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THE DECLINE OF THE UNIVERSALISTS: BIG TO SMALL OR SMALL TO SMALLER?

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ABSTRACT. A large literature suggests that the liberal Universalist religious denomination was quite large in membership in the 19th Century but then by 1900, for a variety of reasons, experienced a dramatic decline in membership. Since contemporary research points to the membership difficulties of 20th Century liberal religious denominations, the Universalists in their large size in the 19th Century seem to suggest a historical anomaly. I argue in this paper that the Universalists were never a large denomination by almost any standard and that their most fundamental problem in the 19th century was a plethora of small societies that had difficulty in sustaining themselves. Rather than going from Big to Small, the Universalists went from Small to Smaller.

Religious denominations that are usually considered relatively liberal in the United States such as the United Methodists, Disciples of Christ, and the Congregationalists have lost membership, either relatively or absolutely for several decades (Finke and Stark 1992, 248). Indeed, as these denominations have become ever more liberal, their membership roles have become ever smaller. In contrast, a number of denominations that are usually considered conservative have shown striking positive growth rates. Finke and Stark (2002) provide multiple specific interpretations of this pattern while emphasizing overall the difficulties of liberal denominations in attracting members who believe they are gaining more benefits than sustaining costs by their membership.

For many, these findings will seem counter intuitive. Various versions of secularization theory (Warner 1993) have argued that the process of economic growth, urbanization, and industrialization should be associated with an increased indifference to religious affiliation, but, if religions grow, they should be found most often in liberal denominations that try to reconcile science and intellectual discovery with faith-based doctrines.

Most attention to the decline of liberal religion in the United States has focused on the period since World War II. I would like to move the discussion back in time by analyzing the decline of the liberal Universalist Church of America that started clearly in the late 1800s and picked up steam in the early 20th Century. In the first half of the 19th Century, the Universalists grew rapidly (according to almost all accounts).

During the 19th Century, the Universalists were arguably among the most liberal religious denomination in the United States that aggressively proselytized among the general American population (Marini 1982). Unlike most major religious denominations, they had few organized roots in European society. The Unitarians, with whom they eventually merged in 1961, were also liberal, but much less evangelical, more indebted intellectually to European origins, and more selectively upper middle class.

This paper focuses on the membership decline of the Universalists in New York State, their most important state numerically except for Massachusetts.¹ One data source is the abundant state census reports that New York produced on its economic, social, and religious characteristics for its approximately 900 towns or subunits of counties (Middleton 1905). Most previous comparative research on religion has focused on county units that probably approximate only partially the day-to-day functional communities in which people lived (Finke, Guest, and Stark 1996; Land, Deane, and Blau 1991). Importantly, I also have annual

Universalists denomination reports on their societies, starting in 1836 and continuing until 1936.² The reports indicate crucial characteristics of religious societies such as their spatial location, membership numbers, date of founding, presence of a minister, and frequency of religious services. Some related data are also available to me in a careful, thoughtful thesis in theology on the decline of Universalists in New York State (Woodman, 1954).

The underlying interest is testing various sociological theories of why this liberal denomination declined. The paper has three major empirical sections. In the first, I investigate the actual numerical decline of the Universalists in the 19th and early 20th Century, focusing on its size. Was this a denomination that actually suffered dramatic losses from a once important role among American religions? In the second section, I view the life histories of Universalist societies that were formed at various time points. Denominational growth and decline may occur from a variety of patterns of mortality among already existing churches or the failure to found new churches. What combinations of institutional deaths and births produced the decline of the Universalists? In the third, I investigate the characteristics of communities and societies that predicted their mortality in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries.

THE PRECARIOUSNESS OF LIBERAL RELIGION

In Christianity, the idea of religious universalism was discussed as early as the first few centuries after the death of Jesus, typically referring to the view that salvation is universal, occurring to all humans regardless of background and social characteristics (Bumbaugh 2001). In the United States, the Universalist denomination gradually emerged in the late 1700s in the Northeast, especially New England. The two key founders were John Murray (Cassara 1991) and Hosea Ballou (1902) who both preached from a Christian perspective that God loved all humans and was beneficent enough to promise universal salvation.

Universalism might be described as Calvinism stood on its head because, while agreeing with the Calvinists on the idea of one universal force or God, it rejected the idea that all humans were necessarily sinful and were selectively (almost arbitrarily) condemned to Hell (Bressler 2001, Williams 2002), a viewpoint that put them at odds with most traditional Christian views in the 19th Century. Adherents were sometimes called the “no Hellers” because they rejected the notion that a literal domain of endless punishment existed. In addition, the idea that all individuals in a socially and morally diverse world could be saved seemed to strike at the notion of many Christians that one had to live within a fairly circumscribed moral universe that coincided with their beliefs.

Murray was a Trinitarian Christian, but, as the denomination expanded, a

unitarian perspective dominated within a theology that emphasized the teachings of Jesus that focused on the reconciliation of humans with each other in a pattern of mutual love. The central early statement of Universalist faith, the Winchester Profession of 1803 (Miller 1979), emphasized identity with the teachings of Jesus as broadly defined while also stating explicitly an “escape clause” to the effect that one could be a Universalist without subscribing fully to the doctrine. Most Trinitarian Christians viewed the Universalists in an antagonistic manner (Cross 1950).

The historical Universalist denomination embodied a number of characteristics that Adams (1976) argues defines “liberal” religion: a belief that revelation and truth are important but not immutably fixed, a willingness to discuss and tolerate different versions of the truth, a belief in a just and open world community, and an optimism about the potential of the human community. Liberal views about religion are virtually omnipresent in societies that have undergone sustained economic development in the past 200 years, although they seem to be accepted in a highly selective manner by community and individual.

As Finke and Stark imply (2002), some of the characteristics of liberal religion may produce problems in sustaining large congregations. As they point out, many individuals join churches because they believe that the benefits are greater than the costs. However, liberal churches suffer because they cannot generally offer the benefits that many individuals want: the certainty of eternal life by following specific precepts, a formalized code of acceptable theological beliefs, and a clear road plan of how to behave morally in many social situations. In addition, even a cursory reading of world history suggests to many individuals that the liberal goal of a just and open world community requires tremendous investment of human effort with, to date, little payoff.

Given the obvious difficulties of building a large liberal religious basis, I have been amazed and impressed to read that the Universalist denomination was once quite large in the 19th Century, especially given the much smaller population of the United States. By the mid to late 1800s, the Universalists reportedly had 600,000 to 800,000 members and were allegedly the sixth largest denomination in the United States (Cassara 1971, 39; Gilbert 1992; Kronholm 2010; Owen-Towle 1993; Walker 2008).³ After 1880, the conventional wisdom holds, a rapid decline in membership set in so that only a few thousand members were left in the period after World War I.⁴

The U.S. residential population was only about 50 million in 1880, roughly one-sixth of the contemporary US population. Projecting the alleged 1880 pattern to the contemporary United States would lead to a total number of Universalists of approximately 4.8 million (6 X 800,000). This can be contrasted with the 2009 official membership total for the merged Unitarian Universalist Association

(2011) which is about 165,000. According to Wikipedia (2011 a, b), the United Church of Christ, the descendant of the Congregational Church reports these days a membership of approximately 1.1 million, and the United Methodist Church (the largest Protestant denomination) indicates membership in the United States of approximately 8.0 million.

The reported membership figures for the Universalists in the 19th century are indeed impressive, if true. As indicated in various writings, these membership figures would suggest a prominent role for liberal religion in the first decades of the American Republic. However, my question is whether the cited figures were true. It seems to me that the best sources of denominational strength are probably the figures of the denomination and the reports of the U.S. Census Bureau which regularly collected data on religious “bodies” until 1936.

New York State, the primary site of this study, witnessed the formation of its initial Universalist societies in the first decade of the 19th Century, especially in the area around Utica. The possibility of rapid denominational growth became especially evident around 1825 with the opening of the Erie Canal which led to the economic development and settlement of much of New York State. During the first part of the 19th Century, the western part of New York State was described as the “Burned-over District”, mainly because the territory had been “burned-over” by the flames of several competing religious movements (Cross 1950).

Numerous social explanations of the decline have been provided. In the literature, I identify three major types of arguments.⁵

Perhaps the most common one seems to be that the Universalists were no longer needed because they had “won”. At one time, the Universalists had been one of the very few torchbearers for religious liberalism. But, during the Universalist decline, religious liberalism had spread allegedly to other Protestant denominations (Cassara 1971, 39; Howe 1993,95; O’Neill 2009; Potter 2010; Woodman, 1954, 53-54). One conceptual issue that seems unclear to me is the social mechanism by which the Universalists suffered so drastically from the spread of religious liberalism (why would Universalist families especially quit their liberal denomination for another?), although some interpreters point out the denomination eventually moved “left” from a unitarian Christianity to a sympathy to Humanism. Some of the Universalists may, admittedly, have found their denomination to be too religiously “left”.⁶ Taking a somewhat unique position on the “winner” issue, Bumbaugh (2000, 175) argues that the Universalist decline was heavily related to the failure of rural migrants to big cities to see the need for new Universalist churches since their needs for liberal Christianity were being met by conventional denominations.

Another major argument (Bumbaugh 2000, 175; Howe 1993, 95) is that the Universalists suffered heavily from the migration of individuals from rural areas to cities so that many small town churches lost their potential members. On the surface, this would seem to be a rather incomplete explanation of Universalist decline since other Protestant denominations must have experienced the same problems. However, this might have been an especially serious problem for the Universalists because they were alleged to be unusually important in rural and small town communities (Cassara 1971, 5; Williams 2002, x).⁷

A related “rural” factor in denominational decline may have been the development of faster transportation such as the automobile that permitted individuals to commute on Sundays from peripheral rural areas to churches in large cities (Husted 1952).

In his analysis, Woodman (1954, 52) argues that the New York decline was evident in both large and small communities. He suggests that urban Universalist churches often had survival problems too. For instance, their buildings were often too spacious for the congregational size, making them apparently unattractive for potential new members who were interested in dynamic, “busy” organizations. In addition, Woodman (1954) argues that many urban neighborhoods were losing the populations that had supported nearby Universalist churches.

A third major argument focuses on the weak central organizational structure of the Universalist denomination (Bumbaugh 2000, 175; Howe 1993, 95; Woodman 1954, 19-39) that led the denomination to provide temporally extended but often limited help for individual churches in times of need. Underlying the Universalist weak denominational succor may have been a suspicion of centralized authority. The denomination attracted many members who emphasized their personal wisdom in understanding the world around them rather than the wisdom of established institutions. In addition, the denomination had a history of struggling in the 19th Century against the existence of a state church (the Congregationalists) in Massachusetts, one of their areas of greatest numerical strength.

Various manifestations of the weak organizational structure were evident. Through much of the 19th Century, the denomination was primarily organized in “regional” associations, with a large number in individual states. For instance, New York at one point had about 24 regional associations, although a state convention had formed in 1825. In addition, the state did not approve a professional executive until 1904, and organized efforts to produce a Sunday school curriculum for the state only began in 1908 (Husted 1952, 39).

One possible manifestation of organizational difficulties was a shortage of

ministers (Woodman 1954, 45-49). An organized state theological education was implemented only in 1856, and records of the churches in New York state indicate that many ministerial positions were unfilled while some ministers served multiple churches. The ministerial shortage might be perceived as due to organizational failures, but it could also be due to other factors such as a lack of interest among denominational supporters in becoming ministers.

However, one needs to be careful in casually attributing the decline of the Universalists to organizational problems. After all, other decentralized Protestant denominations such as the Baptists and Congregationalists did not suffer the same declines. In addition, the state conventions did provide financial resources in the early 20th Century to local groups that were experiencing difficulties in survival. Woodman (1954) notes that many societies in New York State received aid from the state convention.

One potentially very serious organizational problem might be mentioned, namely an inability to form new congregations as the denomination matured in the late 19th Century. Writers on the Universalist decline seem to emphasize the problem as occurring demographically due to the low survival of existing Universalist congregations. For instance, Howe (1993, 94-95) suggests several problems that affected the survival of existing societies, but never mentions how many new societies were being formed. The alternative to the death explanation, of course, is that the decline could have occurred heavily because new congregations were not being created, a possibility suggested by Bumbaugh (2000, 175) and emphasized by Woodman (1954) in his analysis of the New York State Universalists. Any organizational population must change through some combination of births and deaths.

While many references to the organizational problems of the Universalists are evident, another literature exists that celebrates the successful evangelical orientation of the denomination throughout its history. A favorite quote among those those with sympathy to the Universalists comes from Lewis B. Fisher, Dean of the Ryder Divinity School, who wrote in 1921 that "Universalists are often asked to tell where they stand. The only true answer to give to this question is that we do not stand at all; we move." (Cassara 1971, 223).

During the early part of the 19th Century, it is clear that a few Universalist ministers such as Stephen R. Smith and Nathaniel Stacy spent extensive efforts in organizing new congregations in the State, albeit without any extensive support from a centralized bureaucracy (Smith 1843; Stacy 1850). In his history of the Universalists, Buehrens (2011) argues that the denomination often ignored Fisher's quote. He argues that the denomination had a number of campaigns to increase membership dramatically, but most involved little real fund raising and tangible activity. The campaigns were not successful and were

abandoned for other pursuits.

My approach to analyzing the decline of the Universalists in New York State involves two major pieces of data analysis. First, I focus on what I call the Big to Small issue, asking whether the denomination actually experienced the dramatic decline in support that is evident in the portrayal of a Golden Period in terms of churches and membership. Second, I focus on the characteristics of local congregations and their communities that were related to their failure to survive. Three sets of hypotheses will be tested: (1) What I call the congregation “structural” characteristics such as their size and resources were conducive to failure; (2) Community characteristics such as their rurality were associated with failure, (3) The availability of worship in alternate denomination encouraged the abandonment of Universalist congregations.

BIG TO SMALL?

Counting denominational membership and number of churches is difficult. Denominations have varying criteria for membership, including age and commitment to specific creeds. Furthermore, the definition of a church may be somewhat in the eye of the beholder. Record keepers may not know about the existence of various churches, and the denominations may vary in the degree to which careful records are maintained.

In the United States, the historical demographic record of denominations is heavily based on records of the denomination and on census enumerations (Stark 1992). The US government's census agency collected periodic statistics on religious denominations starting with the 1850 census. There were subsequent enumerations in 1860, 1870, 1890, 1906, 1916, 1926, and 1936. New York State's government also conducted a religious census in 1845, 1855, 1865, and 1875 as part of its population enumeration (Secretary of States 1846, 1857, 1867, 1877). The census reports frequently mention that Universalist enumeration did not always match closely the numbers that its field enumerators reported.

Historically, the Universalist denomination was organized by societies or parishes which were not necessarily equivalent to physical churches. From reading the descriptive reports of early Universalist leaders, it is clear that many “societies” were very small in attendance, only met periodically, and used a variety of meeting sites, including those that had more of a public than sacred character.

Annual statistics of the denomination were reported in the Universalist Register (later called the Universalist Yearbook), starting in 1836. The contents of the Registers vary some, but typically reported the name of societies, families in the

parish, and ministers. The basic data were submitted to the Register by representatives of individual societies, and it is clear that reporting was poor for many of the societies. The Registers are filled with references to the difficulties the denomination had in collecting accurate statistics, and one should accept precise numbers for any years with a definite grain of salt. Nevertheless, it is clear that the denomination was sympathetic to the collection of statistics; the records were probably better than most other major denominations. Analysis of the statistics does show some useful, interesting patterns.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Using data from the Universalist Register and census reports, I have shown in Figure 1 the historical record between 1836 and 1936 of number of churches or societies for the Universalists. There are three sets of data:(1) the number of societies reported for the nation in the Register, (2) the number of societies reported for New York State in the Register, and (3) the number of churches enumerated in New York State by various federal and state censuses.⁸ The Register data in the Figure are generally based on reports every five years in those ending with 0 and 5. The census data are based on the available federal and state enumerations.

I have also used the census data to show temporal patterns for number of churches or religious organizations for four selected denominations in New York State, Baptists, Congregationalists, (Dutch) Reformed, and Episcopal. Patterns for these denominations are interesting to compare with the Universalists because they were fellow products of the Protestant reformation, shared similar patterns of strength in the Northeastern United States, and were relatively important in U.S. history throughout the 1800s.

The data for the United States on total number of Universalist societies indicates a substantial “building up” process occurred before the Civil War. After the Civil War, a general decline occurred in the number of societies.

A substantial decline occurs in the first few years after the Civil War. The terrible destruction and mortality of the Civil War may have dampened the enthusiasm of some Universalists about their belief in the goodness and love of God.

Relative stability in total number of societies occurs in the late 1800s. However, this actually implies a relative pattern of decline since the U.S. population size was growing rapidly and the westward movement of the population should have provided many opportunities for the creation of new, sustained societies. The U.S. Population grew from 31.4 to 76.2 million between 1860 and 1900.

The 20th Century was marked by a steady pattern of absolute decline. In 1895, 1000 Universalist societies were listed in the Register, but this had fallen to 550 in 1936.

The New York data on societies in Figure 1 tend to mirror the national data, with less pronounced change. Especially noteworthy in New York state Register data are the pronounced decline during the Civil War and its immediate aftermath. The losses in Universalist societies after 1890 or 1900 in New York State were sizable. These declines were steady, forming a basically downward linear trend. In 1890, the Register listed 166 societies in the state, but only 62 in 1945.

The census data for Universalists also show the decline in numbers of societies that started in the late 1800s, although the decline is more continuous over time. A gap exists between the Register and census numbers at earlier points in time for New York that may indicate either poor enumeration by the census or the fact that many of the Universalist societies of the time were weakly established as churches in the eyes of the enumerators.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

I have also used the census data to show in Table 1 temporal patterns for number of churches or religious organizations for all churches, the Universalism and four selected denominations in New York State, Baptists, Congregationalists, (Dutch) Reformed, and Episcopal. Patterns for these denominations are interesting to compare with the Universalists because they were fellow products of the Protestant reformation, shared similar patterns of strength in the Northeastern United States, and were relatively important in U.S. history throughout the 1800s.

Table 1 shows a basically continuous increase in the number of all churches, with particular gains in the late 1800s and early 1900s, just as Universalist societies were beginning a sharp decline. In interpreting patterns, one should remember that the late 1800s brought a major period of immigration to the United States, especially by European Catholics and Jews.

A major message to be gleaned from Table 1 is the overall small size of the Universalist denomination compared to the others when we use census data to focus on New York State which next to Massachusetts was the heartland of Universalism. At no time point were the Universalist churches even a significant proportion, by almost any standard. In addition, growth or stability in strength is evident in the census data for the other denominations, although it is noteworthy that the Congregationalists and Reformed showed little change over time.

FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

Figure 2 shows temporal patterns of membership for the Universalists by families (using Register data) and by individual membership (using census data) during a shorter time span (1875-1936). Total membership is shown in logarithmic form to minimize the large differences between the national and state data.

While the first Universalist Register in 1836 provided data on membership in societies, so much missing data are evident that the total numbers probably have little substantive meaning. Annual data on family membership become available each year in 1872. By the late 1800s, data were also reported at various times for “members”, and, in general the number of “families” was fairly similar to the number of “members”.⁹

The reason for the rough equivalent of “families” and “members” is not entirely clear since one would expect families to have frequently more than one member in the denomination. However, children may represent families without adult membership, and the Universalists, as many other Protestant denominations of the general time period, were quite disproportionately female in membership, meaning that many families must have been represented only by individual women.¹⁰

The membership data (in Figure 2) suggest more stability for the Universalists than the society data in Figure 1. By the various measures, membership was relatively constant, even showing some growth, into the early 1900s. The data for the subsequent years, however, show a clear indication of decline. The Civil War, with its carnage and chaos, seemed to be associated with an unusual decline in the number of societies. World War I, with its millions of casualties and perceived pointlessness to many, was associated with a clear decline in membership.¹¹

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Universalist churches or societies were typically small in size. The Register data in Table 1 show the distribution of Universalist societies by family size in 1836, 1875, and 1900. In 1836, a large percentage of the societies did not have reports on the number of members, indicating that the numbers should be read with some caution. However, superficially it would seem that the 1836 figures may overstate the size of typical societies since it seems likely that the largest societies would have the most resources such as minister and administrators to report the figures.

As Table 2 shows, the percentages of societies with less than 40 families were: 1836, 45.3; 1875, 57.5; 1900, 39.3. The percentage of societies with at least 80 families reached as high as 25 percent in 1900, and, in 1875, the percentage was only 15.8 percent.

One might legitimately quarrel with some of these statistics since enumeration of churches and their membership has without question many problems. However, there seems to be little doubt that the Universalists, especially on the basis of the New York experience, could never have had the total membership of 600,000 to 800,000 that has been frequently cited. One is reluctant to pick exact numbers, but there seems to be little doubt that the membership of the Universalists was a small fraction of the frequently cited numbers. This should not be especially surprising, given what we know about the experience of most liberal churches. The fact is that large, growing membership numbers are difficult to sustain for many religiously liberal churches.

By comparing census reported membership figures with numbers of churches, one can quickly ascertain that during the time period at hand Universalist churches were typically small in comparison to other churches. Thus, for 1875, I have used the New York State census data to calculate the ratio of members to churches for each denomination. The rough measure of the number of members per church is: Dutch Reformed, 150; Episcopal, 140; Congregational, 120; Baptist, 115; Universalist, 84. Many of the Universalist churches must have been quite small, and suffered from problems that are common to small churches such as a shortage of funds to pay a minister and too many volunteer positions to fill relative to the number of willing members.¹²

BIRTHS AND DEATHS AMONG SOCIETIES

Absent migration, any population of individuals or organization must change through some combination of births and deaths. The temporal data above on New York state societies in Figures 1 and 2 suggest that Universalist societies may have been quite viable (stable over time) in the early 19th Century because the numbers remained relatively constant. But then, they presumably experienced problems of survival over time as interest in Universalism declined. However, we cannot ascertain this without investigating the actual births and deaths among societies. As I show, Universalist societies always had difficulties surviving, but varied greatly in the probability of forming in different time periods.

One technique of analyzing changes in a population is cohort analysis (Glenn 2005). A cohort consists of entities that have experienced the same initial event

in a time period. Most typically, sociologists refer to birth cohorts, consisting of individuals who were born in the same year. But a cohort may also be defined, as in this case, by the time period in which individual Universalist societies appeared. Typically, social scientists observe cohorts over time to determine what happens to them as they age and experience various temporal impacts.

In this paper, I have defined New York State Universalist society birth cohorts for 1800-24, 1825-49, 1850-74, 1875-99, and 1900-25. I will investigate the degree to which societies in each quarter century cohort survive over the successive 25 year time periods. My data are drawn primarily from Woodman's valuable 1954 thesis in which he used Universalist statistics from a variety of sources, although primarily from the Register, to determine whether societies existed in the various time periods above. The first time period of existence for a society determines its cohort or period of birth. When a society no longer appears in a time period, it is deceased or failed to survive.

Woodman (1954) does not distinguish the 1800-24 and 1825-49 time periods, but rather investigates all societies that appeared before 1850. From reading histories of the denomination, I discern that this important time period in the history of the denomination should be divided into two segments. After 1825, the building of the Erie Canal rapidly opened the state to development and settlement, and the number of available ministers to serve societies increased.

Using a variety of sources, I have categorized the pre-1850 societies by whether they first appeared before 1825. The Register gives dates of founding for societies in existence in each specific year. Another useful data base is a file of all Universalist societies in New York State that could be identified by Karen Dau, current historian of the New York State Convention of Universalists. Dau's information about these societies is often based on papers of legal incorporation, items in local newspapers, and reports in Universalist publication of the time. Other important sources of information about the formation of specific societies are sermons (Barry 1840), autobiographies (Smith 1843; Stacy 1850), and biographies (Sawyer 1852; Smith 1835).

My major problem with the data was determining whether the societies that formed before 1825 (easily identifiable from various sources) survived into the 1825-49 time period (not easily identifiable). Woodman's thesis and the Register (started in 1836) indicated survival in later time periods. As a result, I have estimated the 1825-49 survival rate for the earliest cohort (born 1800-24) by fitting a regression line for the five time points where I have observations. I will use the predicted value from this equation for this one cohort to make an estimate of survival for the sixth time period, 1825-49.¹³

FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

Each line in Figure 3 show the survival experience of societies for the different cohorts (defined by period of first formation). That is, each line represents the experience of a different cohort, defined by its time of formation. No line is shown for the 1925-49 cohort since there is only one data point (2 societies).

There are two characteristics of these lines that especially interest me. First, is the height of the line, showing the number of societies that were formed or existed in each time period. Second, is the slope of the line. All the lines slope downward, a logical necessity of the fact that the number of surviving societies will decline over time. The steeper the downward slope, the greater the difficulty of survival for societies in that cohort.

Note that almost all the lines slope downward in a steep manner, indicating that a general problem of the Universalist society was survival. As an example, of the 183 societies that appeared between 1850 and 1874, only 97 (53.0 percent) survived into the 1875 to 1899 period. Only 61 of the original 183 (33.3 percent) survived into the 1900 to 1924 period. Efforts to establish enduring Universalist societies were often unsuccessful.

The survival curves are generally consistent with most of our rudely crafted laws of survival for organizations, institutions, and individuals (Freeman, Carroll, and Hannan 1983). In the vast majority of survival studies, the “liability of newness” occurs, a pattern very evident in these data. What this means is that new observations (or those surviving only a short time) have high failure rates while long-term observations (or those surviving for a long time) have low failure rates. One can ascertain this by looking at the downward slope of the line between different points. The lines are especially steep in the first time period after founding. Reasons for the liability of newness are not well established. However, it undoubtedly relates partially to the unstable relationship of the observation to its environment. In the case of Universalist societies, one might anticipate that the founders would not necessarily guess well the probability of success for their venture. In addition, leaders of new societies might not have had the knowledge or resources to ensure their survival.

The time periods 1825-49 and 1850-74 represented both the positive heyday and what might be called the negative “low day” of the Universalist denomination. During both these periods, relatively large numbers of Universalist societies formed. However, both these cohorts also had low survival rates, as the number of surviving societies in subsequent time periods is much lower than the initial figures. Putting this pattern in the social/economic context of the time leads to the conclusion that the great expansion of development in New York State was followed by a great deal of success but also a great deal of failure. The denomination was able to maintain its overall

society numbers by continually creating new groups to replace the high failure rate of the old groups.

For a contrast, turn to the pre-1825 cohort. There were relatively small numbers of societies formed, but, once formed, these societies had a relatively good chance of survival. Perhaps, almost paradoxically, the slower development of New York State and the more rudimentary development of the Universalist denomination led to more caution in the formation of societies. Given their uncertainty on whether the venture might work, the initial potential organizers may have been unusually cautious in the efforts to establish enduring societies.

Why did the Universalist denomination decline strikingly in number of societies in the very late 1800s and early 1900s? The graph of cohort survival suggests a very serious problem in the lack of new societies. Especially after 1900, very few new societies formed. Since hardly any new societies were forming and some of the older societies were disappearing, the number of total societies underwent a noticeable decline. However, while the lack of survivorship was a problem after 1900, degree of survivorship was actually as high or higher as earlier in the 19th Century.

In summary, the “numbers” problem of the Universalist denomination can only be understood within the context of both births and deaths. In the golden age of Universalism, large numbers of new societies were being created, but large numbers were also disappearing. As the century waned, the Universalists suffered not so much from increased failure of existing societies as from inability to create new societies.

The lack of new societies after 1900 is especially puzzling because major changes in population distribution occurred in the American population. Of particular note was the trend toward suburbanization of population from urban concentrations, facilitated by the development of electric streetcars in the late 1800s and by the automobile after 1910 (Guest 1972).

Buehrens (2011) has argued that the symptoms of the Universalist failure to recruit included a lack of monetary donations to recruitment effort by individual churches and a willingness to abandon nation-wide campaigns if they did not meet immediate success. It is unclear whether these problems were simply symptoms of larger underlying problems such as a lack of demand for the Universalist message. But it was undoubtedly difficult to spread the message when few resources were being devoted to it.

UNDERSTANDING SURVIVAL

While much has been written about the “decline” of the Universalist church, I

know of no studies that have actually tested empirically some of the major hypotheses. Analysis of long time periods might be warranted, but I will focus on the societies that appear as active in the 1875 enumeration for New York of the Universalist denomination. Survival will be defined primarily as appearing 25 years later in the 1900 enumeration. While 126 “active” societies were enumerated by the Register in 1875, I have eliminated six because they lacked key data on the characteristics of the congregation. Of these 120 societies, 63.3 percent survived until 1900. My tables will also show patterns when survival is broadened to include a 50 year time period, to 1925, but my analysis will concentrate on the more compact quarter century. Of the 120, 44.2 percent survived until 1925.

The period 1875 to 1900 seems justifiable as a focus for analysis because it represented the beginning of significant church decline in numbers. Furthermore, for this time period I have what appear to be a good enumeration of society characteristics in the Register and a number of community characteristics from the New York State Census of 1875.

I have three sets of hypotheses to explain the failure of societies which I call the Institutional, the Environmental, and the Competition perspectives. The following sections assess the importance of each in understanding survival of Universalist societies.

INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

(1) By Institutional Development, I refer to the underlying resources (economic, ministerial, numerical) of societies to ensure their survival. My unsurprising hypothesis is that Institutional Development facilitated survival. As noted earlier, the Universalist denomination had minimal centralized authority, forcing individual congregations to survive on their own.

Four specific characteristics of societies will be tested: their size in terms of membership, the presence of a Sunday School program, the presence of a full time minister, and the age or length of time since society formation. The possible importance of size should be evident from our previous discussion that showed many Universalist societies were quite small in size. Furthermore, I have also discussed the liability of newness. Little discussion should also be necessary of the idea that full time ministries would generally provide the energy to staff programs for the members and relieve some members of volunteer responsibilities. Discussions of the denomination in the 1800s frequently mention difficulties in finding enough ministers, partly because Universalist theological education at the post-high school level was quite limited, especially before the end of the 19th Century (Woodman 1954).¹⁴

More needs to be written about the development of church school programs for youth, but the movement primarily seemed to occur in the 1800s as children increasingly occupied different social, educational, and occupational roles than adults (Perry 1988). The Sunday School movement was probably associated, not coincidentally, with a movement toward higher levels of formal non-religious education, and children probably entered the active workforce at older ages than previously (Guest and Tolnay 1983).

All individual churches and societies depend on the recruitment of new members, and I presume that societies with long-lasting Sunday School programs would be positioned to draw more new members than other societies. The Universalist Registers indicate that societies in New York introduced church school education at widely varying dates, with a particular development in the years before and around the Civil War. Some apparently had no church school program even in 1875.

The data on Institutional Development are also drawn from the 1875 enumeration of societies, according to the Register. The enumeration shows the reported number of families in the parish, the presence of a full time, part time, or no minister, the presence of a church school program with date of founding, and the year that the society formed.

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

In Table 3, I have shown the major patterns in the data by cross classifying Institutional characteristics of the societies, defined categorically, with their survival percentages. To measure the association in the table, I have used Gamma, a statistic that varies between 0 and 1 in absolute size, with 1 being a perfect relationship. Gamma also varies in sign (+ or -), depending on whether the variables change positively or negatively in relationship to each other (Davis 1971).

By virtually any standard, the relationship between the institutional characteristics and survival are quite strong. The data are all consistent with the hypotheses.

The strongest relationships are found for family memberships and the presence of a minister. While number of families is associated in a regular linear pattern with survival, there does seem to be a threshold size that is key to survival. Only about half of the societies with 20-39 families survived over the 25 years while over 80 percent survived if they had 40-59 families. Survival was virtually assured if the society had at least 60 units. Patterns are quite striking also for the presence of a minister. Note that many of the societies lacked ministerial support, and these societies experienced a high probability of failure.

By most social science standards, survival was also related to the long-term existence of a Sunday School and to a long-time existence of the society itself. Societies without Sunday Schools and with recent formation were especially like to fail.

Not surprisingly, the Institutional characteristics tend to be correlated, and it is possible that some of the four characteristics might not predict survival when other characteristics are statistically controlled. Unfortunately, the small sample size and the high inter correlations make it difficult to sort out the partial relationships. Using various forms of multivariate logistic regression, I found that the strongest claims could be made for the importance of size, minister's presence, and period of formation.

ENVIRONMENTAL INFLUENCES

(2) Previous research suggests clearly that the survival and growth of churches is affected by their general social and economic environments (Guest 1989). These factors have played an important role in previous discussion of the problems of the Universalist church. For this paper, I focus on three specific indicators of a society's environment: the urban character of the surrounding community, the material prosperity of the surrounding community as indicated by the average monetary value of housing, and the degree to which community residents had New England heritages. These indicators do not exhaust the possible community characteristics that might have affected Universalist churches during this time period, but they were some of the major ones that are suggested by previous theorizing and research.

Fortunately, the New York State census of 1875 provides substantial information by town on communal characteristics. Like the New England states, New York was heavily organized geographically by townships which usually had residential populations of a few hundred to a few thousand. Typically, towns were formed in the colonial history so that small residential centers of population formed their nuclei. Often farmers would live in the central settlement and then till the nearby land during the day. In 1875, the state had over 900 towns. In general, towns were probably better indicators of the social and economic environment of the population than the larger, more commonly used counties. In fact, a substantial share of the Universalist societies took on the name of the surrounding town. I have determined for each of the 120 societies its town or city.

Like much of America, the small, often agricultural communities in New York State were frequently in population decline, and the growth of large urban centers was quite evident in population statistics. As previously pointed out,

some have argued that rural and small town Universalist societies especially faced problems of survival as persons moved to cities and as improvements in transportation permitted individuals in rural and small town areas on the periphery of cities to travel there for church services. Thus, the size of a society's town might be an important correlate of its survival potential.

I also believe that the degree of material prosperity of areas may have affected the life chances of societies. In materially prosperous areas, residents would have the financial resources to support a society budget. Furthermore, when people are prosperous, it seems likely that they would be especially attuned to the Universalist religious belief that their God of love would take care of the human population.

Another Environmental factor of some importance may be the town's New England heritage. In the late 18th Century, the Universalist denomination emerged in New England, primarily along the Atlantic seaboard and in the Connecticut River Valley (Hughes 1997). As they moved west, many of the New England-origin populations were probably good breeding grounds for the development of Universalist societies, and their presence in towns may have helped them survive. New Englanders, due to their cultural background, may have had an unusual incentive to preserve Universalist societies, just as contemporary American ethnic groups may be especially attuned to maintaining vestiges of their origins. In a previous paper, I found that one of the best predictor of the presence of a Universalist church in the period 1845-65 was a high percentage of residents born in New England (Guest 2010).

TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

The relationships between community characteristics and survival are shown in Table 4. The degree of urbanization was measured by establishing separate categories for census recognized cities and villages, which had different legal statuses, with the cities always being larger. I then somewhat arbitrarily divided all the other towns of the societies by whether they had at least 4000 residents. This was a somewhat arbitrary decision, but an inspection of the cases suggested that there was a kind of threshold value of society survival at about 4000 population. Systematic data on overall income levels for towns in 1875 were not reported in the census. However, it is possible to categorize communities by the value of houses, a characteristic that is undoubtedly an excellent measure of wealth and is probably well correlated with income levels. The data also suggested that housing value was at least moderately correlated positively with urbanization levels. Finally, I have categorized the communities by the percentage of the population born in the New England states.

The Environmental characteristics tend to have somewhat smaller relationships

(as measured by Gamma) with society survival than the Institutional characteristics. Furthermore, none of the three Environmental characteristics stands out as a correlate relate to the others.

The strongest relationship with survival occurs for dwelling value, with survivor ship increasing regularly with value. Towns with the most valuable properties clearly had a quite high probability of surviving, while societies in the lowest value towns only had approximately a 50-50 chance.

Urbanization also was related generally positive to survival but the biggest difference is between the most rural communities and all the others. Nevertheless, consistent with previous theorizing, rurality did seem to be a clear detriment to the survival of Universalist societies.

Finally, the patterns for New England origins are contrary, somewhat surprisingly, to the hypothesis, with the lowest rates of survival found in the towns with the strongest New England influence. More on this below.

As might be anticipated, the Environmental characteristics are related to the Institutional characteristics. For instance, not surprisingly, the most rural places had typically the smallest societies. The small sample size makes it difficult to draw clear statistical conclusions, but the effects of the Environmental characteristics were clearly quite small when the Institutional characteristics such as number of families and presence of a minister are controlled. For instance, a multivariate analysis showed that much of the tendency for the most rural societies to have the lowest rates of survival was due to the small sizes of the congregations.

Interestingly, much of the tendency for the most-New English areas to have low survivor ship seemed to be due to the fact that these areas had some of the smallest congregations. Remember that by the late 1800s, large numbers of immigrants were arriving from abroad in the large cities, probably with limited interest in the Universalist denomination. The New Englanders, of course, brought other religions such as pro-Calvinist Congregationalism to small townships in New York. I surmise that the presence of New Englanders was sufficient to create Universalist societies, but this did not mean that the presence of New Englanders necessarily created large Universalist societies.

ALTERNATIVE CHOICES

As others have noted, the late 19th Century involved a movement among several religious denominations away from the traditional Calvinist perspective that Universalists found so repugnant. The alternative choices to Calvinist theology grew. The “social gospel” also developed in a number of

denominations, emphasizing the importance of serving the needs of the marginalized and powerless in societies, a perspective that had some affinity with liberal Universalist theology.

One thesis, then, is that the Universalists declined because the same theological ideas were accessible in other denominations. As far as I can tell, no one has hypothesized which denominations would be especially attractive to “fallen” Universalists, but one might speculate affirmatively on such groups as the Methodists who had rejected Calvinism and placed some emphasis on the ability of all to choose salvation. Another possibility might be the Congregationalists who had been in the religious forefront of the struggle against slavery and shared similar New England origins.

Given this thesis, one might predict that Universalist decline was especially likely either when specific denominations were present or when a large number of alternate religious opportunities existed.

As far as I know, no actual evidence exists on changes during the time period of this study in the self-perceptions of Universalists about their theology relative to other groups. On the basis of analysis of writings by leading Universalists, Bressler (2001) argues that the denomination in the late 1800s was moving toward a more “conservative” theology.

A competing hypothesis is that the presence of other denominations in a community might actually increase the survivorship of Universalist societies. The Universalists, in fact, did have a somewhat distinctive theological position that, in my opinion, never really captured the arguments of mainstream Protestant denominations. Here, I think of the Universalist unitarian conception of Jesus as divine, the continuing effort to appreciate (not just tolerate) the religious ideas of non-European cultures, and a belief that one is “saved” simply by being a good human being. I cannot think of one numerically significant Protestant denomination that had adopted any two of these ideas by the late 1800s.

In their theoretical work on religious commitment, Finke and Stark (1988) suggest that the presence of several religious denominations may increase overall religious affiliation because individuals can find religious choices that suit their interests relative to others. Finke, Guest, and Stark (1996) have tested this theory for towns in New York. Such a position implies that the Universalists might actually be most likely to survive when they could define themselves clearly in relationship to several other denominations.

While the 1875 state census collected information on the presence of specific denominational churches in all New York towns, the data were only tabulated

by county, in my opinion, too large a geographic unit to operationalize well the presence of alternative opportunities. However, the 1865 state census did tabulate denominational church data by town, providing a useful but perhaps slightly flawed measure of alternative opportunities for Universalist societies between 1875 and 1900. Obviously, to the extent that churches disappeared after 1865 or were created anew, our measure of denominational strengths in various towns should be flawed. Nevertheless, barring the unlikely complete reorganization of denominations between 1865 and 1875, it seems likely that the presence of specific denominations in 1865 should be associated to some degree with the subsequent failure of Universalist societies if the denomination was declining because adherents were moving to other churches with a similar theology.¹⁵

I would also like to suggest one other hypothesis about alternate opportunities. While most communities had only one Universalist society (at most), there were some cases of multiple Universalist societies in potential competition to each other. This is especially true if one extends the geographic frame to counties which I believe to be less-than-satisfactory measures of the environments of most New Yorkers in the 19th Century. Nevertheless, it is possible that Universalist societies having some trouble in sustaining themselves may have been willing to merge or even fail when other alternative Universalist opportunities were nearby in the same county. I thus hypothesize that the 1875 presence of solo Universalist societies in a county should be most strongly related to survival.

TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE

Table 5 shows the relationship of the presence of nine other “alternative” denominations in relationship to the survival of Universalist societies. The denominations are the nine largest Protestant groups in New York State in 1865 except for the Universalists. In general, the relationships between the presence of another denomination and the survival of Universalist societies is quite negligible. In some cases, there seems to be a slight positive tendency for the presence of other denominations to be related positively to the survival of Universalist societies.

TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE

Table 6 shows the relationship of the number of alternative denominations to the survival of Universalist societies. A moderate positive relationships exists. The larger the number of other available denominations, the greater the survival of Universalist societies. This supports the hypothesis that the existence of other religious denominations actually enhanced the Universalist motivation for survival, but the Gamma coefficient is not statistically significant by

conventional standards.

One other specification of alternative opportunities is considered. In Table 6, I also show the relationship of the number of Universalist societies in the county in 1875 to the survival of individual Universalist societies. The pattern of relationships is erratic. Nevertheless, note that the greatest probability of survival is found when there was a solo society, and the lowest probability of survival was found where there were at least five societies. Extending the analysis to survival in 1825 shows a much more ambiguous pattern. The Gamma coefficients were not statistically significant.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Contrary to many reports, little specific evidence shows that the Universalists were a large denomination at any point in the 19th Century. While large Universalist societies did exist, the sad fact is that most of them were quite small in membership. This should not be surprising, given the general history of liberal religious denominations in the United States.

Evidence for the decline of the Universalists in the 20th century is clear cut. Trends in the 19th Century present a more ambiguous pattern. The Civil War and its aftermath represented something of a watershed in the denomination history, for noteworthy evidence of decline in number of societies is evident during this period. Actually, membership numbers indicate that the denomination was not in serious decline until decades into the 20th Century. This undoubtedly reflects the demise of small societies and the shift to larger membership among some of the surviving societies.

Populations of organizations, as individuals, maintain their numbers by some combination of deaths and births. While some have suggested that the problem of the Universalists mainly involved the increasing death of societies, I find a more mixed picture. In much of the 19th Century, large numbers of Universalist societies were born but large numbers also died. The eventual problem of the Universalists was the failure to create new societies in any number. While I cannot assess the reason for that in this paper, it certainly appears that a reluctance of the denomination to evangelize actively may have been a primary factor. Of course, it is also possible that consistent with their motto of “we don't just stand, we move,” the Universalists might have been quite energetic but unsuccessful evangelists.

The problems of Universalist society size were quite evident in the analysis of the correlates of society survival between 1875 and 1900 in New York State. The major problem seemed to be weak Institutional Development by which I mean that individual societies lacked the resource to ensure their continuation.

This was most clearly evident in the strong impact of total society membership. Most of the Universalist societies had only a handful of families and must have had extremely serious problems in maintaining their momentum. Societies with more viable numbers did much better in survival, suggesting to some degree that the problem was not so much the theology as the difficulty of finding people to do the work of maintaining and supporting a church. Many communities must have lacked the critical mass to support any Universalist church, and some had the numbers to create a church but not sustain it. This is a chronic problem of liberal religion; it has significant supporters but not enough to become a major organized force.

Substantial attention has been devoted to the rurality of the Universalists as an important issue in understand their decline. While the most rural societies did have relatively low survival rates, the general effects of the urban-rural continuum on society survival were quite small. A better environmental predictor was the material standard of living as measured by housing values. More economically developed parts of the state were better at maintaining survival than the poor areas. While there are probably multiple explanations of this pattern, I would note that the optimistic, positive theology of the Universalists about human society may be difficult to sustain for poor people who are struggling with basic problems of providing housing, food, and clothing.

I have found little evidence that the presence of alternative religious denominations helps explain the decline of the Universalists. In fact, if anything, the opposite seemed to be true.

I started this paper by raising the possibility that the Universalists were actually a somewhat unique denomination. Unlike some liberal religious groups, they allegedly met widespread acceptance, even in the 19th Century. My general conclusion is that the Universalists were like a lot of liberal religious groups. They were relatively small in size at both the denominational and local levels, and they were never able to generate the critical mass to become, in fact, a very successful popular movement. As I started out, the general wisdom is that the Universalists were a liberal denomination that moved over its history from being Big to Small. A more accurate description is that the Universalists were a liberal denomination that moved from being Small to Smaller.

NOTES

1. In the 1875 Universalist Register, New York and Massachusetts included 14.0 and 23.1 percents, respectively, of families in the denomination. Membership was also heavily concentrated in nearby states.
2. The Universalist Registers were usually issued on an annual basis, being

published typically by the Universalist Publishing House in Boston. In 1922, the relevant publication became the Universalist Year Book which continued, with some lapses, as a annual publication until 1936.

3. In general, a number of major historical analyses of the Universalists do not seem very interested in their numbers, although the topic seems quite important to others. I could find very little attention to this topic in Bressler (2001), Bumbaugh (2001), Marini (1982), and Williams (2002), all important analyses of Universalist history. Universalist writers of the late 1800s had a model, somewhat implicit, that the Universalists would grow forever. The possibility of decline received hardly any attention (see Eddy, 1884-1886).

4. Over several years, I have compiled a file of specific reported references to the number of Universalists at their peak and to the year that the decline in numbers began. While there is some agreement that membership peaked between the mid and late-1800s, the exact date varies greatly. There is also variance on the maximum number of members, generally ranging from 600,000 to 800,000. I have used 800,000 here because that seems to be the most common number. There is also some disagreement on the relative ranking of the Universalists at their peak. Most estimates place them somewhere between fourth and sixth. For an example, see Reich (2002). He says that membership peaked in the late 1840s at 600,000 to 700,000, making them the “fifth or sixth” largest denomination.

One of the few dissenting views on the size of the Universalist denomination is Buehrens (2011). He acknowledges the commonly cited figure of 600,000 members. However, he argues that the denomination was probably never much larger than 100,000, at a time point in the late 1840s. He says (2011, 29) that many of the 600,000 “were probably only readers of the many Universalist newspapers and magazines, however, or former members of small rural Universalist groups that seemed to go out of existence almost as rapidly as they were formed.”

The 1850 US Census was the first effort to collect systematic data on the numerical strength of various religious denominations. It focused on numbers of churches, rather than individual members. In this enumeration, the Universalists were ranked 10th. I have checked the other census enumerations of religious denominations and found that the 1850 position was the high-water mark for the Universalists. By the early 1900s, the Universalists did not make the top 20. The relative rankings will depend to some extent on how one defines denominations as it make some difference, for instance, whether one talks about all Baptists or various types of Baptists.

5. Miller (1985) two volume set is the most comprehensive descriptive study of Universalist history. In my reading of Miller's impressive opus about Universalist history, I find little effort to explain the decline. Rather, Miller mainly spends a short amount of space quoting or referencing others (Miller,

1985, 19-29).

6. Howe (1993) points out that trends in Universalist theology were not unilinear. Between the Civil War and the very late 1800s, Universalism tended to move toward an ambivalent and then conservative theology. However, after the turn of the 20th Century, it moved toward a clearly liberal theology.

7. I show (2010) that Universalist societies in New York State were disproportionately concentrated in cities and large places. They were more urbanized than Congregational churches, although less so than the Episcopalians. For much of the 19th Century, levels of urbanization in the United States were quite low by today's standards, and the Universalists by comparison to today were relatively rural, but they were not so compared to other denominations in the same time period.

8. The census data for New York State start with 1845. Gordon's Gazetteer (1836) is generally respected by historians as a useful quasi-census compendium of data about the towns in New York about 1835. It tries to indicate each church by denomination in each town about the time of the mid-1830s. I calculated that Gordon reports a total of 51 Universalist churches in the state about that time. This is a much smaller number than reported in the census of 1845. The growth between the 1830s and 1840s may simply represent the effects of reporting error. However, the Register data on year of founding for societies at later time points shows a dramatic number appeared in the 1830s and early 1840s, a time period of great westward expansion of population in the state due to the opening of the Erie Canal.

9. The close relationship between the number of families and the number of members is suggested by data from the 1906 Register that gives counts of each for 42 states. To reduce the influence of a few states with relatively large numbers of Universalists, I have taken the natural logarithms of the number of families and number of members across the 42 states. The Pearsonian correlation coefficient is .96. Using the number of families to predict the number of members, I find an unstandardized regression coefficient of .97, meaning that there is an almost 1 to 1 ratio of increase in the number of members with the number of families. However, the pattern does differ a bit across the states, suggesting that there may have been some geographic variation in the ways that "families" or "members" were defined.

10. According to the 1906 Census of Religious Bodies, only 35.4 percent of Universalist "communicants" were male. Of all denominations, 43.1 percent were male (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1919, 30-31)

11. Census data are also available in 1875 for some of the smaller denominations, including those with somewhat "liberal" reputations for the time. In New York State, some of these denominations had smaller average membership per church than the Universalists. They also had difficulty maintaining membership. Some of these denominations included the Christian Connection, Friends, and the Union denomination.

12. According to the 1875 data (Secretary of State 1877, Table 53), the

Universalists were the 9^h largest denomination in New York State in terms of members with 9651. However, they were dwarfed in membership by other denominations that appear in figure 1. The comparable membership numbers were: Baptists, 106,947; Episcopalian, 78,515; Dutch Reformed, 37,218; Congregational, 30,922. The Congregationalists were 8th, with over three times the membership of the Universalists.

Historical scholars will remember that the late 1800s represented the rapid growth of large economic organizations in American society (corporate America) and the incipient development of a strong central federal government (Wiebe 1967). The technological and communication development in the society undoubtedly encouraged centralization as an efficient means of mobilizing resources, capital, and ideas. At the risk of being highly speculative, it is possible that large church denominations benefited relative to small church denominations such as the Universalists in the same way as large business organizations.

13. A quadratic equation of time period and number of societies for the earliest cohort had an explained variance of 1.00, surprisingly perfect. This should provide some confidence that the estimate for 1825-49 is probably close to accurate. But the regression equation is based on only five time points.

14. Two of the key Universalist ministers in New York State in the very first part of the 19th Century were Stephen R. Smith and Nathaniel Stacy. Their autobiographies (Smith 1843; Stacy 1850) portray an extreme shortage of ministers and a great deal of circuit-riding to form and serve societies. Smith also notes that some ministers who were recruited to the Universalist ranks lacked the personal character and skills to continue serving. In his biography of Smith, Sawyer (1852) argues that the constant strain of travel contributed quite negatively to his health so that he died at the early adult age of 60.

15. Counties are different units than towns, but it is noteworthy that the correlations between the number of churches in 1865 and 1875 for major denominations are high.

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TABLE 1: NO. OF CHURCHES ENUMERATED BY FEDERAL/STATE CENSUSES, NEW YORK STATE						
Year	All Churches	Universalist	Baptist	Episcopal	Congregational	Reformed
1845	3822	112	782	268	271	260
1850	4134	113	785	279	215	234
1855	5077	133	965	346	301	267
1860	5287	148	864	411	231	287
1865	5388	124	809	428	289	286
1870	5627	124	902	475	268	304
1875	6320	115	932	561	258	248
1890	8237	168	1071	735	301	323
1906	9639	127	1073	843	302	299
1916	9829	104	1031	885	316	333
1926	10638	68	1004	882	280	322
1936	10543	45	907	875	302	284

TABLE 2: DISTRIBUTION OF UNIVERSALIST SOCIETIES BY NUMBER OF FAMILIES							
	Percentage Distribution by Year						
	1836		1875		1900		
Number							
0-19	4.0		13.3		10.7		
20-39	41.3		44.2		28.6		
40-59	24.0		26.7		18.8		
60-79	16.0		5.8		17.0		
80 or more	14.7		10.0		25.0		
Total Pct.	100.0		100.0		100.0		
N	75		120		112		

TABLE 3: RELATIONSHIP OF INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT TO SURVIVAL

		Society Survival			
	% to 1900	% to 1925	Total Societies		
Family Membership					
Less than 20	31.3	12.5	(16)		
20-39	50.9	35.8	(53)		
40-59	81.3	56.3	(32)		
60 or More	94.7	78.9	(19)		
Gamma	0.69	0.60			
Minister Present					
None	37.1	25.7	(35)		
Parttime	63.2	44.7	(38)		
Fulltime	83.0	59.6	(47)		
Gamma	0.60	0.44			
Year Organized					
Before 1835	76.9	59.0	(39)		
1835-1854	63.6	50.0	(44)		
1855 or Later	48.6	24.3	(37)		
Gamma	-0.39	-0.44			
Sunday School Started					
Before 1855	84.6	69.2	(26)		
1855-1868	70.4	48.1	(27)		
1869-1875	66.7	33.3	(27)		
Never	42.5	35.0	(40)		
Gamma	-0.49	-0.36			
Numbers in Parentheses indicate total towns in row					
All Gammas statistically significant at .01 level					

TABLE 4: RELATIONSHIP OF COMMUNITY CHARACTERISTICS TO SURVIVAL

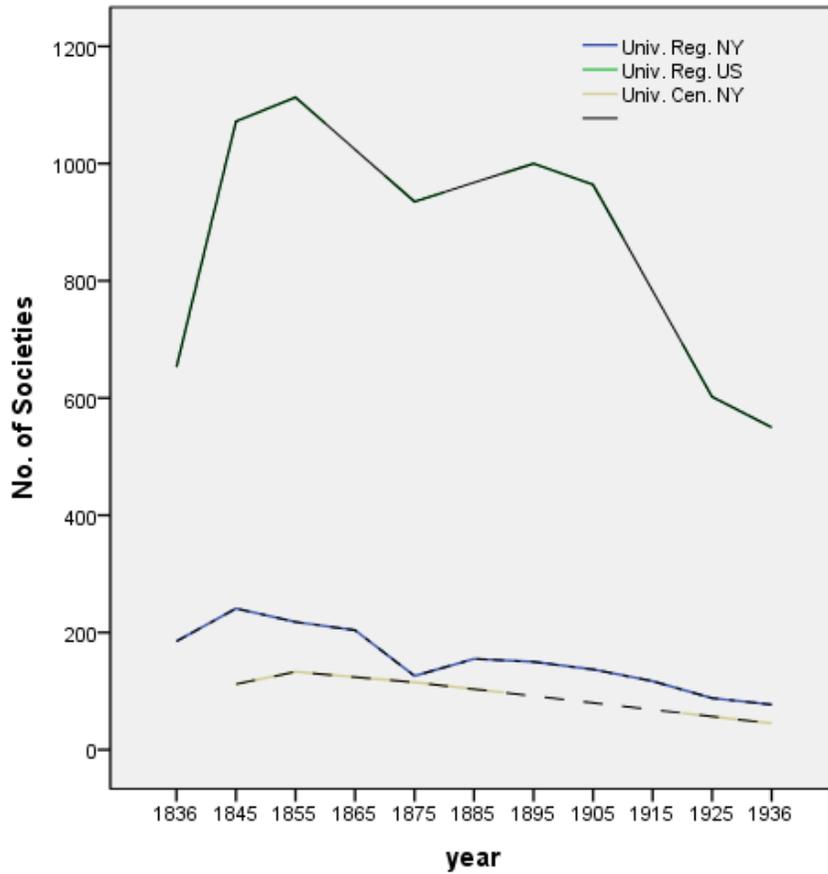
	Society Survival		
	% to 1900	% to 1925	Total Societies
Urban Level			G=+.18
Less than 4K Pop.	50.0	36.8	(38)
Over 4K Pop.	70.3	37.8	(37)
Village	63.0	59.3	(27)
City	77.8	55.6	(18)
Gamma	0.27	0.26	
Pct. Dwelling Value Over 2K			
Less Than 15.0	51.6	35.5	(31)
15.0-24.9	56.4	35.9	(39)
25.0-34.9	68.2	50.0	(22)
Over 35.0	82.1	64.3	(28)
Gamma	0.36*	0.32*	
Pct. Born New England			
Less than 2.0	73.3	46.7	(15)
2.0-3.9	70.4	50.0	(54)
4.0-5.9	52.8	41.7	(36)
Over 6.0	53.3	33.3	(15)
Gamma	-0.28	-0.15	
	Numbers in Parentheses indicate total towns in row		
	*statistically significant at .05 level		

TABLE 5 : RELATIONSHIP OF 1865 DENOMINATION PRESENCE TO SURVIVAL			
	Incidence of Competition	Universalist Society Survival	
Town has Den. Church		% to 1900	% to 1925
Baptist, Free	13	61.5	38.5
Baptist, Regular	88	61.4	44.4
Congregational	51	62.7	39.2
Christian Connection	9	100.0	88.9
Dutch Reformed	25	76.0	48.0
Episcopal	54	74.1	53.7
Lutheran, Evangelical	25	68.0	48.0
Methodist	110	63.6	46.4
Presbyterian	72	68.1	47.2
All Observations	120	63.3	45.0
Note: Incidence of competition is the number of towns where the Universalist society faced direct competition (another church) from that denomination			

TABLE 6: RELATIONSHIP OF COMMUNITY RELIGIOUS CHARACTERISTICS TO SURVIVAL

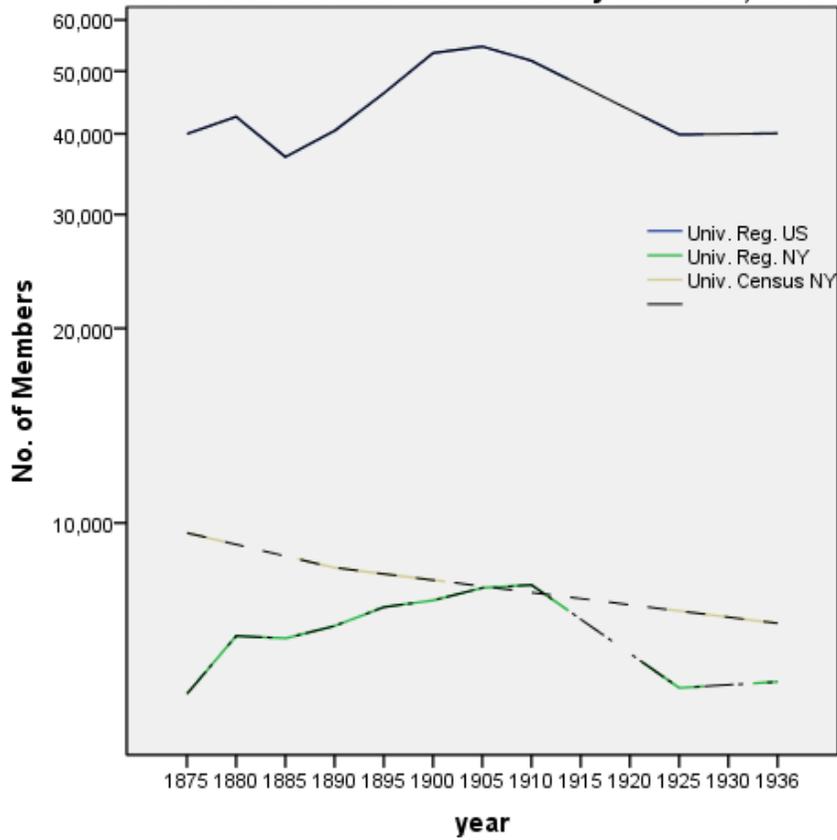
				Society Survival		
		% to 1900		% to 1925		Total Societies
<i>Number, Mainline Denominations</i>						
Less than 3		55.2		41.4		(29)
2 to 3		57.1		39.3		(28)
4 to 5		66.7		45.8		(24)
At least 6		71.8		51.3		(39)
Gamma		0.22		0.13		
<i>Number, Other Universalist Societies</i>						
None		91.7		50.0		(12)
1 to 2		56.3		50.0		(32)
3 to 4		76.5		52.9		(34)
At least 5		50.0		33.3		(42)
Gamma		-0.27		-0.21		

FIGURE 1: No. of Universalist Societies, 1836-1936



Identification: Univ. Reg. NY=data for New York State from the Universalist Register (line with short dashes); Univ. Reg. US= data for continental United States from the Universalist Register (uninterrupted line); Univ. Cen. NY=data for New York State from the US and state census (line with long dashes).

FIGURE 2: No. Universalist Society Members, 1875-1936



Identification: Univ. Reg. NY=data for New York State from the Universalist Register (line with short dashes); Univ. Reg. US= data for continental United States from the Universalist Register (uninterrupted line); Univ. Cen. NY=data for New York State from the US and state census (line with long dashes).

FIGURE 3: Surviving Universalist Societies by Cohort

