the democratic spirit will have been given complete expression in the vital affairs of men.[1]

The report told how much the American Unitarian Association had realized after the half century that Ethelred Brown had been associated with it. At last they had taken official stock of the situation, understood its dynamics, and set specific goals. But despite their good intentions the commission members were not able to facilitate what they proposed. The general conference did not meet at Fisk; the pilot project in North Carolina was never established; and not until 1961, when Lewis McGee was called to the Chico Unitarian Fellowship in California, did a black man become the senior minister of a white Unitarian church. Progress was slow.

The Unitarian church was not integrated because it chose not to be. The church housed ordinary people with grand ideas about themselves, and the denomination was run by men who were no different. Often their vision was narrow and their understanding, too limited to see beyond the status quo or to step beyond the narrow class appeal of the Unitarian church. They were captives of the American caste system. Paternalistic in their racism, our

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[1] Ibid., p. 18.

leaders at the beginning of the twentieth century did not respect the black man. Slowly, over a period of decades, some Unitarians began to see their way out of this, but it was still difficult to break the patterns of segregation that were demographically and socially perpetuated. Even for those who wanted to change, risk and efforts that many were unwilling to take were required.

The racist attitudes of AUA officials explain, in part, why Brown's efforts to introduce Unitarianism to the black community failed. In the prime of life, his energies had been diverted into struggling for economic survival and fighting with the denomination. However, McGee's limited success while supported by the AUA, suggests that we must go beyond blaming the denomination for Unitarian inability to stir the black community. Why did the black community respond to Unitarianism as it did, especially when the message was proclaimed by Brown and McGee?

This thesis has moved through the biographies of Brown and McGee as a way of examining the relationship between the black community and Unitarianism. In their lives Unitarianism was a lived faith, and therein that faith was refracted by the prism of black experience. In Brown and McGee's lives I seek images in whose context they understood themselves, value centers that gave meaning to their lives and animated their religion. Brown is the central vehicle of this inquiry. By examining crises in his life, we find images he relied on and the essence of black Unitarianism as his faith. McGee serves as a corrective to show what was idiosyncratic to Brown and what of Unitarianism was relevant to the the black experience. In the matrix of their efforts we find the

Unitarianism that emerged to engage a community where black orthodoxy predominated and why it was found wanting in this encounter.

Central to Brown's decision to enter the ministry was the crisis he faced in losing his position as a clerk in the treasury in Jamaica. The idea of ministry, which had lain dormant for a time, reawoke. His parents had predicted it; he had played at it in his youth; the question had re-emerged when his brother sailed to Africa as a missionary and when Brown was a lay leader in a Methodist church. In the days of crisis, of dishonor, of loss, of not knowing what to do next, Brown turned to the ministry. This could have been an act of penance for, when he looked, he saw that God's will had been calling him to the ministry and the loss of his job was the price he paid for resisting. Having made the decision to become a minister, he had to decide to which church he would belong. He chose Unitarianism, and he held adamantly to this choice throughout his life. He never veered again.

A second crisis came with the final withdrawal of AUA support from the Jamaican mission. Brown's torrid correspondence availed him nothing; abandoned and humiliated by the American Unitarian Association, he carried on alone. He sustained his family by working as a junior master and received some small aid from the English Alliance of Unitarian Women. Finally, Brown decided he too must betray the cause of Unitarianism in Jamaica by leaving. With personal financial disaster threatening, he was unable to continue his ministry. This crisis led to his departure for New York. He sailed with one thought in his mind, to start a

Unitarian Church in Harlem. Again, in crisis Brown's foremost commitment was to the Unitarian ministry. It demanded great sacrifices from him and held his loyalty.

A third crisis, or, more accurately, series of crises, enveloped him at the end of his employment by the Socialist party. His primary commitment was to the church, and he could not bring himself to go back to menial labor because it interfered with his ministry. Jobless, he began soliciting for the Harlem Church from Unitarian ministers. He was warned that his name would be removed from the ministerial rolls if he continued. He ceased for a time, but was under incredible pressure. His wife was mentally ill; his eldest son committed suicide; another son, an alcoholic, was institutionalized. Caught in this desperate situation, Brown once again solicited aid from his colleagues, and this time he was removed from fellowship. It took Brown five years to get his name reinstated, but he fought that battle with the same tenacity with which he fought anything that stood between him and his ministry.

Brown was loyal to the Unitarian ministry because, from his initial decision in 1907 until his death in 1956, it was the dominant force which gave meaning to his life. He saw his relationship to the ministry as a marriage, and his fidelity never waned. He was ultimately committed to the role of the minister; he turned to it in every moment of crisis; and it gave his life structure, context and goals. However, this role of minister is not a central element in the Unitarian faith. It was only the receptacle of Brown's faith. His faith in and need to fill the ministerial role above all else explains the quick expiration of the Harlem Uni-

tarian Church after Brown's death. The church had little life apart from him, for it was Brown who held it together, rather than the congregants' commitment to liberal religion. Those who were committed went to other Unitarian churches. The contrast of McGee's experience with Brown's bears this out. McGee focused on the community, and he assisted church members in building a community that managed to survive. Many of the commitments he nurtured early in the life of the Free Religious Fellowship have endured. McGee had a different relationship to his ministry. He held it in perspective, sacrificing neither himself nor his family for the cause of liberal religion; he did not envision himself as a martyr.

Brown understood himself as a minister, but this is not the definition of image I choose to use. An image is a metaphor that traditionally embodies the content of faith. The ministerial role gave structure and direction to Brown's life, however, it was engulfed by his self-concept as "suffering servant." That is, ministry provided the framework, but his real sense of himself was his identity as the "suffering servant." Brown did not use the term "suffering servant" himself, but this feeling permeates his letters and sermons. "Of all I suffered in those days I dare not write,"[1] he said referring to his struggles after taking up the Unitarian cause in Jamaica. In later years he recalled that when the AUA withdrew their support, he "struggled on against great odds

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[1]Egbert Ethelred Brown, "A Brief History of the Harlem Unitarian Church," (unpublished sermon delivered in the Harlem Unitarian Church, September 11, 1949), p. 1.

facing public disgrace and ruin."[1] He regularly wrote Boston to tell them how much he had suffered for the cause. Nowhere does he evoke this image more powerfully than in the hymn he sent to the directors of the AUA. "The price I pay, the price I pay, the price I pay--the cross I bear."[2] In a sermon entitled, "My Faith Then and Now," Brown's identification with Jesus was clearly articulated:

> As the years have rolled on Jesus has become more and more my ideal and my inspiration. In the hours of bitterness when I have been hurt--when I would hate those who have hindered me and who have even tried to rob me of my good name--I have turned my eyes to the cross of the crucified Nazarene, and I have looked and heard his immortal prayer: "Father forgive them, for they know not 'what they do,'" and I have forgiven. In the crises when the tempter pointed to me the apparently easier way, but the way which lay not in the path of duty but led to the road of cowardly compromise, I have seen Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane fighting a similar battle, and steadfastly walked to Jerusalem, to Calvary and to his cross, and I was strengthened to lose, if for awhile I must lose, but to be true. Thus has Jesus come to be for me the Master of the Spirit.

Brown saw himself as, a disciple of Jesus, a "suffering servant," a martyr for the liberal cause who bore Unitarianism into what he felt was the "religiously backward" black community, hoping to free minds from superstition. When he suffered, his task gave the suffering meaning.

The theme of suffering locates Brown in the black religious tradition first of all, where it is central to faith and redemption.

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[1] Egbert Ethelred Brown, "A Statement Presented to the Special Committee appointed by the American Unitarian Association to inquire into the circumstances leading to the removal of my name from the official list of Unitarian Ministers." New York City, December 14, 1931, Brown file.

[2] Brown, "The Price I Pay," p. 113.

[3] Egbert Ethelred Brown, "My Faith--Then and Now," Christian Register, vol. 116 (May), p. 715.

There, suffering is compensated by the dignity which comes from knowing that it makes one God's Chosen. Within the black tradition, the reward for life's suffering comes in one's connection with God. This connection which sustained the slave on a day to day basis was ultimately directed toward the afterlife.

Yet, Brown does not come solely out of the black tradition. Unitarians do not place emphasis upon the afterlife, and consequently, the traditional black reward for suffering is denied. Unitarians suffer for their actions or beliefs. However, that suffering is not central to faith. From the middle class perspective it is experienced as a result of one's private actions, not as one's inevitable experience in this world. Suffering, for blacks, was a corporate and universal given. For Unitarians, however, suffering was an isolated, individual burden that was taken on voluntarily. For the Unitarian, the dignity of suffering came, not in one's relationship to God, but in one's relationship to oneself. It came as a result of one's commitment to personal values or conscience.

Brown had to reconcile the almost consuming presence of suffering for the disinherited, with the concept of individual suffering in the middle class. For the former, suffering was inherent. It came as a reality of existence, and relief came through grace. For the latter, suffering was taken on and was related to one's ideals.

Brown understood suffering as a central reality of his existence. Even as a child, his favorite hymn was "Oh Paradise, T'is Weary Waiting Here." He recalled, "I sang it often, and as I

sang my face was bathed in tears."[1] Brown attempted to reach the black community via this link. Both he and they understood suffering as central to existence. However, Brown's concept of suffering was Unitarian. In his sermon "The Price We Pay," his message was this:

> Choose, my friends, but know in choosing, that you shall be paid for what you have done. . . . To obtain the object of your choice you must always pay the price. Choose, then, my brethren, choose. What will you have? Pay the price and take it.

Suffering was here related to individual choice, as a voluntary state of existence and as a personal burden. The black disinherited, under the burden of American life, could not make sense of this message. Only as blacks moved into the middle class could they hear Brown's message. However, once middle class status was gained, the religious centrality of suffering diminished. Uniquely Brown's experience of suffering came out of both traditions. For McGee, who portrayed the more typical middle class liberal response, suffering was no longer central.

What the two men did share was a sense of idealism, but to different degrees. Brown's idealism filled his writing. These ideals drew the "suffering servant" ever onward. His high hopes at setting off on the Jamaican mission supported him when it became transparently clear that the denomination would eventually abandon him. Again and again, Brown had expectations and dreams that seemed to ignore the reality with which he was faced and often led him into irresponsible action. Indeed, he built failure into his

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[1] Brown, "Brief History," p. 1.

mission by consistently taking on too much. When Brown preached "that men who visualized better days and believed that visions may become true were really 'practical,'"[1] he was articulating a conviction by which he lived. But visions may also be held for self-defense, for without them, Brown would have been overwhelmed by his life's legacy of despair. "This year" was always the year of destiny for Brown.

McGee's idealism was not driven by a desperate need to leave today's pain for tomorrows dreams, as was Brown's. McGee had a desire to see Unitarianism proclaimed in the black community, as did Brown. He was committed to ministry, but it was not the center of his life. Methodically and thoughtfully he approached his endeavor, understanding his limits. His idealism did not serve to sustain an illusion, but was, rather, an attainable goal. In spite of their different approaches, Brown and McGee shared the ideal of establishing Unitarianism in the black community. In pursuing this ideal both were fairly rooted in the belief in human perfectibility and progress and in the hope for social justice that are the recurrent proclamations of liberal religion.

I have identified the "suffering servant" as the dominant image in Ethelred Brown's self-understanding. Both Brown's allegiance to the ministerial role and his idealism are subsumed within this image of its dynamic, but the image of the "suffering

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[1] "Harlem Pastor Defends Idealism," New York Times, August 11, 1948.

servant" is not a dominant one in the Unitarian tradition. Its centrality is only particular to Brown's message.

To get beyond Brown's idiosyncracies, to the distinctive Unitarian elements of the message he brought to Harlem, I turn to the institutional life of the Harlem Church. The Harlem Unitarian Church was called "A Temple and a Forum." In these words resides the church's self-understanding. Theirs was a dual purpose that was never synthesized but was manifest as institutional schizophrenia. Was their primary function worship or intellectual dialogue? They were not sure. The church won its acclaim primarily in its role as a forum. The quality of its speakers and discussions drew people, largely young men, who were hungry for intellectual stimulation.

Brown valued intellectual freedom highly, and this was dramatically illustrated when he was attacked after conducting a worship service. On that evening after speaking in favor of the deportation of Marcus Garvey, he had tried to conduct an orderly discussion, but he was a Unitarian. He could not manage members for whom speaking was merely a weapon. He persisted in his efforts to bring the meeting to order, but, failing to achieve an intelligent discussion, he ended the service and was assaulted as he left the room. The church underwent a similar experience when meetings were invaded by communists, who held ideology above the free exchange of ideas. To rid the church of them, Brown had to switch to a strict worship format. He did this to protect what was central to the religious community, intellectual inquiry and

dialogue. For Brown and the Harlem Unitarian Church, intellectual freedom was not the handmaiden of politics; it reined supreme.

The question the Harlem church faced was not the importance of "seeking the truth in freedom," but the context within which that search should occur. It vacillated between the secular and the religious. This issue did not arise for the Free Religious Fellowship. McGee's content was intellectually stimulating, including the political element, and there was no confusion of purpose.

In both churches, political freedom was important. The great difference, however, was that Brown was more outspoken in the community. A political radical and an orator of some eloquence, Brown attracted people who were not as interested in free religion as they were in radical politics and other specifically secular concerns.

Both churches attracted socialists and other political activists; in both, sermons addressed pressing social issues. Intellectual freedom and political freedom were more closely aligned in both these churches. These two ministers did naturally, what only the most conscientious and radical of white Unitarian ministers did. Theirs was the legacy of blackness. With segregation the norm and discrimination always present, blacks knew life was not simply a matter of individual freedom; they had to call for freedom for all blacks in America. Political freedom was more tangible for blacks because it could never be taken for granted. And Brown saw the role of the church as the challenger of inequities. Brown was saying this at a time when most black

churches were focused on otherworldly concerns, and he railed at the irresponsibility of the orthodox black ministers.

The message of political freedom had never been taken up by most black churches. They regarded their realm as the spiritual. Brown fought against this attitude, which he connected with emotionalism, superstition, and escapism. Brown hoped to liberate the minds of blacks from the smothering embrace of orthodox Christianity. McGee also reacted negatively to the emotional, otherworldly quality of traditional black religion. In their own churches, they both toned spirituality down to a reverent contemplative state. They found no place for the ecstatic experience.

The absence of ecstatic experience in the religious lives of Brown and McGee is significant. According to Cecil Cone, ecstatic experience is the essence of black faith. This experience marks the encounter with God which allows one to place entire trust in Him and achieve dignity as one of His children. Brown and McGee's conversions, if we can call them that, to Unitarianism were of a different nature. As inquisitive children and then as educated adults, they had begun to doubt orthodox dogma and eventually their consciences forced on them a choice between their tradition and what they knew was right. Thus for them, the basic religious experience was not an ecstatic encounter with God, but rather, an act of individual will, an act of conscience. Even for Brown, who at one time attributed his decision to enter the ministry to God, the mailing of that fateful letter to "Any Unitarian Minister in

New York City"[1] was the act of a man tormented by his conscience. This explains the lack of spiritual focus in the worship of their religious communities, for it was not the primary element in their commitment to Unitarianism.

Brown and McGee were Unitarian in outlook, and freedom was seen in a Unitarian light in their churches, Intellectual freedom was primary. Political freedom was also valued highly and closely aligned with intellectual freedom. This was perhaps the most vital aspect of these two communities. The connection between political and intellectual freedom was felt, not because the preacher castigated them, as is the case in some white churches, but because they knew oppression of the mind and body. Black Unitarians were still striving after both of these freedoms. Spiritual freedom, which was associated with orthodoxy and was not part of the conversion experience to Unitarianism, was supplanted by a more self-contained variety.

Brown and McGee had moved rapidly away from black religion. McGee, the more radical of the two in this regard, became a humanist. Brown, a theist who believed God was spirit and Jesus was our moral exemplar, emphasized man's responsibility for himself and the world. McGee preached that "we choose our destiny."[2] Brown railed at the black churches that transferred men's "interest from here and now to existence in some other world" and which "destroys personal responsibility." Brown believed that salvation

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[1] Brown, "Brief History," p. 1.

[2] Lewis McGee, "Study of the South Side Negro Community of Chicago, Illinois," commissioned by the AUA, submitted Spring 1948.

came through "character and service" and that "every man must work out his own salvation."[1]

Yet, even with these solidly middle class belief structures, Brown and McGee can be located within H. Richard Niebuhr's description of the disinherited. Like the middle class religionists their messages emphasized individualistic tendencies in which striving supersedes grace as the means of salvation. They also offered abstract ideas rather than emotional fervor. In Unitarian fashion they rely on ideas and concepts. This is evident in the paucity of images that have emerged in this review. But an element associated with the churches of the disinherited that these black Unitarians seemed to maintain was the sense of corporate redemption. Here, the burden of action rested upon the individual not God but the awaited result was still the liberation of the black people. Worldly salvation would come as an event that freed the black community from economic oppression and discrimination. As we have seen the members of the Harlem Unitarian Church and the Free Religious Fellowship had strong social consciences and this too is a quality of black religion. Gayraud Wilmore asserts that this situation generates the "ambivalence about religious and secular objectives [that] has been a characteristic of black religion in America."[2] This ambivalence is readily evident in the experience of the Harlem church. For Brown the difference does not lie in secular objectives but in the form of religious objec-

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[1]Brown, Amsterdam News, n.p., n.d.

[2]Gayraud S. Wilmore, Black Religion and Black Radicalism (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1972), p. 113.

tives. Unitarianism relies more on the intellect; the black church on spirituality. Ambivalence rises from the pressing desire among black people for political and economic freedom.

Interestingly, when political freedom emerged during the Civil Rights era as a religious quest and value, the black church, Unitarianism, and other white denominations were able to form an alliance. Martin Luther King, Jr., was able to mesh the elements of spirituality and political and intellectual freedom with the biblical and democratic traditions. For a time this gave us shared goals and a corporate identity. We had established a common ground. And it was during this time that our churches attracted larger numbers of blacks than ever before. Part of this was due to the rising economic status of the Negro, but this influx of blacks into Unitarian churches also came in response to a liberal message that for a time proclaimed the political aspect of freedom.

Who were the black people who became Unitarians? They were often the educated; many came out of the Methodist tradition as did Brown and McGee; they were middle class. Brown and McGree knew exactly who their message appealed to: the educated, the cultured and the prosperous. These were the people who had begun to question black religion and whose interests had expanded beyond the black community. The report of the Commission on Unitarian Intergroup Relations essentially agrees with them and reiterates observations made earlier:

> The Commission believes that there is a considerable reservoir of non-white people ready for Unitarians. . . . Primary among these . . . are college graduates who can no longer reconcile their advanced scientific knowledge with teachings common to the fundamentalist

> tradition. Then there have been others, just plain people, not college graduates or people with formal education, who raise questions about the concern of God and Jesus for their plight as Negroes in America. They find difficulty in reconciling their long continuing oppression in our Christian community with their expectation that Jesus would be pleading their cause at the throne of grace, brining them relief and solace. To many Negroes the highly emotional content of worship services is objectionable and often embarrassing. Yet because of their early religious training, many would prefer to have some church connection. They stand in a dilemma.

The question remains why did so few blacks respond to Brown and McGee? There is no simple answer except the obvious, that there is a great disparity in the world view of the disinherited black and the middle class Unitarian. The Commission on Unitarian Intergroup Relations speculated about this as well:

> Some Negroes are active in churches for personal business reasons but secretly do not subscribe to the religion they profess. Others go to church simply because relatives and friends expect it of them. Many are silent about their beliefs, fearing that the mass pressure of friends and relatives will brand them with "heresy."[1]

What the Commission is alluding to here is the pressure the black community puts on its members. To become a Unitarian one had to forsake the community by stepping outside its belief structure. This is very risky for a black person because in doing this he challenges the community he depends upon for support. We saw this in the disfavor Brown's pronouncement of Unitarian beliefs met in Montego Bay. His situation is more comparable to an immigrant leaving the faith of the old country, than to the experience of the average suburban Unitarian upon joining a Unitarian church.

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[1] "How 'Open' Is the Unitarian Door?", p. 12.

It is not surprising then that black Unitarian churches arose in America's two largest black metropolises, where the communal bonds were looser. But this was a risk that only a few were able to take. They were among the few for whom wider vistas had already opened; the few who were already or were in the process of becoming middle class. Financially secure, they depended upon it less. They had already begun to see beyond the community and therefore could step out of it. As we have already seen, they had broader social, political, and cultural commitments and wanted a church that could support these. They did not want or need the experience of a tight knit community, for it was that which they had just escaped. The tentativeness of people's commitment to the Free Religious Fellowship and the Harlem Unitarian Church was one of the characteristics of these churches. These involved black people, many of them young men, had no desire to be locked into Unitarianism when they were just discovering the world.

The group we have been discussing was a small one, and their experience and needs different from the majority. The strength of the church in the black community is great. When Richard Allen first established the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Benjamin Rush had encouraged him knowing that this was an important act of self-assertion. In the black church the Afro-American was his own man, he could run his own affairs and could stand with dignity. The church's functions were broad, its members cared for the sick, helped the poor, provided day care, prepared the dead for burial; they were social welfare agencies and more. They had choirs, basketball teams, and literary clubs. For many people the black church was the focus of the community.

Beyond the day to day, lie the years upon years that the black church had spent with the Afro-American in slavery and hard times. The Bible and the spirituals of black religion were imbibed with mother's milk. Blacks needed a way of explaining their suffering and maintaining their hope; and the church answered their call. They needed a place to rejoice and a place to weep, and the church was there. They needed a companion and Jesus came. So much of their lives was out of control. They had learned, in the recognition of their powerlessness, to depend on something outside themselves. And that was God. It was not easy to break away from the black church and from a loyalty that had been forged over centuries. Harry I. Jones, the prime mover behind the Free Religious Fellowship, returned to orthodoxy late in his life. The pull was strong.

The church had evolved in response to the needs of black folk. It had responded to the black call for help. Yet as people broke into the larger culture and had access to experiences that had been denied them, the black church began to lose some of its relevance. As black people gained more control over their lives and experienced a dignity won through personal achievements seemingly independent of God, they could begin to wander away from mother church.

Brown and McGee could not help but react to the orthodoxy they were raised with and left as adults. They diminished God's role and then instead of relating Unitarianism to the full black experience--including spirituality--disassociated themselves from black emotionalism and over-identified with Unitarian intellectualism.

To move as rapidly as they did from a spiritually centered religion to an intellectually centered one was too great a leap for all but a few.

Howard Thurman's experience attests to the plausibility of the assertion that Brown and McGee lost a significant element of the black community in their radical move. When Thurman was called to the "Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples" in 1944 the conditions were more advantageous than they had been for either Brown or McGee when they began. But beyond the good circumstances, the significance of which we should not underestimate, there were two important elements. First, Thurman combined intellectual freedom and spiritual freedom. Thurman is both an educated man and a profoundly spiritual man; he is a mystic. From an inner strength first nurtured by the God of black religion he moved outward to establish a religious community whose parameters embraced the religions of the world. Because he did not reject what was integral to the black religious experience that had sustained him, blacks and whites alike could come to him without rejecting their own religious heritages. Brown and McGee were more rebellious in their transition to a liberal position. Thurman was more gradual. The People's church was nondenominational and this allowed him more freedom to adapt liberal theology to a black perspective. Yet if Thurman synthesized the intellectual and spiritual, he did not bring the political into this configuration. His church community thrived in part because he did not address controversial and friction producing issues head on as Brown had. For Thurman, the church was always a worshipping

community first; never a forum. He saw himself coming at basic social change by building a religious fellowship that could cut across all racial and cultural barriers. Secondly, Thurman had charisma, a personal magnetism that defies analysis but can mean everything when it comes to assuming leadership of a group of people. It was that something that both Brown and McGee lacked.

It is fair to speculate that Ethelred Brown and Lewis McGee would have made fine ministers in less demanding times. But the tasks they took on were great, the demands large and the time not quite right. Brown's life was tragic. His ministerial hubris, in combination with his high idealism, all but destroyed his family. And he was buffeted about by the racial and political divisions within the black community, and the effects of war and depression. We cannot really know how much of his failure was simply due to the momentum of history, how much Eliot and Cornish's bigotry contributed, and how much was of Brown's own making. McGee came to Unitarianism a mature man; he was not dynamic but rather methodical and studious on the one hand and possessed by wanderlust on the other. An undemonstrative man, he does not seem a likely candidate to enliven a movement. The reality was that both of these men took on enormous tasks, that we with the advantage of hindsight can say were beyond their personal resources given a denomination which never made the Unitarian mission into the black community a priority.

CHAPTER V

OUR FUTURE

> This church is dedicated to the proposition that beneath all our diversity, beyond all our differences, there is a unity which makes us one and binds us forever together inspite of time and death and the space between the stars.
>
> David E. Bumbaugh Jr.

The experiences of Ethelred Brown and Lewis McGee reenforce the judgment that Unitarianism is a class-bound religion. These men were Unitarian in their beliefs, attitudes, and messages, and they understandably attracted others of that same mold. Brown and McGee did deviate in one significant way. For both of them political freedom was closely related to intellectual freedom. But besides this one exception they had limited success in bringing the elements of black religion into a productive encounter with Unitarianism. Such a synthesis may have had broader appeal in the black community but we are left with the question of what this would have looked like. Therefore I now turn to this query: How can Unitarianism and black religion enrich one another?

To answer this question I must broaden my scope. In this thesis traditional black religion in the United States has been a religion of the disinherited, where the central experience is

that of oppression and powerlessness over their lives. The working class has a similar experience, but its master is industry. In the factory neither their time nor their product is their own. Until now I have emphasized racial segregation, but class segregation is just as pervasive, if not more so. Our churches have welcomed blacks who have assimilated middle class values. The main barrier for those who enter the liberal religious community is class. This point is convincingly argued by Dale and Haugan in "Class and Conflict: The Declining influence of religion in Unitarian Universalism."[1]

We have discussed the conditions in black life that shaped black religion, and why Unitarianism did not address these conditions, but we have not critiqued the liberal church from the black perspective. Robert Coles, in his essay "Work and Self-Respect," analyzes the intellectual community from the working class perspective. Here, I will broaden my scope to discuss Coles's conclusions, because they parellel the black critique of Unitarianism.

The major criticism the working class has of the intellectual community is its propensity to indulge in self-scrutiny. Coles points out that the working class have "an aversion to it." The reason for this negative appraisal of self-scrutiny is two-fold. First, the ordinary person sees it as a "matter of time and money. Who, they wonder, has the luxury of hours to spend talking about himself or herself, and his or her ideas--and for

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[1]Dan Dale and Eric Haugan, "Class and Conflict: The Declining Influence of Religion in Unitarian Universalism," (unpublished manuscript), Spring 1978.

pay?" The working class certainly does not. Secondly, the working class ask, where does all this thinking lead? They say: "What can I do? What can anyone do?. . . . Nothing, I'll tell you. That's what you learn in life?" These two judgments leveled at the intellectual community show the basic tension in the working class ethos between realism and fatalism which shapes their attitude toward the intellectual community.

The first is an example of working class realism. The realist recognizes "the fact of life," that he has to work if he is going to provide for his family. He says, "I don't have time to sit around and think about myself." He does not have time for the luxury of self-examination. His attitude is, "This is the situation we have to deal with. Let us get on with it and do the best we can." In such situations contemplation is only valuable when it leads quickly to action. From this perspective, thought without action is sterile.

The second query, "What's the use" is a fatalistic one because the worker has a sense that life should be better, yet he is quite unwilling to look at that feeling and is at a loss as to what to do about it. When this feeling of hope does emerge, his fatalism, which he takes to be realism, pushes it back down. The worker exclaims, "You don't ask <u>why</u> in this life." He knows that to contemplate the whys and wherefores of his circumstance would be painful, especially if his reflections do not lead to concrete change. This would only serve to affirm his sense of powerlessness and subsequent unworthiness. He therefore curtails self-scrutiny because of his inability to bring his hopes for a

better world to fruition. If the worker held on to these hopes in the face of his powerlessness, it might well destroy the redemptive character of work. If the ultimate goal of a better world is unattainable, the immediate goals of work and family--which are in fact the primary meaning giving values--become ephemeral.

The realism/fatalism dichotomy in the working class ethos indicates why so few members of the working class are Unitarian Universalists. As realists they have no faith in the endless self-scrutiny in which UU's indulge. Intellectual stimulation without tangible results will not attract them, although the purging effect of emotional religion and otherworldly rewards may. The working class are pragmatic realists who demand that thought lead to action. For the fatalistic part of the worker's character, the questions raised in some UU churches are just too painful. "The trouble with going to church--I told the priest once--is that you get to thinking, and thinking and thinking afterwards. But what can you do? Nothing . . ."[1]

From the working class perspective, intellectuals talk about things they can do nothing about, and do nothing about the things of which they talk. This criticism rings true. It points to a problem raised in the first chapter: The Unitarian tendency to abuse its intellectual freedom by becoming esoteric in its thinking. We have something to gain by re-examining black religion.

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[1]Robert Coles, "Work and Self-Respect," Daedalus (Fall 1976), pp. 29-38.

It provides elements that can save us from intellectual escapism, inaction and, at the same time, broaden the appeal of the message. What do we have to gain from the black church?

Unitarian Universalists need working class realism. Despite the black church's reputation for otherworldliness, it has met the needs of the present. Child care, food and shelter, an undertaker, the cause of civil rights and voter registration all have fallen within the concern of the black church. It was in this later respect that Brown, McGee and the members of their churches dovetailed with black religion. The situation of blacks in America had always served to make political freedom a pressing issue and this is where Brown and McGee endeavored to unite the two traditions. But we have seen that the balance between these two in Brown's Unitarianism was precarious. This can be tracked to a misunderstanding on his part about the nature of the religious community.

The primary function of the church is as a "temple" not as a "forum." Whatever transpires should happen in the context of a worshipping community. It is there that people bear witness to and celebrate their rootage in Universal Life. It is in this time and space set apart that people recognize a worldly intimacy that prevades at all times. Here the elements of spirituality in religion draws us beyond the intellect, to the felt connection with all Reality. Black religion makes this same connection with a personal God. It was in this relationship that the slave found dignity, for it cut across all distinctions and bared one's

essential humanness. While as a Unitarian who has not known a saving experience, I must question Cecil Cone's assertion that this relationship is marked by an ecstatic event, but I do not question that this experience of connectedness is the essential spiritual element in religion. This connection and consequent human dignity are inherent in life. Dignity, which cannot be impinged upon by slavery, does not take class, race, or achievement into consideration. This inherent dignity answers two middle class problems. It bestows forgiveness on the vulnerable individual who inevitably fails in an achievement-oriented society. And it destroys the walls of isolation around those who feel that dignity can only rest upon personal achievement.

What does each of us need to know? That we are valued and that our lives have significance. We struggle to acquire the same sense of somebodiness that the slave desired but he knew that activity could not achieve this sense. It had to be a gift. But as a gift, it undercuts activity, and the source of value--the Value Center--becomes Being itself. It is this which sustains life. It is difficult to express one's loyalty to an intellectually abstract concept like Being itself. And this points to the necessity of a spiritual realm, for it is on this level that one senses or knows the ultimate connectedness of existence. To truly value oneself is to value that which undergrids life. It shatters all illusions of isolation. One begins to experience the suffering of others as if it was one's own, and to act to alleviate it.

For the middle class, this process is initiated by a passive act of power. We listen so deeply to the stories of others that

we begin to know their pain. To open oneself to that which we know will be painful is an act of strength. And having done this we act with a commitment and a conviction which is unlike the noblesse oblige the directors of the American Unitarian Association felt toward Brown. It is unlike the paternalism that motivated Cornish and Eliot, and unlike the guilt that motivates middle class liberals today. This conviction is tied to our concepts of ourselves. We are struggling for ourselves, but our self-understanding has broadened. We realize self-interest goes beyond ourselves and our families.

This has always posed a problem for men like Ethelred Brown who sacrificed themselves and their families for the greater good. These people fell back into middle class individualism which stressed their individual responsibilities. Their sense of somebodiness once again attached itself to their achievements. In reality they could not feel a sense of worth by themselves because such transformation is an act of community, and each member can only sustain his activity to the extent that he receives the support of the group. When they find themselves isolated, leaders tend to lose the sense of connectedness that motivated them in the beginning. They continue to work, not for others, but for the cause in which they had invested themselves. Brown appears to have done this.

Another reason that Brown remained loyal to his cause was that fundamentalist religion and racial discrimination confronted him daily. We have discussed how the immediacy of oppression kept black Unitarians active in social reform. This is another reason

why it is important to have a black presence in the Unitarian Universalist church. When blacks are members of our churches and are among our friends then racial slurs and discrimination can no longer be shrugged off. They become a personal offense. In this situation the overcoming of racism takes on an urgency it lacked. The black presence must include the telling of the black story. Moreover, the American story is incomplete without the black story. Our national self-understanding is inadequate. This black story is essential if we are to develop an accurate perception of reality that brings about correct action.

The church, as the sustaining institution of a worshipping community, is essential in bringing the elements of spiritual, political, and intellectual freedom into a complementary dynamic. The black church has long housed the spiritual element that Unitarianism needs. It is the experience of spiritual connectedness that sustains a lasting commitment to a just society, and places the intellectual and political in perspective. Spirituality provides the motivation; intellectuality provides the reason and method and politics is the process. An understanding of the three-dimensionality of freedom, as rooted in the worshiping community, can save us from the esoteric thinking, the midguided politics, and the isolation of the spiritually vacuous Unitarian community.

Does the black individual and black religion have anything to gain from Unitarianism? This is a serious question. If we answer it affirmatively we commit ourselves to overcoming the middle class isolation of the liberal faith. It puts the universality of our message to the test.

Brown railed against the otherworldliness of black religion. He saw a tendency within the black church to turn its back on this world while in pursuit of the next. There is an imbalance between the spiritual and political elements in black religion that the Unitarian emphasis on intellectual freedom can help remedy. The fatalism of the disinherited black and worker drive both toward a focus on the otherworldly, rather than on justice in this world. In the context of the black church, the spiritual connection to God is emphasized as otherwordly rather than as in and through this world. Power is attributed to God while it is not recognized that they are the primary conduits of His power. Since God is perceived as all powerful; they perceive themselves as powerless. Yet gaining power is one of the central problems in the lives of blacks, workers and the disinherited. Having power means the ability to assert control over their own destinies.

For Unitarians generally, human participation in God's power is assumed, and for humanists, it is the primary source of power. The basic Unitarian belief that both McGee and Brown proclaimed was "the inherent goodness and rightness of Man," as experienced in "service to humanity." They believed in human perfectability and progress. The high esteem in which they held mankind and mankinds ability to affect the world was the basis of confidence. Such confidence is essential in overcoming the fatalistic attitude of the oppressed and thus enables them to utilize their inherent power--the power the middle class are raised to assume they possess.

Intellectual freedom is the missing element in the spiritually dominated black church. The free mind does not shrink from

questioning the dogmas that sustain the church's fatalism. It can break through the feelings of low esteem and the outmoded beliefs that keeps them locked into their helplessness. For it is in reflecting on one's condition that one discovers ways in which to use one's power to bring about a just society. Petitionary prayer can not do this. Reason is one of the primary methods we have to gain control of our lives. It helps us go beyond reacting, to planning and following our life plans. And this process, when it leads to results, is affirming and encourages further effort. But when our plans consistently fail for lack of commitment, or unrealistic goals we simply give credence to the worker's belief that talk is cheap.

Since we have already established that the primary element that the black religious experience has to offer Unitarianism, the question I now raise is: How do we introduce spirituality into our movement? But what is this spirituality? The Latin word for spirit meant breath or the breath of God. This spirit comes in many forms and appears in many places but it always comes as a breath of new life that inspires and revitalizes the human condition. Spirituality allows the individual to span the chasm that divides us one from the other. And reveals to us the eternal truth, that humankind is one for the depth of our own experience is our common bond; it is our common tongue.

In Unitarianism we can move toward spirituality by moving away from the abstract discursiveness of our sermons toward a profounder use of story. The story itself may be told in many ways: in the sermon, in our hymns; through dance. But in each

case the objective of our stories must be to engage the whole person. The Bible has endured because the depth and richness of its stories has spoken to the human condition. Yet this potential rest in many stories. Let us look at the possible responses to Brown's life story. Emotionally, I am angered by both the racism he faced, and his neglect of his own family. I am saddened by the loss of his son and his failure to establish a church. One cannot help but be touched by the tragic quality of his life. Intellectually, his story raises the issues of racism, internalized oppression, suffering, mid-life crisis, commitment, and responsibility. Politically, it points toward the work that has yet to be done. Brown had some success, he did force the AUA to look at Black America. But that limited success was clearly but a beginning. The element of spirituality is introduced by the identification we feel with Brown. God can never be found in Being itself. Identification with the individual story of Brown links us spiritually to God, who is found in every particular life.

The story is emotionally engaging, politically instructive, intellectually challenging, and spiritually broadening. It connects us to each other despite differences of sex and race, time and space. The story forces us to expand and correct our self-understanding. It is "transubjective" in that it overcome subjectivity by forcing us out of our assumed social context and into that of someone else. In the case of Unitarianism, the story of Brown sensitizes whites by providing them with an opportunity to "try on" the black experience. The evocative power of the story breaks through superficial rationalizations to educate and connect

us all at a deeper level. Moreover, story is important because of the many levels at which it appeals both to the individual and to the community.

Story puts one into someone else's world. It holds up their struggles and therein helps us to look at our own. This forces us to reappraise ourselves, to look more carefully at the assumptions of middle classness, the assumptions of whiteness. In this process one is "liberated into particularity." One's own existence becomes relative and distinctive. This is essentially an event that affirms the self. We then move out from the strength of discovery of our somebodiness. But that somebodiness is always known in relationship and known best when one can see the true depth of one's relationship to others.

Although I have emphasized story in the context of the worship service as a means of recognizing spirituality, it is not restricted to this situation. The Spiritual Presence may come at any time because it is not something that one wills. At best, the worship service is a time set apart, in which we endeavor to create the conditions which invite a spiritual encounter. The church can never have a monopoly on spirituality--whether it comes in an experience of oneness with nature or a flash of insight in the midst of crisis, whether it be experienced as a serene or an ecstatic event. It comes when it will.

This is the central task of the worshiping community: to invite the Spiritual Presence; to unveil this connectness with the story of life; to reveal the universal amidst the particular; and to inspire us to act for justice. The dynamics of intellectual,

spiritual, and political freedom occur within the religious community. A loving and supportive community assures us we are not alone fighting for justice, but rather striving as a member of a community. A religious community enhances our vision, for, alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our power, too limited to do all that must be done.

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