

Prophetic Religion in America: Tracing the Liberal Contribution

By Dan McKanan

Thank you for coming. My goal in this presentation is to invite all of you to help me think through one aspect of a book I am just beginning to write. That book is tentatively entitled *Prophetic Encounters: The Religious Left in American History*, and it will trace a variety of socialist, pacifist, anti-racist, and feminist movements from the abolitionist era of the 1830s and 1840s, through the social gospel and civil rights eras of the twentieth century, and up to the present. My hope is to integrate the many excellent scholarly treatments of specific eras, shedding new light on particular movements and moments by viewing them alongside others. I also hope to demonstrate that no single theological tradition has a monopoly on radical religion: sectarians and church-types, Catholics and Protestants, liberal Christians and orthodox Christians and non-Christians have all at times been at the forefront of efforts to bring more liberty, equality, and fraternity to the United States. As a liberal Christian and a Unitarian Universalist myself, however, I am particular concerned to ensure that the liberal religious contribution is not slighted in the story I tell. That's where all of you come in. Today I would like to sketch out a framework for understanding the special contribution liberal religion has made to radical social movements in the United States, and then to invite you either to challenge my framework or else to fill it in with concrete examples.

This project is important to me because many standard accounts of radical religion in the United States leave out the distinctive liberal contribution. Many historians of the abolitionist era, for example, suggest that the revivalist fires of the Second Great Awakening led directly to the fiery activism of William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, despite the fact that the mature theologies of these three individuals were hardly evangelical.¹ In the past few decades, *Sojourners* editor Jim Wallis has done much to promote the link between "spiritual revivals" and abolitionism, in part because of a laudable desire to combat the currently prevailing link between evangelicalism and political conservatism.² The result, though, is a one dimensional picture of an extremely complex religious community. Similarly, studies of the social gospel era typically stress the ways in which social gospellers built on the mainline Protestant liberalism of Friedrich Schleiermacher, Horace Bushnell, and their

¹ The "evangelical thesis" about abolitionism can be found in Donald M. Scott's claim that "Abolition in a very precise sense was a form of evangelicalism and [abolitionist lecturers] were its evangelists," in Bertram Wyatt-Brown's contention that "the movement for 'immediate abolition' began as a direct extension of evangelical Christianity," in Laurence J. Friedman's placement of "immediatism within the early nineteenth-century American evangelical missionary crusade to propagate Gospel truths and supplant heathenism throughout the globe," and in John R. McKivigan and Mitchell Snay's assertion that "the degree to which evangelical doctrines affected a denomination generally determined its receptivity to abolitionist arguments." See Donald M. Scott, "Abolition as a Sacred Vocation," in Lewis Perry and Michael Fellman, eds., *Antislavery Reconsidered: New Perspectives on the Abolitionists* (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), p. 73; Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Lewis Tappan and the Evangelical War Against Slavery* (Cleveland, Ohio: Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1969), p. 81; Friedman, p. 3; John R. McKivigan and Mitchell Snay, "Introduction: Religion and the Problem of Slavery in Antebellum America," in McKivigan and Snay, eds., *Religion and the Antebellum Debate over Slavery* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1998), p. 10. Abolitionist historians who have been more willing to acknowledge multiple religious sources for the movement include Louis Filler, James Brewer Stewart, Ronald Walters, Paul Goodman, Steven Mintz, and Robert Abzug.

² Jim Wallis, "The Religious Right's Era is Over," *Time Magazine*, 16 February 2007.

successors—the sort of liberalism that insists that traditional scriptures and creeds be read symbolically rather than literally. That emphasis leaves out the more thoroughgoing liberalism of Unitarians, Universalists, Transcendentalists, and humanists, all of whom were more interested in finding alternatives to the creeds than symbolic interpretations of them. Yet these groups were as likely as their mainline neighbors to sponsor innovative forms of urban ministry, to resist the militarism of World War I, and to align themselves with labor unions and socialist political parties. Finally, many studies of religious activism in the 1960s and beyond place special emphasis on the connection between the Black Church and civil rights, or on the ways post Vatican II Catholicism informed the peace and Central American sanctuary movements. More than one interpreter of these movements has suggested that it was precisely the traditionalism of their religious foundations that gave civil rights and peace activists strength to persevere. Historian Mel Piehl, for example, has written that the “radical social outlook” of the Catholic Worker movement cannot be understood apart from its “conservative Catholic religiosity,” while civil rights scholar Charles Marsh has urged activists to “reckon with the truth that personal salvation is the most enduring source of social engagement.”³ If religious liberals are not entirely invisible in these accounts, they appear as odd anomalies or even as parasites who draw their strength from religious traditions they are unwilling to help sustain.

There are many reasons for the relative invisibility of liberals within the history of the religious left. In large part, it is a matter of numbers: Unitarians, Universalists, and their ilk were greatly outnumbered by Second Great Awakening revivalists in the 1840s, by mainline Protestants in the early twentieth century, and by Catholics and Black Protestants in the 1960s. Even if—as I suspect—they were more likely than those other groups to participate in radical social movements, the total number of participants they could contribute was vastly outstripped by the more numerous groups.

But numbers do not tell the whole story. Religious liberals have been rendered still more invisible by a set of half-truths perpetuated by outsiders and, often, by ourselves. I will identify four of these; perhaps some of you can suggest still others.

First and foremost, so the story goes, *religious liberals lack fervor*. We are, in Ralph Waldo Emerson’s telling phrase, “corpse cold.” We might have good ideals and values, but without the inner fire of the revivalist we will not persevere in our activism when the going gets rough. Catholic Worker co-founder Peter Maurin eloquently expressed this analysis when he laid out the difference between liberals and radicals: “Liberals are too liberal to be radical. To be a radical is to go to the roots. Liberals don’t go to the roots; they only scratch the surface.”⁴ Even more pointedly, sixties folksinger Phil Ochs sang ironically that “I vote for the democratic party / They want the U.N. to be strong / I go to all the Pete Seeger concerts / He sure gets me singing those songs / I’ll send all the money you ask for / But don’t ask me to come on along / So love me, love me, love me, I’m a liberal.”⁵

Second, liberals are too inclined to affirm “the world,” and thus unable to come to terms with the persistence of radical evil. H. Richard Niebuhr charged that liberals taught that “a God without wrath

³ Charles Marsh, *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice, from the Civil Rights Movement to Today* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), pp. 176-77; and Mel Piehl, *Breaking Bread: The Catholic Worker and the Origin of Catholic Radicalism in America* (1982, rept. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006), p. ix.

⁴ Peter Maurin, “Not Liberals but Radicals,” *Easy Essays* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1977), pp. 156-57.

⁵ Phil Ochs, “Love Me, I’m a Liberal.”

brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.”⁶ In his famous typology, Niebuhr described the liberal approach to social issues as “Christ of culture”: by subordinating Jesus’ work and teaching to the demands of the modern age, liberals lost the ability to criticize that age. A similar criticism is at least implicit in the work of two recent scholars who, unlike Niebuhr, place themselves solidly within the liberal theological tradition. Both Gary Dorrien and Paul Rasor have defined liberal theology precisely by its affirmation of modernity. “Liberal theology,” writes Rasor, “is characterized by the belief that human religiousness should be understood from the perspective of modern knowledge and experience,” while Dorrien begins his definition by highlighting liberal theology’s “openness to the verdicts of modern intellectual inquiry, especially the natural and social sciences.”⁷ If this is so, it is hard to see how liberals could set themselves against capitalism, consumerism, ecological devastation, scientific racism, or other distinctly un-liberatory manifestations of modernity.

Third, liberals are so individualistic that we are unable to see that most social evils require large-scale institutional solutions. For many observers, Emerson’s rebuff of the more community-minded Transcendentalists at Brook Farm represents *the* liberal position on social change. “To join this body,” he wrote in his journal, “would be to traverse all my long trumpeted theory . . . that one man is a counterpoise to a city,—that a man is stronger than a city, that his solitude is more prevalent and beneficent than the concert of crowds.”⁸ “The danger,” echoed James Freeman Clarke, was “of expecting from a new outward arrangement, what no such arrangement can ever accomplish; of looking to outward forms for a cure of the evils which have their root in the soul and heart.”⁹ However laudable in intent, such anti-institutional sentiments can have the objective effect of reinforcing existing, oppressive institutions.

Fourth and finally, liberals are privileged. As a recent article in the *UU World* eloquently argued, religious liberals have a “class problem” because our theology makes sense only to those who have experienced the freedom and self-determination of the educated professional class.¹⁰ Moreover, Unitarian ministers in particular have long complained about congregations filled with prosperous businessmen seeking a religion that will make as few claims on them as possible. John Haynes Holmes—a religious socialist and co-founder of the pacifist Fellowship of Reconciliation—described his first parish as “a class church” whose “people had high standards of respectability and culture.” “Already,” he lamented, “in the impending struggle between capital and labor, our churches had lined up, more or less unwittingly, on the side of capital.”¹¹

⁶ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1937), p. 193.

⁷ Paul Rasor, *Faith Without Certainty: Liberal Theology in the 21st Century* (Boston: Skinner House, 2005); p. vii; and Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion 1805-1900* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), p. xxiii.

⁸ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journals*, 17 October 1840, cited in Henry W. Sams, ed., *Autobiography of Brook Farm* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1958), p. 5.

⁹ James Freeman Clarke, “The Christian Examiner on the Doctrine of Fourier,” *Phalanx* 1/17 (August 24, 1844): 248-49.

¹⁰ Doug Muder, “Not My Father’s Religion,” *UU World*, Fall 2007.

¹¹ John Haynes Holmes, *I Speak for Myself: The Autobiography of John Haynes Holmes* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), p. 71.

I will not take the time to refute these charges or explain why they are only *half-true*. I think I can leave that to your imaginations. But I must note that most of the accusers I have just quoted were themselves religious liberals. This suggests a fifth trait of religious liberals, perhaps more than half-true: *we are relentlessly, and at times pathologically, critical of ourselves*. This self-criticism may be the outgrowth of our idealistic faith in the human capacity to do better, and at times it has served as well. It is worth reflecting, however, on whether the self-critical impulse might sometimes absorb too much of the fervor that should be directed outward, against injustices in the larger world.

In short, it is not really that surprising that religious liberals are often invisible in accounts of radical religion. But it is time now to turn to my more constructive argument. Once we start seeing religious liberals, what story can we tell about their distinctive contribution to movements for social change? Here I would suggest five themes, illustrating each with just a few examples. I hope you will be able to help fill in the picture!

First, *religious liberals have been able willing to place social change at the heart of theology*, rather than treating it as a mere auxiliary to an orthodox system of doctrine. Perhaps the most significant starting point for this contribution was William Ellery Channing's insistent emphasis on the divine image within the human being as the starting point for theology. "God becomes a real being to us," Channing declared in 1828, "in proportion as his own nature is unfolded within us."¹² Even before he personally aligned himself with the abolitionist movement, Channing's words were treasured by such leading reformers as William Lloyd Garrison (a renegade Baptist) and Lucretia Mott (a liberal Quaker), because they made it possible to see God *in*—and thus to think theologically *about*—both the victims of violence and slavery and about the activists who struggled against injustice. Indeed, Mott went so far as to trace all social reform movements to the *imago dei*: "All the leading reforms of the age . . . have sprung not by the dogmas propounded by either the Church of Rome or England, or any other material organization, but from the individual soul of man, from the Divinity rising within man, from the Divinity of which Christ was the most celestial exemplar."¹³

Almost a century later, Clarence Skinner would revolutionize Universalist theology, not with a general study of doctrine, but with his book on *The Social Implications of Universalism*. While mainline social gospelers generally placed ideas about "social salvation" alongside traditional evangelism, Skinner was able to call for a more thoroughgoing revision. "The traditional Protestant Church is dying," he wrote—if presciently then somewhat prematurely!—because "the individualism which called it into being is dying; the social order which it expressed is dying." A new age called for a new theology and "a religion which is throbbing with the dynamic of democracy." "A democratic people," moreover, "demand[ed] a democratic God, a robust deity who likes his universe, who hungers for fellowship, who is in and of and for the whole of life."¹⁴ Today, Unitarian Universalists who care about peace, racial justice, or the environment can readily root these causes in the Seven Principles that appear on our Sunday morning bulletins and organize our children's religious education curriculum. Roman Catholic activists, to be sure, can just as easily appeal to the principles of Catholic Social Teaching—indeed, some published

¹² Channing, "Likeness to God," in *Works*, 291-92.

¹³ Cited in Hallowell, *James and Lucretia Mott*, p. 346.

¹⁴ Clarence Skinner, *The Social Implications of Universalism*, in Charles Howe, ed., *The Essential Clarence Skinner: A Brief Introduction to His Life and Writings* (Boston: Skinner House, 2005), pp. 43, 44, 50.

lists of Catholic Social Teaching principles display an almost point-by-point correspondence to the UU Seven Principles. But Catholic activists cannot presume that their co-religionists even know about Catholic Social Teaching, and they must fight an uphill battle to make social justice as central to parish life as liturgical observance or sexual morality.

Second, *religious liberals have consistently provided institutional support for nascent social movements*, even when those movements' leaders have been stridently anti-institutional or illiberal in their personal sentiments. When William Lloyd Garrison began his career as the nation's foremost antislavery editor and agitator, for example, he was a professed evangelical who believed that the literal words of the Bible demanded freedom to the slave and social equality for people of all races. Because this message was unacceptable to the leaders of Boston's Protestant churches, however, Garrison held his first abolitionist lectures at Abner Kneeland's Society of Free Enquirers. Kneeland had begun his own career as a Universalist minister but had gravitated to a "freethinking" position that anticipated the humanist strand within contemporary Unitarian Universalism. Though the doors of Unitarian churches were initially closed to Garrison, moreover, many of his earliest and most enduring allies came from William Ellery Channing's congregation or from the ranks of Unitarian clergy. Maria Weston Chapman was the organizing and fundraising genius who kept the Anti-Slavery Society afloat financially, while the gentle Rev. Samuel J. May translated Garrison's radical ideas into an irenic discourse that eventually won over Channing himself. Perhaps in part due to the influence of these friends, Garrison's own religious sentiments soon gravitated to the liberal extreme, and he devoted many pages of the *Liberator* to sharp criticisms of Sabbath observance and of biblical authority.

Almost a century later, Garrison's anti-institutional spirit was revived by Ammon Hennacy, a pacifist agitator and "Tolstoyan Christian" who believed he could fight a "one-man revolution" by refusing all cooperation with the militarist state, directly caring for the poor and homeless, and picketing against war at every opportunity and in virtually every part of the country. "I may not change the world," Hennacy famously declared, "but I'll work so the world won't change me."¹⁵ Though Hennacy knew more about early Unitarian and Universalist radicals than virtually any of his contemporaries, he never joined the Unitarians or Universalists—perhaps because he shared the standard "radical" wariness of "liberals." Instead, he became a Roman Catholic as a result of his admiration for (and infatuation with) Catholic Worker founder Dorothy Day. Some years later, he repudiated his Catholicism because "after fifteen years in the Catholic church I find that any increase in spiritual emphasis that I have gained has been in spite of and not because of attendance at Mass and taking Communion."¹⁶ From then on, Hennacy eschewed formal religious affiliations, declining to start his own church on the grounds that "I sure don't want any Ammonites following me around."¹⁷ Yet through all his religious transformations and geographical wanderings, Hennacy knew that he could always find a hearing at the local Unitarian church.

This pattern of institutional support has gone hand in hand with the choices of individual religious liberals, suggesting a third theme: *religious liberals have consistently been willing to play supporting roles in movements initiated by others*, especially by the more theological conservative leaders of

¹⁵ Ammon Hennacy, *The Book of Ammon* (Baltimore: Fortkamp, 1994), p. xi.

¹⁶ Hennacy, *Book of Ammon*, p. 474.

¹⁷ Hennacy, *Book of Ammon*, p. 476.

oppressed communities. Perhaps the two best known Unitarian Universalists in the civil rights movement, for example, were James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo, rank-and-file Northern marchers who had the misfortune to be murdered by segregationists during the Selma campaign. The fact that these two were both UU raises an intriguing question about numbers—what percentage of the white allies of the movement were in fact UU? From my perspective, though, the more important insight is that Reeb, Liuzzo, and many others were so willing to follow the lead of Martin Luther King and other Baptist preachers. Their commitment echoed the strategic choices of such earlier liberals as Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, an African American activist and novelist who belonged to a Unitarian congregation in Philadelphia but also served her people by writing Sunday School materials for the African Methodist Episcopal church. (Conversely, Coretta Scott King once told a Unitarian admirer that "We gave a lot of thought to becoming Unitarian at one time, but Martin and I realized we could never build a mass movement of black people if we were Unitarian."¹⁸)

The tendency of religious liberals to play the role of allies rather than movement leaders has, of course, compounded our invisibility in both the activist and theological worlds. Many observers, for example, have claimed that Unitarian Universalist theology is currently in decline, noting that there are no obvious heirs to the legacy of James Luther Adams, George Williams, and Conrad Wright. Yet Starr King president Rebecca Parker has aptly pointed out that several leading exponents of liberationist theologies—William Jones, Anthony Pinn, Stephanie Mitchem, Sharon Welch, Parker herself—are in fact UUs. For better or for worse, religious liberals have been such good citizens of the social movements they have espoused as to obscure their distinctive religious commitments. And all too often, their good citizenship has been rewarded with exclusion from such organizations as the Federal Council of Churches and National Council of Churches—institutions that have done much to coordinate and strengthen the social justice efforts of mainstream Christians.

I am not certain, but I suspect that none of the theologians I just mentioned are birthright Unitarians. This brings me to a fourth, and especially important, theme: *religious liberalism has more often been a destination than a starting point for American social activists*. This is especially well illustrated in the case of the abolitionists. The basis of the conventional historiographical link between the Second Great Awakening and abolition is the fact that most abolitionists were evangelical revivalists immediately before becoming abolitionists. Perhaps the quintessential evangelical abolitionist was Theodore Dwight Weld. He was converted under the ministry of Charles Grandison Finney, organized the "Lane rebels" who abandoned Lane Seminary for Oberlin because the latter was more open to abolition, and personally trained the "Seventy" abolitionist lecturers who spread anti-slavery sentiment throughout Ohio and the upstate New York. Historian Gilbert Barnes, the first major exponent of the evangelical interpretation of abolitionism, used an extended study of Weld's correspondence both to challenge the centrality of William Lloyd Garrison and to argue that "in leadership, in method, and in objective, [Finney's] Great Revival and the American Anti-Slavery Society . . . were one."¹⁹ Yet it was up to a subsequent biographer, Robert Abzug, to trace Weld's subsequent religious evolution. When Weld married the Quaker abolitionist Angelina Grimké in 1838, they refused to have any minister participate in

¹⁸ Rosemary Bray McNatt, "To Pray without Apology: Why Martin Luther King, Jr., Wasn't a Unitarian Universalist," *UU World*, November/December 2002.

¹⁹ Gilbert Hobbs Barnes, *The Antislavery Impulse, 1830-1844* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1964), p. 107.

the ceremony. By 1843 Weld was telling his fellow abolitionist Lewis Tappan that he believed all church structures interfered with the individual's relationship with God. When he founded the Eagleswood School, his inclusion of prominent transcendentalists Elizabeth Peabody and William Henry Channing on the faculty did not dissuade Henry and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Gerrit Smith, and other ex-Finneyites from enrolling their children. After the Civil War Weld moved to Boston and was a cofounder of a Unitarian congregation that "exact[ed] no sectarian or theological test of membership, and [strove] for no dead uniformity of speculative belief, as a means of obtaining that living unity with God, which first of all we should seek."²⁰

A similar story could be told of Frederick Douglass, who began as a Methodist but sounded like a religious humanist by 1870, when he told an audience celebrating the Fifteenth Amendment that "I want to express my love to God and gratitude to God, by thanking those faithful men and women, who have devoted the great energies of their souls to the welfare of mankind. It is only through such men and such women that I can get any glimpses of God anywhere."²¹ Indeed, it could be told of virtually every major evangelical abolitionist except Lewis Tappan, who ironically enough began his reform career as a member of William Ellery Channing's congregation and the founding secretary of the American Unitarian Association. The ubiquitous abolitionist story line recurs in the biographies of at least a few subsequent activists. B. Fay Mills, for example, began as perhaps the most "evangelical" of the social gospelers. He successfully led a famous revival in Cincinnati, and subsequently made his mark by integrating the content of the social gospel with the style of the revivals. Yet within a few years of embracing the social gospel, he switched denominational allegiances to become pastor of First Unitarian in Oakland—a fact that is glossed over in most histories of the social gospel. (Lest I be guilty of my own glossing, I should admit that Mills eventually returned to Presbyterianism.)²²

When historians "explain" social movements by describing the original religious commitments of their leaders, they perpetuate the notion that the causal relationship between religion and social change runs in just one direction. Religion—and perhaps only certain especially fervent sorts of religion—causes social change, never the other way around. In the hands of at least some interpreters, this view is accompanied by a scolding admonition that activists who neglect their religious sources will eventually run out of activist fervor. The well will run dry. I believe that this is a terribly dangerous error. All of us, to be sure, should take care not to let our wells run dry, but religious social activists have *two* wells. We can draw sustenance from both our religious traditions and our present activist commitments, and each has the potential to nurture and sustain the other. Indeed, I have chosen *Prophetic Encounters* as the tentative title for my book because I want to accent the fundamentally religious character of the many encounters that take place within movements for social change. Ultimate reality—what I would call God—is revealed when an abolitionist encounters the humanity of a fugitive slave, or when a Northern

²⁰ Robert H. Abzug, *Passionate Liberator: Theodore Dwight Weld and the Dilemma of Reform* (New York: Oxford, 1980), pp. 196, 240, 263, 292. It is telling that Abzug is one of the harshest critics of Gilbert Barnes, faulting him for "making a very complicated man into an unbelievable, two-dimensional Christian hero." Another biography which traces the evolution of a once evangelical reformer is Lawrence B. Goodheart, *Abolitionist, Actuary, Atheist: Elizur Wright and the Reform Impulse* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1990).

²¹ Douglass, "A Reform Absolutely Complete," 9 April 1870, in *Papers*, ser. 1, 4:264.

²² Jean Miller Schmidt, *Souls or the Social Order: The Two-Party System in American Protestantism* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Carlson Publishing, 1991), pp. 97-98; Martin E. Marty, *Modern American Religion: The Irony of It All, 1893-1919* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 214-15.

white joins the march on Selma, or when an impoverished sharecropper is able to declare that “Black is Beautiful!” And I suspect that the reason activists gravitate toward religious liberalism is that religious liberalism is more willing than other traditions to affirm the religious character of these experiences.

Still, I must admit that if liberal religion were *always* the last stage of the activist’s evolution, it would not deserve a central place in the story of the religious left. But for some activists, it is much more than a final stage, and this brings me to my fifth and final theme: *for many religious activists, liberal religion has served as a lifelong companion*, walking with them through many stages of spiritual development. This theme may be best illustrated in the story of Adin Ballou, perhaps the original “Unitarian Universalist” radical, since his nineteenth-century career featured extended affiliation with both the Unitarian and Universalist denominations. Ballou was not a lifelong liberal, but he came to Universalism early in adulthood, after a very brief affiliation with the revivalist Christian Connection. He soon aligned himself with the “restorationist” wing of Universalists, in part because he could not square his distant cousin Hosea Ballou’s theology of instantaneous universal salvation with his awareness of radical social evil. Even among restorationists, however, Ballou’s fervent abolitionism and pacifism proved controversial, and he soon began espousing what he called “Practical Christianity”: the position that Christianity should be defined not by doctrines but by practical (and socially radical morality). “Our creed is the New Testament,” Ballou declared in the “Standard” he composed for this nascent movement. “Our religion is love. Our only law is the will of God. Our grand object is the restoration of man, especially the most fallen and friendless. Our immediate concern is the promotion of useful knowledge, moral improvement, and Christian perfection.”²³ Within a few years, Ballou and his friends had formed a socialist community to contain the “new wine” extracted from the “fresh and hitherto unknown species of grape” they had gathered “from the primitive Christian vintage.” From 1841 to 1856 Hopedale was among the most stable and prosperous of a farflung network of communities seeking to realize the Kingdom of God on earth. The Hopedalers provided the most significant base of support for the radically pacifist New England Non-Resistance Society, and also contributed significantly to the abolitionist and temperance movements. In keeping with the community’s doctrinal openness, moreover, Ballou publicized both his own theology and several alternatives in the pages of the community’s newspaper. By the 1850s, both Ballou and many other Hopedalers had embraced the new religious ideas of the spiritualist movement, but even then he insisted on presenting divergent viewpoints in the community newspaper. In 1852, for example, Ballou’s glowing account of a spiritualist convention ran alongside an article by his close ministerial colleague William Fish, who questioned whether spiritualism’s “direct and easy way to faith” might distract from the reformer’s more demanding “consecration of ourselves to Religion and Humanity.”²⁴ By preserving theological diversity within his community, Ballou created one of the rare spaces for open dialogue between spiritualism and liberal Christianity.

Through all these changes, moreover, Ballou retained both his Universalist sensibilities and the status as a Unitarian minister he had obtained after his reform activities had alienated him from his early Universalist parish. Indeed, in the 1850s Hopedale did not so much dissolve as morph into a residential neighborhood with an especially activist Unitarian congregation. In part because of the radical influences of such ministers as Theodore Parker and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, liberal religion had grown

²³ “Standard of Practical Christianity,” in Ballou, *History*, pp. 3-8.

²⁴ William H. Fish on “The Spirits—The Side of Doubt,” *Practical Christian* 13/8 (August 14, 1852): 30.

increasingly committed to social justice during the Hopedale years, and Unitarianism was thus able to reabsorb the best gifts of its rebellious children. Much the same thing would happen for John Haynes Holmes during World War I: though denominational opposition to his pacifism led him to create the nondenominational Community Church of New York, by World War II, Unitarianism had made peace with pacifism and was honoring the Community Church movement as one of its most promising initiatives.

To sum up: religious liberalism has influenced social change movements out of proportion to the number of religious liberals because, *first*, religious liberalism has been able to place social change at the center rather than the periphery of its theology; *second*, liberal institutions have provided support for even the most anti-institutional of radicals; *third*, individual religious liberals have been willing to work as allies of oppressed groups and alongside much more orthodox activists; *fourth*, religious liberalism has offered a welcoming home to those pilgrims whose faith has been transformed by activism; and fifth, liberal traditions have been supple enough to accommodate even those activists whose faith journeys have never quite reached a final destination.

I do not have time to develop this thought fully, but it may be that even the “half-truths” with which I began point to distinctive contributions that liberals can make, and have made, to radical social movements. If liberals lack fervor, for example, we may be able to balance the intense emotionalism of other activists with sober analysis and careful attention to detail. If we are overly optimistic about “the world,” we may be better positioned to forge unlikely alliances with mainstream American culture. Our tendency toward individualism may serve as a reminder that changed institutions can do little if hearts are not also changed. And even our professional class privileges can be turned to the greater good, so long as we remain open to the leadership and indeed inspiration of less privileged allies.

But it is time now to invite your insights. Does my framework make sense, and if so, how would you flesh out the story?