

Barnard College, Columbia University

**Religiously Feminist**  
Unitarian Universalist Women's Activism: 1961-1986

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## Preface

I have been a Unitarian Universalist my entire life. Being raised UU is one of the things I am most grateful for, particularly because it is more common for UUs to convert to Unitarian Universalism in their adulthood. My UU communities have been instrumental in shaping who I am as a person today. My religion has challenged me to question my beliefs and pushed me to open my mind and heart to others. I am exceedingly grateful to my parents for raising me at the Unitarian Society of New Haven, to my religious education for teaching me the seven principles, and to my church for instilling in me a pride in my religion, which prepared me for the infinite questions about it I have fielded throughout my life. Growing up in this small, young, and largely misunderstood faith, more often than not when I share my religion with others, it is quickly followed by my “elevator speech” explaining what it is. In my elementary school, when religion was discussed among my peers, the question was “are you Christian or Jewish?” There was no other alternative.

When considering what my topic for my senior thesis should be, I came to the realization that Unitarian Universalism has been excluded from my undergraduate studies as well. It was almost as absent in the general discourse in my college experience as it had been in elementary school. Throughout my undergraduate career I have studied the 1960s-1980s in the United States quite a bit. Even though Unitarian Universalism emerged in the early 1960s as a new religion centered on social justice, it received barely a mention in most of the historical texts I have read covering this period. I hope this thesis will challenge people’s assumptions about what activism looked like in the late twentieth century. And I hope it may inspire further activism by Unitarian Universalists to come together to combat injustice.



## Introduction

In June of 1974, the Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation (UUWF) presented its Ministry to Women award to *Ms. Magazine* as part of the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly.<sup>1</sup> Though the ceremony was not scheduled as a religious happening, 200-plus people packed the Brooklyn Heights Unitarian Church to watch Gloria Steinem accept the award on behalf of the feminist publication.<sup>2</sup> The "Ministry to Women" award represented the theme of a ministry to, for, and by women.<sup>3</sup> Despite *Ms. Magazine's* secular nature, the UUWF and other Unitarian Universalists (UUs) in attendance deeply responded to the event's "religious overtones as it honored ethical and spiritual ideals in [this] secular world."<sup>4</sup>

In her acceptance speech, Steinem thanked the Federation for "finally giving us a word for what we've been doing over the past two years – *ministering* to women."<sup>5</sup> Not only was *Ms. Magazine* serving as a platform to voice women's issues and report on feminist politics, but it was also a kind of religious experience for many women. *Ms.* was *ministering* to them, providing a source of healing for many who deeply appreciated having a news outlet facilitating "communication to, for and among women."<sup>6</sup>

Steinem continued to say this was a historic moment, in which women from a religious group were reaching out to women of a secular group, "and in that gesture is symbolized the compassionate ability of the women's movement to unite across the usual boundaries of race or

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<sup>1</sup> General Assembly (GA) is the annual meeting of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA). Attendees worship, witness, learn, connect, and make policy for the Association through democratic process. Anyone may attend; congregations must certify annually to send voting delegates.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Lou Thompson, "UUWF Visible, Active at General Assembly," *Unitarian Universalist World: The Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association* 5, no. 11 (July, 1974): 1.

<sup>3</sup> "UUWF Award Goes to Maggie Kuhn," *Unitarian Universalist World: The Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association* 7, no. 7 (April, 1976): 2.

<sup>4</sup> Thompson, "UUWF Visible, Active at General Assembly," 1.

<sup>5</sup> Thompson, "UUWF Visible, Active at General Assembly," 3.

<sup>6</sup> Thompson, "UUWF Visible, Active at General Assembly," 3.

religion or class.”<sup>7</sup> In fact, for Unitarian Universalist women, interacting with the “secular” feminist movement was nothing new. In the 1970s UU women were frequently intentionally reaching out of their religion in order to expand their own feminist movement. This award ceremony is indicative of the all too common oversight in the history of the women’s movement – religious women were involved, and actively so.

In 1961, two religious denominations, Unitarianism and Universalism, consolidated to form the new liberal religious faith, Unitarian Universalism, governed by the denominational organization, the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA). UUs today are highly active in social justice work and social action is embedded within the seven principles by which they live. Unitarian Universalists are often left out of the popular narrative of the 1960s, which is surprising, given that it was an entirely new religion grounded in social justice that formed in the midst of the social and political upheaval of the period.

In dominant literature and historiography about the women’s rights movement during the 1960s through the 1980s, religious women activists are often excluded. Many historians have attempted to split feminists of this period into two groups: liberal feminists who tried to work within the system, and radical feminists who preferred to replace the existing system. There are a number of scholars who complicated that narrative, broadening the women’s movement, particularly in the late ‘60s and early ‘70s to center around issue-based organizing such as socialism, lesbianism, and eco-feminism. However, even those who sought to redefine the popular narrative about the waves of feminism missed strains of feminism in this period, particularly the feminism of religious women.

Some authors did add the caveat that “feminists have been just as diverse as are women in general. Some were Democrats, some were Republicans; some were religious, some were

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<sup>7</sup> Thompson, “UUWF Visible, Active at General Assembly,” 3.

adamantly anti-religious; some pushed for civil rights, others did not.”<sup>8</sup> The majority of the historians who did reference the existence of religious feminists did not delve into the significance of their involvement in the women’s movement. Even worse, many scholars’ only discussion of religion is in reference to the Religious Right, pitting it against the New Left.<sup>9</sup> Religious women’s activism is left out almost entirely. This conflation of religion with conservatism is perhaps one of the main downfalls of scholarly literature on feminism in the 1960s-1980s.

There are some authors who did not erase religious feminists from women’s rights history. In *Feminism and the Women’s Movement: Dynamics of Change in Social Movement, Ideology and Activism*, Barbara Ryan offered an examination of the long women’s movement, with a particular focus on the second half of the 1900s. Ryan provided a thorough overview of the women’s movement capturing multiple different strains of feminism, and she did include references to religious women in her analysis. She credited Sonia Johnson, a Mormon woman who was excommunicated after forming Mormons for ERA with bringing non-violent civil disobedience to the forefront of politically focused women’s rights organizations.<sup>10</sup> In her discussion of the 1980s, she included another cursory mention of religion when she addressed “feminist spirituality.”<sup>11</sup> However, her brief inclusion of this aspect of feminism during that period gives the inaccurate impression that this was a new idea women in the United States were thinking about, when in reality, the question of how spirituality and religion fit with feminism

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<sup>8</sup> Dorothy Sue Cobble, Linda Gordon, and Astrid Henry, *Feminism Unfinished: A Short, Surprising History of American Women’s Movements* (New York: WW Norton & Company, 2014), xviii.

<sup>9</sup> The “Religious Right” refers to right wing, typically evangelical Christian political factions that are characterized by their strong support of socially conservative policies. The “New Left” refers to a political movement mainly in the 1960s and 1970s consisting of individuals who sought to implement a broad range of reforms on issues such as civil rights, gay rights, abortion, gender roles, and drugs.

<sup>10</sup> Barbara Ryan, *Feminism and the Women’s Movement: Dynamics of Change in Social Movement Ideology and Activism* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 76.

<sup>11</sup> Ryan, *Feminism and the Women’s Movement*, 137.

was something religious women involved in the feminist movement had considered for decades prior.

Ann Braude, director of the Women's Studies in Religion Program and Senior Lecturer at Harvard Divinity School, successfully integrated religion and feminism in her study of Christianity and the women's rights movement in the late twentieth century. In her article, "A Religious Feminist – Who Can Find Her? Historiographical Challenges from the National Organization for Women," she debunked the myth that faith and feminism are antithetical cultural forces. She argued, rather, that the inclusion of religion in historical assessments of feminism is necessary to fully understand the women's movement, even the so-called "secular feminism" demonstrated by the National Organization for Women. Religious figures were in fact some of the key founding members of the organization.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, unlike their secular counterparts, religious feminists did not need to build women's networks from scratch. Braude noted that religious organizations were among "the largest and most effective groups that had particular concerns with women's issues," making them ideal candidates for the cause of women's rights.<sup>13</sup> Braude made a compelling argument for why religious women's participation in the women's rights movement should not be ignored, however she centered her argument on Christian women, largely ignoring Unitarian Universalist women's participation in the movement in the 1960s-1980s.<sup>14</sup>

Similar flaws exist within the study of Unitarian Universalist history. While there is a fair amount of scholarship dedicated to Unitarian Universalist activism, and some specifically focused on UU women's activism, virtually all of what little there is stops before the second

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<sup>12</sup> Ann Braude, "A Religious Feminist—Who Can Find Her? Historiographical Challenges from the National Organization for Women," *The Journal of Religion* 84, no. 4 (2004): 559.

<sup>13</sup> Braude, "A Religious Feminist – Who Can Find Her?," 567.

<sup>14</sup> While Unitarian Universalism has its roots in Christianity, it is not a Christian religion. It does not affirm the existence of God or Jesus Christ as the lord and savior. Nor does it confirm or deny the existence of heaven.

wave of feminism.<sup>15</sup> There is ample scholarship on the women's movement from the 1960s-1980s, and there exists scholarship on Unitarian Universalist activism, but these two topics have not been merged. Examining the extent to which UU women activists were inspired by, involved with, and influenced by the mainstream women's movement and vice versa will provide a more well-rounded understanding of how religious and feminist ideologies existed in conversation with each other in the 1960s-1980s in the United States.

In the early to mid 1960s, Unitarian Universalist women had an inward focus in their activist efforts. They mobilized to work for the rights of UU women before the second wave of feminism truly took hold in the United States, and their initial long-term planning reveals an understanding of how culture influences gender roles and the negative effect that can have on women's lives. While they had dreams of being able to create an organization for the rights of women the world over, in actuality they ended up focusing the majority of their attention towards improving the status of Unitarian Universalist women. Additionally, their activism was based in gender essentialist ideals that reinforced feminine exceptionalism. However antiquated their feminist ideals quickly became, the existence of that feminist ideology was key in setting the stage for the more radical and far-reaching activism that became prominent among UU women activists in the late 1960s to mid 1970s.

The second phase of Unitarian Universalist women's activism incorporated a wider variety of causes and strategies to work for women's liberation. While UU women in the first period were slightly ahead of the broader women's movement, by the late 1960s to mid 1970s, the strategies and ideals of the women's movement highly influenced Unitarian Universalist women activists of the time. UU women broadened the type of woman they sought to work for,

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<sup>15</sup> Dorothy May Emerson, June Edwards, and Helene Knox, *Standing Before Us: Unitarian Universalist Women and Social Reform, 1776-1936*, Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, 2000.

expanding their goal from seeking to empower UU women to aiming to liberate all women, regardless of race, class, or religious background. UU women activists also became more radical in their strategies for organizing, calling out inequalities in Unitarian Universalism and organizing events to bring attention to gender gaps and stereotyped expectations of women compared to men in the denomination. The balanced mix of inward and outward activism and the effect of the wider feminist movement on its ideals and actions characterized the second phase of UU women's activism.

The third phase of the UU women's movement, from the mid 1970s to the mid 1980s, greatly departed from the wider feminist movement, which was facing diminishing support by the general public and even its own participants. The UU women's movement, on the other hand, saw the creation of a powerful new women's rights group, the Women and Religion task force. Women and Religion influenced the entirety of women's rights activism within Unitarian Universalism. It pushed members to recognize sexism inherent in the religious structure and proposed pragmatic initiatives to help dismantle the patriarchy within the denomination. Due largely to Women and Religion, the third phase of UU women's activism returned to an inward focus, but in a very different manner than the first phase. While in the initial years of Unitarian Universalist women's activism, an internal approach was based on a privileging of certain identities over others, in the 1970s and 1980s it was grounded in the increasing radicalization of UU feminism. The departure from the wider women's movement and the criticism of internal sexist structures led to an increase in the celebration of individual women within the denomination as well as more contained, precise actions to improve women's status from second- to first-class citizens within the religion.

Unitarian Universalist women's activism did not appear out of nowhere in the early 1960s. Unitarianism and Universalism each had preexisting women's groups that were already advocating for the rights of women within their denominations. The year 1961 merely marked the beginning of their collaboration under the new religious faith of Unitarian Universalism. The early years were characterized by an inward focus, minimally influenced by the wider feminist movement of the period. By 1967, UU women activists were paying more attention to a wider range of issues and concerns facing women across the United States. Influenced by the broader women's movement, they diversified their activism to include issues that affected women outside of the church community in addition to radicalizing their activism within Unitarian Universalism. The third phase of UU women's activism is distinctive due to their re-centering on inward activism. This period is unique from the first because of the radical motivations behind this shift. UU women's activism in 1975-1986 became increasingly introspective, as it revealed the deep-seated roots of patriarchy within the religion.

Chapter one looks at the theory and practices behind the founding feminism in the early years of Unitarian Universalism (1961-1967). It compares the feminism prominent in Unitarian Universalism to that which was popular in the wider women's movement and the extent to which UU women centered their activism on internal or external issues. In order to identify the core values of UU women in the early states of the religion's formation, this chapter's analysis is centered on two key primary sources. The first is issues of the *Unitarian Universalist Register Leader*, the official periodical for the UUA. The second are notes from the long range planning committee meeting for the Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation. Investigating these sources creates a solid foundation from which to examine the trajectory of UU women's activism.

Chapter two presents research on the evolution of UU women's feminism from 1967 to 1975. Grounding the analysis in the comparison between the UU women's movement and that happening across the United States reveals that this was the period in which UU women were most influenced by the broader feminist movement. Additionally, this chapter examines the increasing use of radical tactics and the expanding definition of feminism within Unitarian Universalism, again, based on the primary source documents from the UUWF long range planning committee and the newsletters from the Unitarian Universalist Association.

Chapter three delves into the third and final period of UU women's activism covered in this paper, 1975 to 1986. Specifically, it examines the role the Women and Religion task force had in affecting the feminist theory and actions of the UUWF, the UUA, and other UU institutions. Because the activism during this period was centered on the goal of dismantling sexism inherent in the religion's structure, this chapter reveals how UU women activists largely broke from the wider women's movement in order to eliminate patriarchal practices in their denomination.

Unitarian Universalist women activists are almost always left out of the narrative of the women's rights movement spanning the 1960s through the 1980s. This erasure of UU women from the wider women's movement contributes to the misconception that the second wave of feminism was widely secular, and the deepening connection of religion with conservatism common in scholarly discourse. However, by reinserting UU women's activism into the narrative of this period, it becomes clear that religious women were in fact in dialogue with the wider women's movement, even in times when they departed from the more popular organizing tactics or feminist theory.

# Chapter 1

## Feminist Foundations Unitarian Universalist Women's Activism: 1961-1967

### Introduction

In 1962, Beacon Press, the official publishing company for the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA), published *American Women: The Changing Image*. Edited by Beverley Cassara, it was a compilation of essays on the woman's experience contributed by women in a wide range of professions, including authors, anthropologists, choreographers, and economists. *American Women* addressed issues related to women's identity and role in the evolving American society, and asked questions similar to Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, though it was published a full year in advance of Friedan's phenomenon.

In her foreword to the book, Cassara claimed that "the ambiguity which clouds the whole problem of woman's role in the modern age" left some women denying the change itself, while other suffered because "avenues of self-expression and individual development supposedly open to them are inaccessible."<sup>16</sup> As Margaret Mead, the noted anthropologist, succinctly put it in her introduction to the book, "we [women] stand very badly indeed."<sup>17</sup> Dilemmas Cassara sought to bring to light with *American Women* were markedly similar to what Friedan later called "the problem that has no name." Yet Cassara's hope to push women to face the problem had a religious basis, supported by her partnership with the Alliance of Unitarian Women, which helped publish the book.<sup>18</sup> The religious motivation behind UU women's activism was key in

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<sup>16</sup> Beverly Cassara, "Foreword," in *American Women: The Changing Image*, ed. Beverly Cassara (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), v.

<sup>17</sup> Margaret Mead, "Introduction," in *American Women: The Changing Image*, ed. Beverly Cassara (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), xi.

<sup>18</sup> Cassara, "Foreword," v.

defining UU women's activist efforts and strategies, and in many ways set them apart from the mainstream feminist movement of the time.

In the early 1960s, feminism was quickly becoming a main topic of conversation in the United States. In the year 1961, birth control pills were made available to the public and President Kennedy appointed Eleanor Roosevelt as the chair of the first President's Commission on the Status of Women.<sup>19</sup> The first half of the decade also saw many women activists becoming disillusioned with their role in social movements. As early as 1964, women in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) wrote a position paper protesting their status within the organization working for civil rights.<sup>20</sup> However, there was not much official women's rights organizing until later in the decade. The National Organization for Women, for example, was not formed until 1966.<sup>21</sup> Unitarian Universalist women, however, were already meeting to discuss long-term plans for how to best serve the women of their faith through the Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation (UUWF)

This chapter examines the founding feminism of the UUWF as it relates to broader feminist concerns of Unitarian Universalist women at the time of the religion's formation. In order to identify the core values of UU women in the early stage of the religion's existence, this chapter analyzes notes from the long range planning committee meetings and reporting on women's rights in the official newsletter of the UUA, the *Unitarian Universalist Register Leader*, 1962-1967.

By investigating the founding ideals of UU women in the UUWF and the voice given to women and women's activism in the *Register Leader*, it becomes evident that Unitarian

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<sup>19</sup> Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America*, Tantor eBooks, 2013, xvii.

<sup>20</sup> Ryan, *Feminism and the Women's Movement*, 46.

<sup>21</sup> Rosen, *The World Split Open*, xix

Universalist women activists were in some aspects ahead of their time in terms of feminist theory and political organizing. They mobilized to work for the rights of women before the second wave of feminism took hold in the United States. UU women drew strength from their religious communities, providing them with both a secure network and incentive to work to improve their status and standing within Unitarian Universalism. In the early years of the faith, UU women primarily focused their efforts on improving the status of other Unitarian Universalist women, and were yet to broaden their range of activist efforts to include women of color or lower-class women. They also rarely used the word “feminist” to describe themselves, and did not yet embrace that identity. Nevertheless, it is clear through their language and their goals to empower women on personal, congregational, denominational, and societal levels that their efforts stemmed from a deeply feminist motivation.

### **Founding Feminism in UUWF**

On April 27<sup>th</sup>, 1961, some of the founding members of the Unitarian Universalist Women’s Federation met at Mt. Vernon Place in Boston to discuss the long-term goals of their new organization. Included in attendance was Connie Burgess, who would become the first executive director of the UUWF, serving in that capacity for ten years. Issues on the table consisted of determining the Federation’s goals, with specific attention to how to merge the two preexisting women’s groups of Unitarians and Universalists. In sessions that lasted all day, these women were able to engage with each other about how the new Unitarian Universalist women’s organization would fit into the structure of the Unitarian Universalist Association and how women’s role would evolve with this new religion.

This meeting was related to broader changes occurring in the Unitarian and Universalist communities as the two faiths prepared to merge into the single denomination of Unitarian

Universalism. All Unitarian and Universalist organizations needed to work out the logistics of how they would exist under the new institutional structure, whether that meant merging with their equivalent from the corresponding denomination, staying as an individual organization, or dissolving altogether. As there were preexisting women's organizations for Unitarians (Alliance of Unitarian Women) and Universalists (Association of Universalist Women), women from both groups met in 1961 to discuss the terms of their union into the major national women's organization for UU women.

This meeting is key in the examination of the Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation and UU women's activism more broadly as it offers a starting point for what the organization's principles were upon its formation. The long range planning committee offers a key organizing moment to reference in order to examine how the women's movement within Unitarian Universalism developed over time.

### **Feminism for Which Women?**

The meeting notes indicate that the founding members of the Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation were concerned with the wellbeing of women on an international and local level. They ambitiously considered the creation of an alliance of women from all over the world, as a "truly 'long range' ...but not impossible" goal for them to work towards. These women hoped that the formation of the UUWF could be the first step in creating an "International Alliance of Women...all the women in the world...in an 'Orchestration of Cultural Diversities.'"<sup>22</sup> This goal was the most difficult to achieve and least likely to happen out of everything discussed at this meeting. However, its inclusion despite the immense challenges associated with it, suggests that these women were interested in reaching outside of their comfort

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<sup>22</sup> Long Range Planning Committee Notes, April 17, 1961, Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation, Executive Committee Records, 1963-1977, bMS 1230, box 3 folder Long Range Planning Task Force (2), Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School.

zones, expanding their networks, and leading the charge in a move towards women's rights through international solidarity.

This worldwide ideal was reinforced in 1963 when the *Register Leader* published an article entitled "Women Will Unite." It included a list of the stated purposes of the Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation, one of which was, "To join wholeheartedly with men and women everywhere in striving for universal human dignity, freedom, and peace."<sup>23</sup> The hope to join with people "*everywhere*" with the shared goal of "*universal human dignity*" is telling. Unitarian Universalist women envisioned a future in which their activist efforts would benefit people the world over.

Despite these noble and rather lofty hopes, the founding members of the UUWF in reality seemed to be more focused on specifically helping Unitarian Universalist women. In the meeting of the long range planning committee, they asked how to best help "our women," not "all women."<sup>24</sup> The second of three main goals they outlined for themselves was the plan to identify what women can do for women "within the Church family."<sup>25</sup> Even as founders of the UUWF called for collaborating with and working for the rights of all people, they simultaneously made the rights of Unitarian Universalist women their primary focus. They reaffirmed their goals of women helping one another, but only within the framework their religious denomination.

### **Addressing Women's Status and the Role of Culture**

One of the main issues women in the UUWF sought to tackle was women's status and the expectations and limitations placed on women within the context of U.S. culture. In the long range planning committee meeting notes Davies, the recorder, wrote, "Patterns of Culture exert pressures, but are formed by, and respond to, the pressures of the individuals who comprise

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<sup>23</sup> "Women Will Unite," *The Register-Leader of the Unitarian Universalist Association* 145, no. 5 (May, 1963): 20.

<sup>24</sup> Long Range Planning Committee Notes, 2.

<sup>25</sup> Long Range Planning Committee Notes, 3.

them.”<sup>26</sup> Here the women representatives from the Association of Universalist Women and the Alliance of Unitarian Women acknowledged the “patterns of Culture” that exist in society and pressure women into acting certain ways and filling certain roles. At the same time, they agreed that every individual is responsible for their choice to reinforce or challenge the preexisting norm. They expanded upon this idea, noting, “Whether consciously or not, we are engaged in shaping the Culture that our successors will inherit, just as we inherited from our predecessors.”<sup>27</sup> In this meeting, these women noted both that they were at the mercy of the generations who preceded them, while still possessing the power to reject the norms and conventions they deemed antiquated and in need of updating.

The founders of the UUWF gave an immense amount of credit to those who came before them, claiming, “Women have been emancipated from their traditional status as a Minority Group of second class citizens.”<sup>28</sup> This statement appears confident in its assertion that women were no longer second-class citizens with special needs, but it is likely these women did not fully believe in this claim, because it would logically follow that there would be no need for a separate religious organization such as the UUWF to exist in the first place. They articulated their understanding of women’s place in society, stating, “Women are legally free from domination and a great many restrictions, but it is not yet clear what for, what with, and how to draw out the latent potential.”<sup>29</sup> Essentially, what these UUWF founders were arguing was that while – in their view – there were no more legal barriers in the way of women’s success, they still faced unknown challenges in rising to the same status as men. Their aim was to determine how to best unlock women’s potential.

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<sup>26</sup> Long Range Planning Committee Notes, 1.

<sup>27</sup> Long Range Planning Committee Notes, 1.

<sup>28</sup> Long Range Planning Committee Notes, 2.

<sup>29</sup> Long Range Planning Committee Notes, 2.

The long range planning committee recognized that while women had made great strides, they still lived in a culture that limited their capabilities. Their hope was the Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation could help UU women capitalize on their untapped potential. They understood that women needed "to realize a new self-image, and learn to help each other, in creating a New Tradition."<sup>30</sup> Fundamentally, the UUWF founders saw women's conception of themselves as behind the times. In order for women to better their place in society, they needed to accept the new potential avenues open to them, and match their own self-image to those possibilities. In so doing, they hoped to create a "New Tradition," or a new "Culture" that would serve as an improved starting point for the generations to succeed them.

### **Feminine Exceptionalism in the UUWF**

Although the UUWF founders expressed the desire to improve women's station in U.S. society, they still appeared to exist in a relatively narrow understanding of femininity. This is evident in their claim, "A basic feminine need, that obtains throughout life, is the 'need to be needed.'"<sup>31</sup> This grand generalization is grounded in the conceptualization of women as inherent caregivers who are always ready to serve others because that is an intrinsic part of their being. It suggests that these women had some feminist education still awaiting them, particularly because it seems to be playing right into existing gender norms. While they did appear to accept this statement as fact, they also sought to expand it, asking, "How can we help our women escape from this enough to consider themselves a little, and release them from feeling guilty about doing so?"<sup>32</sup> These statements suggest the acceptance of this almost biological "need to be needed" they described, as well as their recognition that it was a problem. In their opinion, this apparent

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<sup>30</sup> Long Range Planning Committee Notes, 2.

<sup>31</sup> Long Range Planning Committee Notes, 2.

<sup>32</sup> Long Range Planning Committee Notes, 2.

feminine need caused women to put themselves last, particularly after family. Their goal was to help women put themselves first every so often, breaking the stereotype of woman as caregiver.

The long-range planning committee also identified another “lack” among women; the “courage to stand up and BE.”<sup>33</sup> Interestingly, they argued, “At home, a woman behaves as an individual, but is apt to retreat into the group pattern when away.”<sup>34</sup> This is notable because they use the home as a place of refuge, when a few years later many second wave feminists, particularly middle-class white women, were viewing the home as akin to a place of imprisonment. The home in this quote can be read more to represent solitude or comfort, where women feel secure in being themselves and speaking their minds. It is out in society, in public, that they face pressures and expectations that make them feel like they need to stand back rather than stand out. This led to another goal for the Unitarian Universalist Women’s Federation; “Women have all along said ‘Yes...but...’ Now they must learn how to say ‘No.’”<sup>35</sup> Again, the women in the UUWF long range planning committee were making assumptions about how women function and connecting that to concerns about cultural systems that they perceived to form these “feminine” behaviors.

This line of thinking also influenced their overall goals. In the article “Women Will Unite,” one of the published aims of the UUWF was “to contribute to the Unitarian Universalist Association the sensitivity, vision, and pioneering spirit of women.”<sup>36</sup> This reinforces the idea that the UUWF was operating under the assumption that women had specific qualities that were different than men’s. In the third of the three main goals outlined in the committee meeting, the attendees sought to answer the question, “How can ‘what women can do for women’ enable

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<sup>33</sup> Long Range Planning Committee Notes, 2.

<sup>34</sup> Long Range Planning Committee Notes, 2.

<sup>35</sup> Long Range Planning Committee Notes, 2.

<sup>36</sup> “Women Will Unite,” 20.

them to make a constructive impact in shaping Society?”<sup>37</sup> While they subscribed to a rather gender essentialist view of the world, founders of the UUWF used this to propel their activism forward in order to make a better society. Ultimately, the founding goals of the UUWF were aimed at serving women on three levels: personal, congregational, and societal, however misguided their initial feminist theory behind these goals might have been.

### **Feminism in the *Register Leader***

It is evident from the initial planning meetings for the formation of the Unitarian Universalist Women’s Federation that UU women leaders were focused explicitly on empowering Unitarian Universalist women and raising their stature within the religion and wider American society. Though they might not have identified it as feminism at the time, fundamental feminist ideals were influential in the creation of the new women’s organization. The women were laying the groundwork for embracing the cause of women’s rights and organizing Unitarian Universalist women in the fight for social justice. In the broader denomination, however, women’s rights were by no means dominating the conversation.

As early editions of the *Unitarian Universalist Register Leader* show, women’s organizing, or even social justice issues that primarily concerned women, were not a central point of focus. In 1962, articles such as “The Outlook for Equal Rights” and “New Voice in Birmingham” focused on race relations in the United States.<sup>38</sup> Another main topic of focus was the United Nations, with articles such as, “Crisis: How Much Can the UN Do?”<sup>39</sup> In addition to these political topics that interested the entire nation, issues more specific to Unitarians and Universalists took up a large portion of the articles written for the *Register Leader*. The columns “What Our Ministers Say” and “Open Forum” answered readers’ questions about the logistical

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<sup>37</sup> Long Range Planning Committee Notes, 3.

<sup>38</sup> “Table of Contents.” *The Register-Leader of the Unitarian Universalist Association* (March, 1962).

<sup>39</sup> “Table of Contents.” *The Register-Leader of the Unitarian Universalist Association* (December, 1962).

details of the merging of the two faiths. Additionally, pieces focusing on the spiritual practices and religious health of Unitarian Universalists during this time of transition were common in the UUA newsletter.

Within what might seem to be gender-neutral topics, however, it is evident that men were privileged over women in the *Register Leader*. The selection of poems and readings for the “Thoughts for Meditation” section, for example, were overwhelmingly focused on men. In any given publication of the *Register Leader* one could open to this section and see “man” used again and again as a stand-in for “human.” Virtually the only time women were not excluded from these readings were when they were written from a first-person perspective or were not about people.<sup>40</sup> Women were markedly absent from the official literature of the Unitarian Universalist Association though it was intended for the enjoyment of all UUs.

Occasionally articles were published about topics that historically have been of greater concern to women. Sex laws, pornography, and obscenity, for example, were generally issues taken up by women activists. Religious women have a long history of manipulating their own sphere to cleverly work outside their assigned realm. The Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, founded in 1874, participated in public activism, a sphere typically reserved for men, by arguing that the issue of sobriety affected the home, and therefore was a concern of women.<sup>41</sup> Women and the conception of their sexuality played key roles in the creation of the 1873 Comstock laws on obscenity.<sup>42</sup> While these were areas in which women had carved out

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<sup>40</sup> “Thoughts for Meditation,” *The Register-Leader of the Unitarian Universalist Association* 144, no. 4 (April, 1962): 22; “Thoughts for Meditation,” *The Register-Leader of the Unitarian Universalist Association* 145, no. 5 (January, 1963): 17; “Thoughts for Meditation,” *The Register-Leader of the Unitarian Universalist Association* 146, no. 2 (February, 1964): 20; “Thoughts for Meditation,” *The Register-Leader of the Unitarian Universalist Association* 147, no. 6 (June, 1965): 16.

<sup>41</sup> Brian L. Donovan, “Framing and Strategy: Explaining Differential Longevity in the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union and the Anti-Saloon League,” *Sociological Inquiry* 65, no. 2 (1995): 146-147.

<sup>42</sup> Molly McGarry, “Spectral sexualities: Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism, Moral Panics, and the Making of US Obscenity Law,” *Journal of Women's History* 12, no. 2 (2000): 8-29.

significant space for themselves in public debates, when the *Unitarian Universalist Register Leader* published articles debating sex laws and pornography, men were often the contributing authors.<sup>43</sup>

In his open letter to Hugh Hefner, Carl Scovel criticized Hefner's "Playboy Philosophy," arguing that sex out of wedlock is not inherently a bad thing, as sex is a pleasurable and healthy part of human existence. The simplicity of his argument is dangerous, suggesting that there are not potential downsides to sex, no possibility of anything going wrong.<sup>44</sup> In the only article in the *Unitarian Universalist Register Leader* addressing the Playboy lifestyle, there was no mention of the playboy bunnies that Hefner objectified, no nuanced examination of how Hefner, as a powerful and influential public figure, could have an effect on women's daily experiences. No woman's perspective was heard. Similarly, in Henry Castor's article examining how humankind has handled obscenity in order to put the contemporary debate in context did not include any reference to how women were portrayed in things like pornography. In both instances, these articles failed to bring any subtlety to heated debate topics that deeply affected women. Still, if there was any backlash in reaction to this, it was not published in the UUA newsletter.

Oftentimes any "coverage" of the women's movement was simply a reference, almost a footnote, in the *Register Leader*. One such instance is Beverly Cassara's promotion of the book *The Pace of a Hen* by Josephine Moffett Benton in the "Books and Ideas" section of the newsletter. Cassara, who just the previous year had published her own book, *American Women: The Changing Image* through Beacon Press, advertised *The Pace of a Hen* as "the answer to women's dilemma." The summary Cassara provided suggests the modern housewife is similar to

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<sup>43</sup> Carl Scovel, "Bunnies Aren't Funny: An Open Letter on the 'Playboy Philosophy,'" *The Register-Leader of the Unitarian Universalist Association* 148, no. 1 (January, 1966): 3-4; Henry Castor, "What's Obscene? Censorship in America," *The Register-Leader of the Unitarian Universalist Association*, 148, no. 5 (May, 1966): 3-4.

<sup>44</sup> Scovel, "Bunnies Aren't Funny," 3.

a barnyard hen, as she “seems to go in endless circles answering her commitments to home, children, husband, community, church, and to her own special interests.”<sup>45</sup> Cassara went on to explain that part of the difficulty in defining the woman’s dilemma is “the changing status of women in our society. Women are offered free access to all – but not quite all – avenues of self-development. Invisible lines are drawn which woman finds she is not allowed to cross.”<sup>46</sup>

Cassara’s attempt at defining the status of women in the United States is similar to how the Unitarian Universalist Women’s Federation long range planning committee members defined it at their meeting in April of 1961. This suggests the founding members of the UUWF were not the only women in the UU denomination who felt this way. The “women’s dilemma” Cassara described in her book and in her endorsement of *The Pace of a Hen* was quite possibly felt by a number of women throughout the denomination and the wider U.S.

However, the “problem” for Unitarian Universalist women was potentially different than the problem Betty Friedan described in her book *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963. Cassara’s review of *The Pace of a Hen* created an image of a woman who is constantly busy from having too many identities, too many roles, while Friedan’s “problem without a name” was more an argument for women’s lack of purpose as their identities faded into those of their families. Cassara and the UUWF were questioning how women could best advance their own interests while paying attention to the various roles that make up their identity. Furthermore, they were confronting the question of how to operate within a culture that limits women’s potential even while still expecting them to fill multiple roles.

Unitarian Universalist women were searching for words to express their lack of fulfillment in life, and struggling to understand how to fit into a world in which it seemed like

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<sup>45</sup> Beverly Cassara, “What is the Answer to Women’s Dilemma?” *The Register-Leader of the Unitarian Universalist Association* 144, no. 1 (January, 1962): 23.

<sup>46</sup> Cassara, “What is the Answer to Women’s Dilemma?” 23.

they had equal access, but continued to experience discrimination. Though this short article only took up about a sixth of a page in the *Register Leader*, it is demonstrative of a concern of Unitarian Universalist women in the early 1960s, and the limited attention the broader UU community gave to such concerns in the religion's initial years.

### **Religious Leadership for UU Women**

Even though the Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation was the main women's organization that received coverage in the *Register Leader*, it was not the only UU women's group active during the 1960s. Formed in 1961, the Unitarian Universalist Ministers' Wives Association (UUMWA) facilitated frank and open conversations about their role in their congregations, and the various expectations held of them by the congregational members, and by their husbands.<sup>47</sup> Though this organization was not included in the *Register Leader* on a regular basis (in fact, it was not until the *Register Leader* became the *UU World* that it was regularly reported on), its formation as early as 1961 is notable. Not only does its name emphasize the predominance of male ministers at the time, but it is also exemplary of the uncertainty of a woman's place in a Unitarian Universalist marriage.

During the time UU women such as members of the UUWF and Beverly Cassara were considering how to take ownership of their identities and balance self care with care for others, wives of UU ministers were also questioning the expectations and limitations placed on them as wives of religious leaders. In the first article updating the UU community on the UUMWA's progress, Mrs. Richard Boeke was quoted saying, "It's a hectic life and you do learn to be ready for anything at any time. But I think I would find being an ordinary housewife very dull."<sup>48</sup> This suggests that perhaps Unitarian Universalist ministers' wives were able to take on more active of

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<sup>47</sup> Mrs. Robert Edward Greene, "UUMWA," *Unitarian Universalist World: The Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association* 1, no. 2 (March, 1970): 3.

<sup>48</sup> Greene, "UUMWA," 3.

a leadership role in their congregation, taking advantage of their husbands' role in order to effect positive change and be prominent members of their religious communities. This is a large shift from the UUWF committee members' concerns of women losing their identity outside of the safety and comfort of their home.

### **Religious Dissent**

There were rumblings of discontent on an institutional level regarding systemic patriarchy within religion in the early- to mid-1960s. As early as 1964, Professor Emeritus Margaret Brackenbury Crook, a retired scholar of religion and biblical literature at Smith College, published a book entitled *Women and Religion*. In it she argued that women have a proud religious heritage to reclaim and carry on.

The *Register Leader* printed her article, "Religion – A World Without Women" that same year, offering readers a short snippet from her book. Crook argued for a "breakthrough in the art of communication" in more than just words, but also in attitudes and occupations.<sup>49</sup> She argued criticism was a necessary part of this process, for criticism has the potential to bring new insights.<sup>50</sup> Because so many people draw strength from religion, the idea of criticizing it was a source of discomfort for many. As a friend once said to Crook, "If we question it, what have we left?" However, Crook saw this state of immunity towards religion as a "deterrent to further enterprise."<sup>51</sup> Here, Crook expertly acknowledged the uneasiness towards her call for criticism while affirming her stance in support of said criticism. For many their religion is a source of love, healing, and support; to criticize it can feel like a betrayal. However, as Crook maintained, criticism can be a manifestation of appreciation as it shows that one cares about one's religion, its reputation, and its role in shaping the future.

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<sup>49</sup> Crook, "Religion – A World Without Women," 8.

<sup>50</sup> Crook, "Religion – A World Without Women," 8.

<sup>51</sup> Crook, "Religion – A World Without Women," 9.

Crook then used this argument in support of religious criticism to focus in on her main claim, that women were not sufficiently represented, nor did they wield enough influence in religious institutions. She contradicted the notion that religion had always existed within the patriarchal structure by referring to ancient times when women had far more power and leadership positions than they did in the 1960s.<sup>52</sup> She argued it was only in the modern era that men overtook religious administrations and doctrines, that religion became “man-formulated, man-argued, man-directed.”<sup>53</sup> Such a blunt statement of the patriarchal nature of modern religious institutions had yet to be published in the *Register Leader*. While the article was a commentary on religion as a whole, and not specifically focused on Unitarian Universalism, Unitarian Universalism was certainly not excluded from this general criticism either.

In addition to criticizing the sexism within religious institutions, Crook used her article as a call to action for getting more women in religious leadership positions. She noted that women had become accustomed to not being religious leaders because the system had been that way for so long, but this did not change the need for reversing the modern trend of masculine dominance in religious institutions. She ended her article by claiming, “Once religious leaders realize that Paul did not forbid women to preach, a great roadblock in the way of their future progress will be removed.”<sup>54</sup> However, by looking at both sides of the coin and calling on women to “realize their responsibility for shouldering their share of leadership,” she connected gender equality with the need and ability to “move forward into the desired new age in world progress.”<sup>55</sup> Crook equated women advocating for their own rights with social progress. She contended that without gender

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<sup>52</sup> Margaret Brackenbury Crook, “Religion – A World Without Women,” *The Register-Leader of the Unitarian Universalist Association* 146, no. 9 (November, 1964): 8-9.

<sup>53</sup> Crook, “Religion – A World Without Women,” 8.

<sup>54</sup> Crook, “Religion – A World Without Women,” 9.

<sup>55</sup> Crook, “Religion – A World Without Women,” 9.

equality in religious institutions they would be behind the times, or worse, hold back necessary progress in other areas.

Perhaps it is this final point that motivated the editors of the *Register Leader* to add an addendum to the end of Crook's article. In addition to a short biography about the author, they took an explicitly feminist stance, writing, "With this article, adapted for us from Miss Crook's new book, we may be open to a charge of feminism – two of *The Leader's* three 'man' editorial staff are women."<sup>56</sup> This addendum demonstrates a desire to stand in solidarity with Ms. Crook's assertions. At a time when even the UUWF was not using the word "feminist" to describe its actions or goals, Margaret Brackenbury Crook's article condemning the sexism inherent in modern religion inspired the UUA's official newsletter to stand in solidarity with the feminist cause, even if only in this one way as of yet.

## **Conclusion**

The initial years of Unitarian Universalism were categorized by a state of mild confusion coupled with a strong bond of camaraderie, hope, and determination to have a positive influence on the world. While the *Register Leader* largely ignored the need for gender reform both within the Unitarian Universalist faith and within the wider United States culture, the absence of coverage of feminist issues does not signify the absence of feminism in Unitarian Universalism.

Founding members of the Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation, while not ones to label themselves as feminists in the early 1960s, did advocate for the rights of UU women. They sought to help women unleash their latent potential, empower them to put themselves first, say no, and feel comfortable taking up space in the public sphere. Their emphasis was on women's status and the ways in which culture molds gender roles. Despite these noble aims, the range of activism in actuality was fairly narrow, with a heavily inward focus that predominantly

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<sup>56</sup> Crook, "Religion – A World Without Women," 9.

benefitted Unitarian Universalist women, rather than women at large. Furthermore, the theory behind these goals was based in exceptionalism, in which women in the UUWF argued women were inherently different from men, which therefore necessitated the existence of the Federation.

In addition to the UUWF, feminist thought by UU women was published, however infrequently, in the *Register Leader*. This included a more radical feminist strain introduced by Margaret Brackenbury Crook, which connected one's duty to critique one's religion with a feminist call for gender equality in religious institutions. UU women's religious activist efforts to improve their own lot on a personal, congregational, denominational, and societal level solidified the feminist roots of UU women's activism in the initial years of the religion's formation.

Unitarian Universalist women were ahead of their time in terms of their activism for women's rights, despite not calling it feminism at the time. UU women introduced concepts of culture's influence on gender roles to their denomination before it became a widespread conversation in the U.S. and successfully organized within a women's rights group to work to improve women's status. However, they did not ignore the efforts of the mainstream women's rights movement. As it grew, the UUWF expanded its efforts as it influenced its own feminist theory and affected its strategies for activism.

## Chapter 2

### Speak Out!

#### Unitarian Universalist Women's Activism: 1967-1975

##### Introduction

On June 1, 1974, Wilma Scott Heide, President of the National Organization for Women (NOW), wrote in a press release that the biblical Eve, who “as the first seeker after knowledge when she (regrettably) took only one bite of the apple, may have been the first feminist and it’s no sin and never was.”<sup>57</sup> This press release was in response to her invitation to attend the Feminist Salon for Women and Power hosted by the Unitarian Universalist Women’s Federation (UUWF). She sent her thoughts regarding the Salon, saying, “It must be the mission of any valid religion or ministry to nurture the wholeness with which the newborn arrives,” regardless of their gender.<sup>58</sup> Heide’s press release was indicative of the UUWF’s success in prompting major feminist leaders to consider the role of religion in the feminist movement as well as its efforts to expand its feminist ideology by reaching out to “secular” feminist organizations for support and collaboration.

In the late 1960s, the United States was growing more and more restless. Protests and riots erupted across the nation surrounding various causes including the war in Vietnam, gay liberation, and the civil rights movement. During this time, the women’s movement grew more radical and militant. NOW adopted its Bill of Rights for Women in 1967, and radical feminist groups held a demonstration against the Miss America pageant in 1968, home to the popularized

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<sup>57</sup> Statement from Wilma Scott Heide, President of the National Organization for Women, for the Feminist Salon, June 18, 1974, Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation, President Records, 1959-1974; 1977-1979, bMS 1234, box 1 folder Feminist Salon for Women and Power (1), Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School, 1.

<sup>58</sup> Statement from Wilma Scott Heide, 1.

myth of second wave feminists burning bras to protest the patriarchy.<sup>59</sup> In the late 1960s and early 1970s the feminist movement also saw an increase in smaller groups, oftentimes based around specific issues.<sup>60</sup> These groups of women began meeting and participating in consciousness raising as an opportunity for them to share their experiences of discrimination with one another and bring sexism to the attention of those who might not have recognized its influence in their lives prior. It also became more common for women's groups to push men away, arguing for a separation of women from men in order to fully realize the goal of women's liberation.<sup>61</sup> The UU women's movement, undoubtedly influenced by the tactics of other feminist groups, also became more militant and radical in its organizing. The UUWF gained prominence in the UUA and was frequently written about in UUA publications.

This chapter examines the evolution of Unitarian Universalist women's feminism from 1967-1975. This period saw the most extensive influence of mainstream feminism on women's activism within the UUWF. Their activist efforts greatly expanded to include a more well rounded aim of the type of woman they hoped to help, broadening their range of feminism from being mainly centered on inward activism to a fairly even balance of inward and outward focus. Instead of only working to help UU women, the UUWF hoped to help all women. Even within their organizing to improve conditions for women within the denomination, they broadened the types of problems they worked to improve and sought to make women's rights a religious issue of concern to the entire faith community. Perhaps the most dramatic shift in their activism, influenced by theatrical and attention-grabbing actions such as the Miss America Protest, was the UUWF's increasing criticism of structural sexism in church institutions.

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<sup>59</sup> Rosen, *The World Split Open*, xx.

<sup>60</sup> Ryan, *Feminism and the Women's Movement*, 54.

<sup>61</sup> Ryan, *Feminism and the Women's Movement*, 51.

## **Which Women's Rights?**

In the founding years of the Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation, UU women leaders focused their efforts mainly on increasing and protecting the rights of UU women. However, by the late 1960s, UU women simultaneously expanded the range of issues they sought to work on as well as the type of woman they were working to help. Instead of centering their efforts on the white, upper-middle-class woman that was most common in the Unitarian Universalist faith, they attempted to broaden their own range of experience and reach out to and include women of different racial and class backgrounds.

Class was more explicitly recognized, for example, in the UUWF's fight for abortion rights. In an article updating readers on the UUWF's work to repeal harmful abortion laws, provisions of the resolution of the National Conference on Abortion Laws were laid out. In addition to advocating for the "continuation and expansion of current abortion counseling services," this resolution called for "equal availability of abortion services to all women regardless of economic status."<sup>62</sup> By throwing their support behind this appeal, and specifically naming the part of the resolution that noted the disparity in treatment options between upper- and lower-class women, members of the Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation were complicating their understanding of abortion. The UUWF brought a more intersectional approach to its activism by considering the unique needs of lower class women.

In addition to thinking about the rights of the mother in the abortion debate, the UUWF took a stance arguing the right to abortion was beneficial for children as well. In an update on the workings of the UUWF, Mary Lou Thompson wrote, "the ethics of bringing an unwanted child into such a callous world seems highly questionable in the face of neglect, malnutrition, or [...]"

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<sup>62</sup> "UUWF Works on Abortion Law Repeal," *UUA Now* newsletter (April, 1969): 2.

starvation unwanted children may encounter.”<sup>63</sup> Thompson made a compelling argument for the rights of children to come into loving homes with families prepared for their arrival, and the rights of the children themselves to be supported by Unitarian Universalists. She followed this with a reminder of a proposed Resolution on Child Care Centers at the 1971 General Assembly (GA), connecting the issue back to women’s rights. Childcare centers clearly benefit both children and their mothers, particularly working women. Again, the UUWF reframed how it approached the abortion debate in order to provide a more inclusive, intersectional view of the issue.

In addition to bringing social class into topics such as abortion, economic concerns were sometimes at the forefront of UU women’s activism, such as when they worked for the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). In 1971, the UUWF wrote an article for the *UU World*, connecting the religion’s principles to this economic cause. “One of the basic tenets of Unitarian Universalist belief is the inherent worth of every human being without regard to color, race, creed or SEX. Therefore all rights under law should be equalized for women and men.”<sup>64</sup> Unitarian Universalist women also took an intersectional approach to their activism surrounding the ERA. In a written appeal to congregations to support the amendment, Mary Lou Thompson noted, “Women constitute 40 percent of the labor force. They are not working for pin money, since most work because they must – to support themselves, their children, or to help maintain a family” She also pointed out that almost “one-third of all families living in poverty are headed by women. Way at the bottom of the economic ladder is the black working woman.”<sup>65</sup> UU women

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<sup>63</sup> Thompson, Mary Lou. “UUWF.” *Unitarian Universalist World: The Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association* vol. 2 no. 3 (February, 1972): 3.

<sup>64</sup> “Equal Rights Amendment Supported,” *Unitarian Universalist World: The Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association* 2, no. 9 (May, 1971): 1.

<sup>65</sup> Mary Lou Thompson, “UUWF,” *Unitarian Universalist World: The Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association*. 1, no. 2 (March, 1970): 3.

were not only advocating for the working rights of white middle-class women, but for women of all racial and economic backgrounds, with the understanding that women of color and poor women stood to benefit the most from the constitutional amendment.

In addition to reframing their pre-existing activism in order to address the issues of low-income women and women of color, UU women also started diversifying the new causes they worked for. In 1972 Dorothy Chase, head of the Massachusetts Correctional Institution, presented at a UUWF conference on the status of women in prisons. Neglected in the contemporary drive on prison reform, “approximately 15,000 women in the U.S. [were] kept in county jails, state prisons, or the Federal Alderson prison, mostly for non-violent crimes such as vagrancy, drugs and prostitution.”<sup>66</sup> This is a clear example of Unitarian Universalist women taking concrete steps to broaden their own worldview and work for all women’s rights, not just Unitarian Universalist women’s rights. As Mrs. Chase said at the conference, “Remember, we are our sisters’ keepers. Their fate is our fate.”<sup>67</sup>

### **Women’s Rights as a Religious Issue**

While the Unitarian Universalist Women’s Federation diversified the type of women’s rights they were fighting for, they also sought to get the entire denomination behind their cause. In 1969 the UUWF introduced a resolution at the UU General Assembly; “To all, the call to action, adopted at the convention, is now ‘Work for the civil rights of women.’”<sup>68</sup> The address of the call to action “to all” was an expansion of the UUWF’s sphere of influence. Up until this point, the organization had not explicitly sought to garner the support of the entire denomination. Furthermore, the simplicity and broadness of the call, working for “the civil rights of women,”

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<sup>66</sup> “UUWF Plans Pilot Parley on Women in Prisons,” *Unitarian Universalist World: The Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association* 3, no. 13 (October, 1972): 2.

<sup>67</sup> “Ex-Inmates and Prison Head Say Society Fails Women Prisoners,” *Speak Out!: Supplement to UU World* (November, 1972): 1.

<sup>68</sup> Mary Lou Thompson, “UUWF Adopts Plan,” *UUA Now* 150, no. 11 (November, 1969): 7.

suggests that the purpose of this resolution, more than anything, was to make themselves known to all Unitarian Universalists and ensure their support. With this resolution, the UUWF unequivocally made women's rights a religious issue.

In her effort to gain wider support for the UUWF, Alice H. Kimball, the president of the Federation, urged men to join UUWF women in their efforts.<sup>69</sup> Kimball was arguing that women's rights affected everyone, and as religious people, male Unitarian Universalists had a duty to work for the rights of all people. This is a key difference between the UU women's movement and ever-growing radical feminist groups in the U.S. at the time. In the early 1970s it was increasingly common for smaller women's groups to take on a separatist strategy, in which they refused men participation in their actions. This was not true of all feminist organizing during the period, but it was rapidly becoming more popular. Unitarian Universalist women, while critical of men's complacency in women's liberation, still sought to bring men into their cause.

While the UUWF made great strides in the late 1960s and early 1970s in terms of drawing denomination-wide attention to their cause, their attempt to make men feel welcome and necessary in the fight for women's rights was not always successful. As the mainstream women's movement became more radical, so did the UUWF. The intensity with which Federation members urged the broader Unitarian Universalist community to support them grew substantially in this period. In an article from the *UUA Now* newsletter in 1969, Dr. Lonny Myers is quoted as saying "If men had to bear children they would have repealed abortion laws long ago."<sup>70</sup> Up until that point the reluctance of men to support the abortion cause had not been widely criticized in the UUA newsletter. The UUWF had focused on the statistics and the

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<sup>69</sup> Thompson, "UUWF Adopts Plan," 7.

<sup>70</sup> Cindy Edson, UUWF Meets in St. Louis, *UUA Now* newsletter (May, 1969): 1.

wellbeing of the mother when arguing for the right to abortion. Yet in this article men were being called out for their complicity in undermining women's rights. Written in the same year that Kimball urged men to participate in UUWF activism, this comment reflects the influence the mainstream feminist movement had on UU feminists, and complicates the idea of exactly who the UUWF was trying to bring into their activist efforts.

### **Redefining the Unitarian Universalist Feminist**

When the UUWF was in its infancy, one of its stated goals was “to contribute to the Unitarian Universalist Association the sensitivity, vision, and pioneering spirit of women.”<sup>71</sup> At the committee's meeting in May of 1971, however, the members voiced a change of heart, pointing out, “We are contributing to the UUA as capable people.”<sup>72</sup> This redefined the roles of women in the UUWF from exceptional beings who are sensitive visionaries to simply people, who are just as much diverse as men. The committee proposed to shift the focus from the inherent characteristics of women to the ideas of individuals who made up the Federation's membership. This is a marked change in how the UUWF defined feminism in the 1960s versus the 1970s, as they moved from an exceptionalist to a universalist approach to gender definitions during this period.

The UUWF also redefined the type of woman who could be a feminist within their organization. The question of how to be more inclusive in the women's movement was an idea that repeatedly arose in UU women's groups in the early 70s. In 1969 the UUWF made great strides in opening up its membership by voting to allow individual members in addition to church groups to join the organization. They also approved a resolution presented by twelve

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<sup>71</sup> Long Range Planning Task Force Report, May, 1971, Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation, Executive Committee Records, 1963-1977, bMS 1230, box 3 folder Long Range Planning Task Force (1), Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School, 3.

<sup>72</sup> Long Range Planning Task Force Report, 3.

women of the Black Unitarian Universalist Caucus (BUUC), asking that the UUWF endorse the efforts of the BUUC, specifically in the establishment of the Mary McLeod Bethune Family Institute.<sup>73</sup> While the UUWF was working to increase inclusion on an institutional level by extending its activist agenda to include issues that affected working-class women and women of color, the enactment of those efforts on a local level was more challenging. This period is characterized by a tension between having a unified movement and meeting the needs of women with various identities within the religious denomination.

In the early 1970s, the UUWF worked to bring more women into the organization. Natalie Gulbransen, a board member of the UUWF, wrote in her article “On the Cutting Edge,” “we need the women who wish to sustain and cherish each other. We need the women who wish to develop themselves. And we also need the women who see great needs in the community and the world [...] so that they may use their strength and vision to help solve some of the problems.”<sup>74</sup> Mary Lou Thompson targeted a specific group of women in an article advertising a discussion of “the woman question.” She asked young women to “come and take part in some intergenerational rap sessions.”<sup>75</sup> This suggests that the UUWF was largely made up of older women, since she felt compelled to reach out to young women specifically, using clunky sounding slang that did not fit with the rest of the piece.

However, as the UUWF appealed to a broader range of women, it encountered the problem of how to sufficiently address the needs of all of them. Gulbransen wrote that she saw “groups which extend into many kinds of women with many kinds of needs. There is no one plan or structure which can serve these needs, but under multi-faceted groupings, women would find

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<sup>73</sup> Edson, “UUWF Meets in St. Louis,” 1.

<sup>74</sup> Natalie Gulbransen, “On the Cutting Edge,” *Speak Out!: Supplement to UU World* (November, 1972): 2.

<sup>75</sup> Mary Lou Thompson, “UUWF,” *Unitarian Universalist World: The Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association* 1, no. 8 (June, 1970): 3.

ways of organizing to fill those needs.”<sup>76</sup> This statement expressed the difficulty of having a national organization. The UUWF hoped to work for the rights of all women, but the process of introducing more intersectional concepts into its activism led to a more divided experience on the local level, as multiple women’s groups formed to fulfill different women’s needs. This increase in the number of small women’s groups based on specific identities they held or issues they chose to focus on, is reflective of the influence the mainstream feminist movement had on UU women activists. During this period, a similar phenomenon was occurring in women’s groups across the nation.

In addition to the challenges of meeting the interests of a large group of ever-more diverse women, the different national UU women’s organizations already had some tensions among them, as a poem by Suzanne Corrado, president of the UUMWA in 1970 reveals. In the opening stanza she writes,

“Whenever I go to a party / And talk to fascinating women and men / Ministers,  
Unitarian Universalist, / In town for a meeting), [sic] / Then I’m glad that I’m a /  
Unitarian Universalist Minister’s Wife. / And when the Womens [sic] Federation  
(Unitarian Universalist) / Sends me a letter asking / Will I help the Ladies Alliance / To  
have a better relationship / With my husband, / Then I’m not.”<sup>77</sup>

This suggests that not all Unitarian Universalist women held the assumptions made by women in the UUWF at the time. It is important to note that the President of the UUWMA felt so hurt by the actions of the UUWF that she felt the need to write a poem about it and publish it knowing full well it would be seen by any and all members of the Federation. This reveals tensions between the two groups, which might be viewed as a negative, as one would hope women’s activism would not end up hurting other women. However it is also a positive reinforcement of

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<sup>76</sup> Gulbransen, “On the Cutting Edge,” 1.

<sup>77</sup> Suzanne Corrado, “UUWMA,” *Unitarian Universalist World: The Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association* 1, no. 16 (November, 1970): 3.

the decision to have multiple groups honing in on certain aspects of women's identities other than their gender.

### **Women's Representation**

While Unitarian Universalist women actively worked for causes outside of their own denomination, including abortion, the ERA, and prison reform, the late 1960s and early 1970s were also characterized by greater internal activism. One of the most common topics of focus in this period was increasing women's representation within the denomination. There were multiple citations throughout this period of women's underrepresentation in the religion's leadership.<sup>78</sup> In the 1969 General Assembly, Alice Kimball and Connie Burgess, President and Executive Director of the UUWF respectively, proposed a plan for involving small group discussion of crucial Assembly issues to encourage more women's voices to be heard. They claimed that the UUWF existed in part because most women did not feel free to speak in the councils of decision within their liberal denomination. Nevertheless, it was promptly voted down.<sup>79</sup> The UUWF later used this strategy at its own convention held before the 1971 General Assembly in order to allow "varied opinions and feelings about the issues to be raised in groups small enough for all to be heard and involved."<sup>80</sup>

A large part of the effort to increase the number women leaders throughout Unitarian Universalism included a push for more women ministers. In 1970 Violet A. Kochendoerfer wrote about being one of the only women in the ministry. She was struggling to find work, despite the resolution passed at the previous General Assembly on equal employment

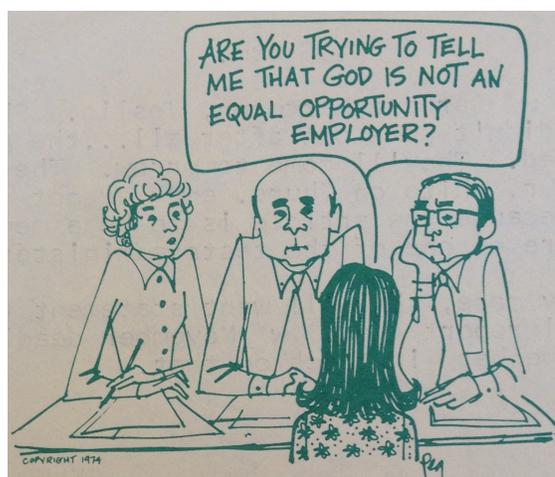
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<sup>78</sup> "Women Demand Places in the UUA," *Unitarian Universalist World: The Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association* 2, no. 11 (June, 1971): 6.

<sup>79</sup> Mary Lou Thompson, "UUWF," *Unitarian Universalist World: The Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association* 1, no. 4 (April, 1970): 3.

<sup>80</sup> "UUWF Plans for the 70s," *Unitarian Universalist World: The Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association* 2, no. 9 (May, 1971): 1.

opportunities for women. Of the sixteen ministerial search committees to whom her name had been submitted as a potential candidate, she was completely ignored by eleven!<sup>81</sup> In 1972 at a conference to acquaint new ministers and their spouses to the resources of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, a woman minister was assumed to be a spouse likely due to her gender.<sup>82</sup> The gender gap in hiring of women ministers became a widely discussed issue, often depicted and criticized in the form of political cartoons.<sup>83</sup> In an effort to address the gender gap, 17 UU women ministers and theological students caucused one afternoon during the 1974 General Assembly to create the Ministerial Sisterhood Unitarians Universalist (MS.UU). MS.UU was intended to act as a support group, so the women could offer encouragement and care to one another. The group began publishing a newsletter, the first of which posited questions to women ministers about their experiences. Responses ranged from women claiming they had no real problems, to examples of tokenism, double standards, and not being taken seriously.<sup>84</sup>



<sup>81</sup> Violet A. Kochendoerfer, "A Woman Minister?," *Unitarian Universalist World: The Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association* 1, no. 18 (May, 1970): 4.

<sup>82</sup> "Mixup on Gender at New Minister's Conference," *Speak Out!: Supplement to UU World* (November, 1972): 3.

<sup>83</sup> Equal Opportunity Employer Political Cartoon, 1974, Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation, Records, 1944; 1951-1979, bMS 1236, box 4 folder Historical Material (1), Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School.

<sup>84</sup> "Women Ministers Organize MS. UU," *Unitarian Universalist World: The Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association* 5, no. 16 (November, 1974): 1.

The Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation also sought to increase women's representation in religious education. In 1973 the UUWF posed a question in the *UU World*, "How much do you know about women in Unitarian Universalist history?"<sup>85</sup> The article served both to shock the readers into realizing the limited educational materials on UU women, and to make a statement; "The UUWF feels it is important to record the colorful and inspiring stories of women in Unitarianism and Universalism, and is seeking funds to undertake a comprehensive history."<sup>86</sup> Part of addressing the representation of women in Unitarian Universalism meant addressing the effective erasure of women from their shared history.

Finally, the UUWF brought attention to the lack of women in the UUA. In 1971, Mary Lou Thompson, at the time the associate director and editor for the UUWF, reminded her audience that the denomination passed a General Resolution on Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women in 1970, yet the executive staffs of the UUA, Beacon Press, and the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC), were still all made up of men. She insisted UUs implement the resolution in their own denomination, stating that women wanted an equal place in decision-making; "They ask to share leadership in creating a religion for our day."<sup>87</sup> In 1972, UUWF president Alice Kimball challenged the UUA and church members to undertake five actions in order to raise women's status within the religion. This included intentional recruitment of women for nomination to elective offices and hired positions in the UUA, and encouraging women to "seek participation in the movement."<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> "How Much Do You Know About Women in Unitarian Universalist History?" *Unitarian Universalist World: The Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association* 5, no. 1 (September, 1973): 8.

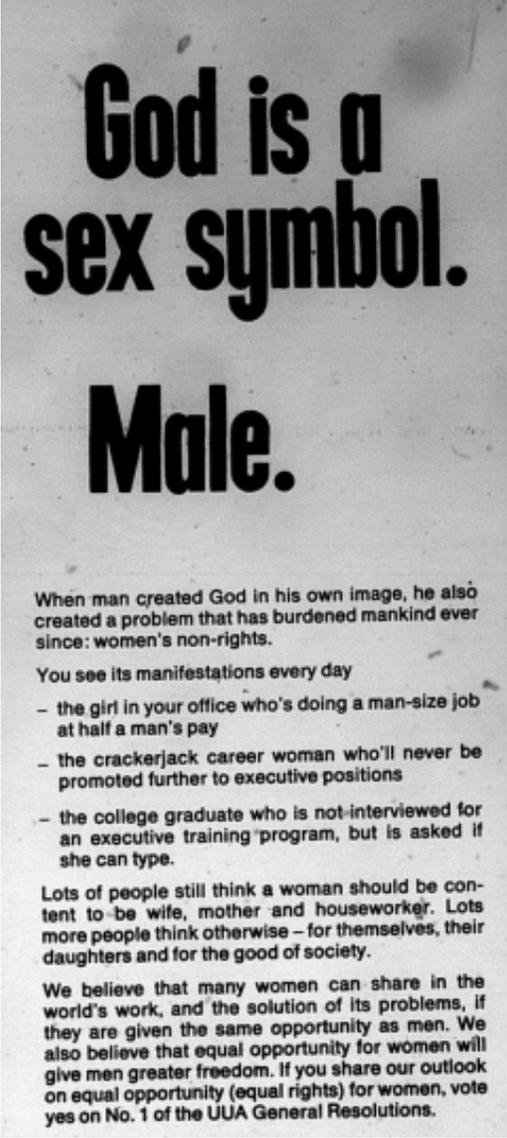
<sup>86</sup> "How Much Do You Know About Women in Unitarian Universalist History?" 8.

<sup>87</sup> "Women Demand Places in the UUA," 6.

<sup>88</sup> "GA Endorses Raising Status of Women," *Unitarian Universalist World: The Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association* 3, no. 10 (July, 1972): 7.

## Critiquing Unitarian Universalism

The call for more representation of women in the denominational leadership was one of many initiatives UU women undertook in order to criticize sexist practices in Unitarian Universalism. The UUWF started writing articles for the UUA newsletter that were shocking and rather angry in tone. In the second issue of the *UU World*, Mary Lou Thompson posed the question, “Do Unitarian Universalists care about the rights of women in employment?” to which she immediately answered herself, “Very little, judging from last year’s parish poll.”<sup>89</sup> This harsh opening is a clear departure from the writing style of the period before. The fourth issue of *UU World* included an advertisement placed by the UUWF to educate people on the unequal treatment of men and women, and encourage them to vote yes on UUA General Resolution No. 1 of the UUA. About half of the ad space explained why equal opportunities for women are important. The other half was dominated by the phrase, “God is a sex symbol. Male.”<sup>90</sup> This claim is both provocative and eye-catching, and represents a distinctly new strategy by



**God is a sex symbol. Male.**

When man created God in his own image, he also created a problem that has burdened mankind ever since: women's non-rights.

You see its manifestations every day

- the girl in your office who's doing a man-size job at half a man's pay
- the crackerjack career woman who'll never be promoted further to executive positions
- the college graduate who is not-interviewed for an executive training program, but is asked if she can type.

Lots of people still think a woman should be content to be wife, mother and houseworker. Lots more people think otherwise - for themselves, their daughters and for the good of society.

We believe that many women can share in the world's work, and the solution of its problems, if they are given the same opportunity as men. We also believe that equal opportunity for women will give men greater freedom. If you share our outlook on equal opportunity (equal rights) for women, vote yes on No. 1 of the UUA General Resolutions.

<sup>89</sup> Mary Lou Thompson, “UUWF,” *Unitarian Universalist World: The Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association* 1, no. 2 (March, 1970): 3.

<sup>90</sup> UUWF, Advertisement, *Unitarian Universalist World: The Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association* 1, no. 4 (April, 1970): 7.

the Federation to attract the attention of UUs to inform them of women's issues and encourage participation in women's rights activism.

Unitarian Universalist women also criticized common practices within the religion, such as the gender gap in terms of volunteering for church events. During its meeting in May of 1971, the UUWF long range planning committee also noted a general under-appreciation of women volunteers. They observed, "Women have always provided support to the church when needed, and many have felt, once accomplished, their deeds were ignored, after a few – sometimes patronizing, kindly pats on the back."<sup>91</sup> In addition to women's contributions to their church communities going unpaid, they were often going unappreciated, due to the expectation that women always volunteer their time and energy.

In 1973, in the UUWF supplement to the *UU World*, *Speak Out!*, the Federation posited the question, "Should women give freely of their time to carry on service in their communities which could be done by paid workers?"<sup>92</sup> Spurred by the National Organization for Women's task force on volunteerism, the question got at the root of how many UU churches functioned – with men in the paid positions supported by the unpaid yet necessary labor of women volunteers. In the following issue of *Speak Out!*, the UUWF published some of the responses they received in reaction to this article. The responses captured the intricacies of the issue; addressing the desire to still promote volunteerism because of the good it brings to the individual and to the world, the balance between wanting to volunteer while not wanting to undercut job opportunities for people who need work, and reflecting the need for a structural shift in the United States in order to render volunteerism unnecessary. Georgia Kunkel wrote that while she acknowledged the potential benefits of volunteering, she also tackled the question of sexism, writing, "When

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<sup>91</sup> Long Range Planning Task Force Report, 2.

<sup>92</sup> "Controversy Today on Women as Volunteers." *Speak Out!: Supplement to UU World* (November, 1973): 1.

one sex is type-cast to do all the free service in our culture and the other sex makes all the administrative decisions, this is sexism...”<sup>93</sup>

While there was a debate to be had on pros and cons of volunteering as a general practice, one thing made perfectly clear through these letters to the editor is that volunteering remained an overwhelmingly feminine activity within Unitarian Universalist congregations. The UUWF sought to question this practice, which could contribute to the idea that women’s work was not worth the same as men’s. The UUWF brought their activism for women into the religious sphere by examining the economic and value impact of common practices within Unitarian Universalist congregations.



The UUWF took on its most public critique yet of sexism within Unitarian Universalism in the summer of 1974, when it hosted a Feminist Salon for Women and Power, held at the same time as the annual General Assembly of the UUA. The UUWF intended it as an event to raise the consciousness of officers, delegates, and general members of the denomination and demonstrate “that women in the church have not yet realized full equality in religious affairs and are still playing largely stereotyped roles in their local churches and are under-represented at the decision-making level.”<sup>94</sup> With this event, members of the UUWF specifically laid out their

<sup>93</sup> Georgia Kunkel, “Sexism in Volunteering,” *Speak Out!: Supplement to UU World* (February, 1974): 2.

<sup>94</sup> Invitation for Sarah Bentley-Doely to the Feminist Salon, May 21, 1974, Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation, President Records, 1959-1974; 1977-1979, bMS 1234, box 1 folder Feminist Salon for Women and Power (1), Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School.

objections to systemic issues within Unitarian Universalism and set themselves in opposition to the business-as-usual happenings at the General Assembly.

The Feminist Salon was not just aimed at Unitarian Universalist women. The Federation invited women leaders from various fields to share their wisdom and learn from the community. Among the distinguished invitees was Ruth Bader Ginsberg, then teaching at Columbia Law School and on the Board of Directors at the American Civil Liberties Union.<sup>95</sup> The UUWF invited women from various religious denominations, feminist organizations such as the Association of Feminist Consultants and the National Organization for Women and powerful women in a variety of fields not traditionally thought of as “feminist.”<sup>96</sup> The Feminist Salon for Women and Power was not merely a two-hour gathering of UU women to share their experiences of misogyny within the church. It was an event attended by some of the more powerful women in the country, aimed at both raising the consciousness of Unitarian Universalists and starting a wider conversation about how feminism and religion could go together.

Many women invited to attend the Salon released press statements about it, further raising the profile of the event and the issues. Judith Leaming, at the Commission on the Status and Role of Women in the United Methodist Church, wrote, “We are in wholehearted agreement with you that religious women are bonded together in common pursuit of full equality in

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<sup>95</sup> Invitation for Ruth Bader Ginsberg at the American Civil Liberties Union to the Feminist Salon, May 29, 1974, Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation, President Records, 1959-1974; 1977-1979, bMS 1234, box 1 folder Feminist Salon for Women and Power (2), Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School.

<sup>96</sup> Invitations to the Feminist Salon for Women and Power. Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation, President Records, 1959-1974; 1977-1979, bMS 1234, box 1 folder Feminist Salon for Women and Power (1), Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School; Invitation for the Association of Feminist Consultants to the Feminist Salon, Invitation for the National Organization for Women to the Feminist Salon, June 17, 1974, Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation, President Records, 1959-1974; 1977-1979, bMS 1234, box 1 folder Feminist Salon for Women and Power (1), Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School.

religious life.”<sup>97</sup> She affirmed the sharing of ideas, support, and resources between women of different religions. The Feminist Salon made women’s status in Unitarian Universalism not simply an issue of relevance to the UU community, but to the religious community as a whole.

The Salon also served to bring the issue of religious feminism to the attention of women concerned with the broader women’s movement. Vicki Mosa, from the Central Bank in New York City, wrote, “To use a religious conference as a forum to discuss such controversial issues as ‘women’ and ‘power’ is innovative and exciting.”<sup>98</sup> Her statement suggests that the idea of religion and feminism going together was not something she had previously considered very seriously. She went on to address various definitions of power, including, “the wherewithal to effect change.”<sup>99</sup> She further took the opportunity to connect her role in banking to the aims of the UU women taking up the cause of feminism within their religious faith. “They want to do what they, as human beings, should do – use their creative energies to shape culture: religious institutions, economic institutions, all the institutions that make up a social system.”<sup>100</sup> The Feminist Salon for Women and Power hosted by the UUWF was a key turning point in the Federation’s strategies in terms of connecting UU feminism to broader movements.

## **Conclusion**

The middle period of Unitarian Universalist women’s activism is characterized by an increasingly outward focus. UU feminists broadened their definitions of what it meant to be a feminist as well as who to include in their activist efforts. Additionally, rather than working to

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<sup>97</sup> Response on the Feminist Salon from Judith Leaming Elmer at the Commission on the Status and Role of Women in the United Methodist Church, Jun 12, 1974, Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation, President Records, 1959-1974; 1977-1979, bMS 1234, box 1 folder Feminist Salon for Women and Power (1), Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School, 1.

<sup>98</sup> Response on the Feminist Salon from Vicki Mosa at the Central State Bank in New York City, June 21, 1974, Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation, President Records, 1959-1974; 1977-1979, bMS 1234, box 1 folder Feminist Salon for Women and Power (1), Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School, 1.

<sup>99</sup> Response on the Feminist Salon from Vicki Mosa, 2.

<sup>100</sup> Response on the Feminist Salon from Vicki Mosa, 2.

improve the rights only of Unitarian Universalist women, they started working for the rights of all women, often participating in activism that was not related to UUs or religion, but helped women who came from different class and racial backgrounds. They continued to work to improve the status and representation of women within their own denomination, keeping a certain level of an inward activism, but that was no longer their primary concern.

Influenced by the mainstream feminist movement of the time, UU feminists became increasingly radical in their tactics, culminating in their most public criticism of their religion, the Feminist Salon for Women and Power. By reaching out to “secular” feminist groups and individuals to contribute to their own attempts to dismantle the patriarchy within Unitarian Universalism, the Salon was an event combining inward and outward activism. Scheduling it to compete with the UUA’s General Assembly, one of the very institutions the UUWF was criticizing, served as one of the most attention-grabbing actions the UUWF had organized up until this point. The Feminist Salon for Women and Power was a major turning point for members of the UUWF in terms of the tactics employed to make its grievances known and strategize for improvements to the denomination’s treatment of women. However, as the subsequent decade showed, it was just the start of a new period of more radical and introspective activism for Unitarian Universalist women.

## Chapter 3

### Religious Feminism Unitarian Universalist Women's Activism 1975-1986

#### Introduction

“With the hold the patriarchy has on all religions, how can one possibly be religious and a feminist too?”<sup>101</sup> This was the question posed by a Danish woman at a workshop in Copenhagen at the July 1980 United Nations Mid-Decade Conference for Women. Called to assess the progress made since the 1975 conference and to set priorities for the UN Decade for Women (1976-1985), over eight thousand women were in attendance. Lucile Schuck and Lili Hahn, two prominent UU activists had been concerned with the lack of religion in the 1975 conference, and helped run two workshops designed to address just this question posed by the Danish woman; a question that had increasingly taken hold in the minds of Unitarian Universalist feminists.

As feminism grew within Unitarian Universalism in the 1970s, the question of how feminism and religion connect had become ever more prominent in the minds of religious women of many denominations. The year 1975 was a pivotal time for them to reevaluate their own definitions of feminism for a number of reasons: it marked the end of the Vietnam War and the start of the United Nations Decade for Women. Both of these events had far-reaching implications for how women in the United States related to the world and their own activism. However, one event that was particularly significant for UU women was the formation of the Women and Religion task force.

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<sup>101</sup> Rosemary Matson, “UU Workshops Start Women Talking at Copenhagen,” *Unitarian Universalist World: The Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association* 11, no. 13 (September, 1980): 3.

By the late 1970s, many of the artificial barriers between feminist organizations had broken down.<sup>102</sup> For many women's groups this initially meant coming together to form a more universal feminism rather than the splintering off into more specific groups that had occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s. However, there were also some defectors. In the 1980s, two groups of people in particular dropped out of the feminist movement in large numbers; men, and women who saw the movement as neglecting maternal needs.<sup>103</sup> After the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment in 1983, even more people, exhausted by the continued failures to affect positive political change for women, stopped or dramatically decreased their feminist activism.<sup>104</sup> The late 1970s and early 1980s saw the women's movement shrink, as well as the adoption of causes not traditionally considered feminist, such as peace and environmental movements.<sup>105</sup>

This chapter examines the influence of the Women and Religion task force on the wider feminist movement within Unitarian Universalism. It had a profound effect on the Unitarian Universalist Association and broader UU theology and conversation, including the feminist agenda of the Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation. It re-centered the activist thinking to focus more on Unitarian Universalism itself and address the sexism inherent in the religion's structure. Women and Religion caused a denominational shift back towards introspective activism, with the aim of eliminating patriarchal practices closest to home in addition to working for the rights of all women.

Unitarian Universalist women did not ignore broader issues such as the Equal Rights Amendment, the right to abortion, and the intersection of age and gender during this period. On

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<sup>102</sup> Ryan, *Feminism and the Women's Movement*, 89.

<sup>103</sup> Ryan, *Feminism and the Women's Movement*, 105.

<sup>104</sup> Ryan, *Feminism and the Women's Movement*, 137.

<sup>105</sup> Ryan, *Feminism and the Women's Movement*, 137.

the contrary, these issues remained very much at the forefront of their activism. However, in the second half of the 1970s into the mid-1980s, Unitarian Universalist women also pushed boundaries, empowering individuals and embracing a wider range of people and issues. But UU feminism in 1975-1986 was defined by further radicalization of strategies and aims. Members performed introspective activism by examining and criticizing their own organizational structure and that of Unitarian Universalism as an institution, as is evidenced through coverage of feminist issues and organizing in the *Unitarian Universalist World*, the official newsletter of the UUA, and documents from the Women and Religion task force.

In a period in which the broader women's movement was facing dwindling support and branching out to focus on issues not easily recognizable as feminist, the Women and Religion movement re-centered UU women's activism on celebrating women within the denomination. UU feminists during this period also reigned in the breadth of issues they chose to work on, focusing more, though not exclusively, on localized issues and causes directly applicable to Unitarian Universalism. Perhaps, like many feminists of the period, they felt disillusioned by the loss of the ERA, but UU women did not give up, they simply refocused their energies towards home, on battles that were more easily won but still had a positive impact on their communities. Part of this inward focus was due to the strength and prominence of the Women and Religion movement, which doubled down in the 1980s to encourage more introspective critique of the religious structure as well as a drive to empower individual women within the denomination.

### **UUWF Empowering Individuals**

The UUWF continued to embrace and recruit a wider range of women to its organization from the late 1970s through the mid-1980s. A key step in this process was the vote at the eighth biennial convention of the UUWF to change its bylaws. The 82 delegates voted, for the first time

in history, to give every UUWF member an individual vote, empowering women as individuals to have a greater direct impact in the organization than ever before.<sup>106</sup> This is not to say that individuals had not previously had a voice in the Federation. Many of the resolutions and initiatives the UUWF advocated for originally began in small women's groups at local organizations across the country. Nevertheless, this action was a key step in acknowledging the opinions of each and every woman in the Federation.

The UUWF took another step to empower individual UU women activists when they discontinued *Speak Out!* and replaced it with *Kyriokos* in 1976. In an advertisement announcing the switch, the UUWF called for submissions from any and all UU women. This new supplement to the *UU World* would contain paid articles written by any woman who should like to offer her opinion or experience on the theme for that quarter.<sup>107</sup> In that advertisement there was also an asterisk after the name, explaining, "The classic definition of the word 'church' from the Greek 'Kyriokos' is 'circle of power.'" This connection to the circle reinforced the idea that all women had an equal voice in the UU women's movement, were equally important to the work of the UUWF, and indeed were powerful.

In April of 1977, the Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation passed the Religion and Human Dignity Resolution at its biennial meeting.<sup>108</sup> This resolution set forth the purpose of the Federation "to join wholeheartedly with men and women everywhere in striving for universal human dignity, freedom and peace." Not only was the Federation expanding its reach in terms of the number and diversity of women that they sought to empower, it was also explicitly calling for men to join them in their feminist work. In this statement they broadened their definition of

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<sup>106</sup> "UUWF Votes Bylaw Change, Adopts Budget," *Unitarian Universalist World: The Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association* 8, no. 9 (May, 1977): 3.

<sup>107</sup> UUWF, Advertisement, *Speak Out!: Supplement to UU World* (June, 1977): 3.

<sup>108</sup> "Religion and Human Dignity," *Kyriokos: A Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation* vol. 1, no. 9 (May 15, 1978): 1.

feminism, working on behalf of all people, grounded in the denominational principle of the inherent worth and dignity of each individual.

In 1982, UUWF president Denise T. Davidoff, for the first time, personally addressed the General Assembly. In her remarks Davidoff expressed concern that so many UUs either “‘know nothing’ about or hold misconceived or stereotyped views of the Federation.”<sup>109</sup> In her address she simply stated, “The reality of the UUWF today is growth, diversity, change, and clout.” This suggests that perhaps popular misconceptions about the Federation were along the lines of considering it a small organization with minimal influence and a narrow scope of issues. In order to foster a more direct path of communication from the Federation to UUs, Davidoff presented an overview of the UUWF’s advocacy programs and service projects at GA, particularly noting those dealing with reproductive choice, day care, and the needs of older women. While the perceived need for this new practice indicates that the Federation’s goals were not being communicated effectively to the religious community, Davidoff’s commitment to righting this misstep affirms the Federation’s goal of reaching a broader and more diverse membership.

The UUWF acknowledged the value of each UU woman in 1985 by awarding the UUWF Ministry to Women Award to “the Women in the Pews.”<sup>110</sup> This was not only a celebratory recognition of current women in the denomination, but also served as a celebration of UU heroines of the past. This decision to acknowledge and show appreciation for the average woman, even if she had not accomplished anything “‘remarkable,’” was an important statement by the UUWF. Notably, this award had historically only been given to non-UU individuals or

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<sup>109</sup> Ellen Spencer, “Another First: UUWF President Officially Reports to a GA,” *Unitarian Universalist World: The Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association* 13, no. 7 (July, 1982): 10.

<sup>110</sup> “UUWF Faces Changing Times,” *Unitarian Universalist World: The Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association* 16, no. 8 (August, 1985): 13.

organizations. This decision reflects both an effort to reach a wider audience and an inward focus by UU feminists.

### **Women and Religion and Introspective Activism**

While the UUWF's dedication to including more women was an important characteristic of UU women's activism during this period, perhaps the most dramatic shift was in the Women and Religion movement, which took on an introspective analysis of sexism inherent within Unitarian Universalism. In 1975 a group of women formed the Women and Religion task force. Separate from the UUWF but still under the umbrella of the Unitarian Universalist Association, the task force sought to examine the history and contemporary manifestations of sexism within Unitarian Universalism. While efforts by the UUWF had previously focused primarily on correcting language and advocating for more women in paid positions, Women and Religion looked at sexism in a much broader way. At the 1977 General Assembly they proposed a resolution to this end.<sup>111</sup> In the words of Rosemary Matson, a primary task force leader, "The underlying myths and assumptions that have created and perpetuated this imbalance in our liberal religious movement need to be identified and understood and reprogrammed. Only then will the spiritual needs of women begin to be fulfilled."<sup>112</sup>

This type of activism was more radical than any activism that came before, but it did not come out of nowhere. Criticism of the patriarchal structure of religious traditions was not a new idea; Margaret Brackenbury Crook had argued against the sexism inherent in religious institutions in 1964 (see chapter one). However in 1964 there was no officially recognized group whose sole purpose was to scrutinize Unitarian Universalist religious traditions and its sexist theological assumptions. Crook provided a base theoretical framework for the Women and

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<sup>111</sup> "UUWF votes bylaw change, adopts budget," 3.

<sup>112</sup> Rosemary Matson, "GA Resolution on Women and Religion: a great human task has a beginning," *Unitarian Universalist World: The Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association* 8, no.11 (July, 1977): 3.

Religion task force. But she was not an activist, nor did her work influence the entire path of feminism within Unitarian Universalism as Women and Religion did. The UUWF's increasing work to improve representation for women within UU institutions and its Feminist Salon for Women and Power were also precursors to the Women and Religion task force. However, unlike the UUWF, Women and Religion sought to challenge the myths and dominant ideology within its religion that led to women's demeaned status. They hoped to cure both the symptoms and the illness.

### **Women and Religion and the Evolution of UU Feminism**

Following the passage of the Resolution on Women and Religion at the 1977 General Assembly, it became clear that the UUA leadership both accepted the feminist theory behind it, and was committed to changing practices criticized by Women and Religion. Pamphlets distributed at the National Women's Conference in Houston included an introduction by the president of the UUA, Paul Carnes. He enthusiastically threw his support behind the resolution, stating that it "recognizes that the elimination of sexism is both an *individual* and an *institutional*, a *spiritual* as well as a *socio-economic* problem."<sup>113</sup> Evidently, the Women and Religion task force was being listened to and taken seriously by the administration at the Unitarian Universalist Association.

Later in 1978, Carnes launched a three-year program with the goal of eradicating sexism within Unitarian Universalism. Specific actions planned for the coming year included: district-appointed Women and Religion chairpeople and committees, a Women and Religion Continental Conference, and an Affirmative Action Program for women ministers.<sup>114</sup> In addition to these

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<sup>113</sup> "The GA Resolution on Women and Religion: A Task Force Works to Implement it," *Unitarian Universalist World: The Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association* 9, no. 7 (April, 1978): 6.

<sup>114</sup> "Three-year Program Aims to Eradicate Sexism," *Unitarian Universalist World: The Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association* 9, no. 13 (September, 1978): 2.

plans for the near future, President Carnes took immediate action by appointing Reverend Leslie Cronin as “Minister of Women and Religion.” In this new position she would work with UUA staff in Education, Ministry and Extension in order to develop material, programs, and policies that “carry out the intent of the resolution.”<sup>115</sup> Commenting on her new role, Rev. Cronin stated, “Because our religion is the matrix of meaning and values and attitudes we hold towards ourselves, one another, and the society in which we live, the task of examining our attitudes towards women is a religious task.”<sup>116</sup> While the Danish woman at the UN conference in Copenhagen would later ask how religion fits with feminism, many UUs were already questioning how religion and feminism mixed in the late 1970s. Upon the initial passing of the Women and Religion resolution, many UUs were asking this the other way around; how does feminism fit with religion? To Ms. Cronin, the answer was very simply, because both frameworks affirm the worth and dignity of all people, and require action to that end by their followers.

In its Religion and Human Dignity resolution, the UUWF explicitly affirmed the idea that “religious myths, historical materials, generic language, and other resources perpetuate assumptions and attitudes that cause the talents of women throughout the world to be overlooked and underused.”<sup>117</sup> The influence of the Women and Religion task force is evident in this language. Up until this point, the recognition of the role of the patriarchy within Unitarian Universalism had not been officially endorsed by the UUWF. While individual members, including some prominent leaders, had taken up this critical stance, it was not until this resolution was passed in 1977 that the Unitarian Universalist Women’s Federation, as an

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<sup>115</sup> “Three-year Program Aims to Eradicate Sexism,” *Unitarian Universalist World: The Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association* 9, no. 13 (September, 1978): 2.

<sup>116</sup> “Three-year Program Aims to Eradicate Sexism,” 2.

<sup>117</sup> “Religion and Human Dignity,” 1.

institution, endorsed this viewpoint. The resolution also called upon “all UU women to examine carefully their own religious beliefs” in order to investigate the extent to which they might influence their own self-worth and dignity, and called on all Unitarian Universalists to take note of the ways in which women were diminished in religious literature, even in UU church services. Not only was the UUWF being explicitly critical of its own faith, but it was also, for the first time, calling on its entire religious community to do the same. This resolution is evidence of Women and Religion’s influence on the feminist philosophy and strategies of the UUWF.

The effect of this introspective activism by Women and Religion is seen in the UUWF’s activism not specifically related to issues of sexism within Unitarian Universalism. The Federation undertook efforts to ensure that it was serving its members as well as possible. An issue that had been voiced in the early 1970s was that of how many groups to include in Unitarian Universalist women’s activism. In an article “Can Just One Unit Please Everyone?” multiple UU women were quoted as saying their churches had several different women’s groups centering on different issues, making the structure of the UUWF appear similar to Russian nesting dolls.<sup>118</sup> While women felt these small, focused groups were productive, the overall structure was rather chaotic, as was later confirmed by the Taft Corporation.

In 1976 the UUWF hired the J.R. Taft Corporation, a consulting firm that specialized in helping non-profit organizations, to help ensure that the UUWF was meeting the needs of its members and functioning in the most productive manner possible.<sup>119</sup> Taft found the UUWF constituency consisted mainly of women who were homemakers, over 50 and employed at volunteer jobs. The women’s groups lacked a single articulated purpose, and survey respondents indicated a need for strengthened leadership, educational programs and intergroup

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<sup>118</sup> “Can Just One Unit Please Everyone?” *Speak Out!: Supplement to UU World* (November, 1972): 1.

<sup>119</sup> “UUWF to Undertake Three-Year Expansion,” *Unitarian Universalist World: The Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association* 7, no. 6 (April, 1976): 1.

communications on the local level. In response to this feedback, the UUWF undertook a membership expansion and development program that included new program efforts and publications, and an augmented staff.<sup>120</sup>

In addition to affecting programs and actions by the UUA and the UUWF, Women and Religion had a wide-reaching effect on the denomination itself by helping to bring feminism explicitly into divinity school curricula. In 1981, the Harvard Divinity School “established a program to serve as an international center for research and teaching in Women’s Studies in Religion,” an action that explicitly stemmed from “eight years of pioneering work on women and religion at the Divinity School.”<sup>121</sup> By incorporating women’s studies into theological training for new ministers, Women and Religion ensured the connection between religion and feminism would remain for generations to come.

### **Women and Religion Politicizing the Mundane**

One of the most defining characteristics of Women and Religion’s feminism is its politicizing of the mundane. The theory behind the formation of the Women and Religion task force was that religion as an institution is inherently sexist due to its patriarchal structure. Women and Religion sought to get UUs to recognize this, and worked to change it within its own denomination. In 1979, the Women and Religion task force recommended congregations implement a “Women and Religion Sunday” in order to raise awareness for the ways in which women were undervalued in the contemporary structure of the service and church community. Suggestions for what congregations could do on that Sunday included: having men pour coffee following the service while women serve as the ushers, having men make food for sale for lunch, have a display on historical UU women, particularly those in the UUA, have a book sale

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<sup>120</sup> “UUWF to Undertake Three-Year Expansion, 1.

<sup>121</sup> “Women’s Studies,” *Unitarian Universalist World: The Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association* 12, no. 2 (February, 1981): 10.

featuring only books on women's issues, and presenting non-sexist versions of old and familiar hymns for use in the service.<sup>122</sup> These were all fairly small, but significant changes to make, particularly switching what had traditionally been male or female roles in the church service. Yet this is exemplary of the kind of change Women and Religion was calling for. They argued that the patriarchy influenced all levels of church life, all of which needed addressing. This is demonstrated in their suggestions for Women and Religion Sunday.

One of Women and Religion's most contentious proposals was to change language in Unitarian Universalist hymns in order to make them non-sexist and more representative of the UU churchgoing population. Women and Religion advocated a "degenderizing" of language, such as replacing "man" with "human." This turned out to be an extremely controversial topic. It was consistently written about in the *UU World*, in letters to the editor, and in full articles reporting on the subject. From 1977 onward, the topic of how to handle sexist language was hotly debated in UUA's official newsletter. In 1978, Karol Jensen wrote a letter to the editor arguing that gender neutral language is simply accurate, and anyone who says the word "man" and means "people" or "somebody" or "who," hasn't thought about it long enough.<sup>123</sup>

Throughout the 70s and early 80s, letters like this were common in the *UU World*. In April of 1978 two women wrote letters to the editor objecting to an article about qualities prized in ministers, but which used only male pronouns. These women both wrote in to remind the author, David Pohl, that there were 35 settled women ministers and 75 women theological students training for the ministry. Their letters were followed by an apology from the editors explaining

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<sup>122</sup> Rosemary Matson Papers, 1971-2011; Some Suggestions For: Women and Religion Sunday, April 30, 1979, MC 760, folder 4.13, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

<sup>123</sup> Karol L. Jensen, "Fine Word, But," *Unitarian Universalist World: The Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association* 9, no. 1 (January, 1978): 5.

why the mistake was made and ensuring readers of Pohl's and the newsletter's commitment to gender equality.<sup>124</sup>

Some wrote in expressing agreement with the sentiment behind degendering the language, but arguing that in the long run, it would be better to increase the number of references to women and the feminine so it was equal or similar to the number of references to men and the masculine. The Reverend Roy Phillips argued that to demasculinize God, UUs would be left with hymns "echoing in an utterly depersonalized, desacralized cosmos. The world of 'it' affirms not persons: not women, not men."<sup>125</sup> He called for an alternative in which the UU faith would commission young poets to create hymns that used feminine imagery for the "Mystery." Others argued about the practicality of it all, particularly in terms of copyright laws, and for the value of tradition.

Some were outright against the idea of changing language in the Unitarian Universalist tradition. In 1983 Dean Allen wrote a scathing letter to the editor in which he called those who were demanding gender-neutral language "psychotic women."<sup>126</sup> Thomas Carroll wrote a letter to the editor in 1985 stating, "Let those who find themselves emotionally disturbed by singing or speaking the words written in good faith in another time and place feel free to make whatever oral changes they wish."<sup>127</sup> Evidently, the response to Women and Religion's activism was not always positive. Many Unitarian Universalists, despite their stated principle valuing each life equally, rejected the idea that structural sexism could exist within their religion, and pushed the responsibility of change onto those who already felt marginalized.

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<sup>124</sup> Dorothy Boroush and Christine C. Robinson, "C is for Solid," *Unitarian Universalist World: The Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association* 9, no. 6 (April 1, 1978): 5.

<sup>125</sup> Roy Phillips, "Regenderize," *Unitarian Universalist World: The Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association* 15, no. 1 (January, 1984): 7.

<sup>126</sup> Dean Allen, "Sexist Language," *Unitarian Universalist World: The Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association* 14, no. 9 (January, 1983): 11.

<sup>127</sup> Thomas L. Carroll, "Degenderizing," *Unitarian Universalist World: The Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association* 16, no. 1 (January, 1985): 15.

Despite the mixed opinions expressed in the *UU World* over the gendered language issue, Women and Religion continued to influence change on this matter. In 1979 the UUA Commission on Common Worship published an update in the *UU World* in which it announced its goal to eliminate “exclusionary language and preference for male gender.” It also noted that revisionism in hymns was nothing new; Universalists removed “hell” and Unitarians eliminated references to the Trinity. They related their modern move to degenderize language in hymns and readings as stemming from the same place as their religious predecessors, “an act of conscience and theological affirmation – for freedom, equality, and a richer future for us all.”<sup>128</sup> In 1980 the UUA released a new guide called “Guidelines for Avoiding Sexist Language” for use by Unitarian Universalist congregations.<sup>129</sup> And progress continued when, in 1986, the UUA Board approved plans for a new hymnal “to reflect a diversity of theological outlooks and musical styles and show a particular sensitivity to inclusiveness of language.”<sup>130</sup>

By politicizing seemingly mundane issues like the particularities of language used in sermons, hymns, and readings, Women and Religion had an immense impact on the worship style and practices of Unitarian Universalism. As Jeanne Nieuwejaar noted in “Feminist Theology Changes Church Life” in 1986, the Women and Religion movement, though making seemingly small changes, was truly very strong. It changed not only the theoretical bases of UU’s religious meaning, but also seeped into almost every aspect of religious life. As Jeanne Nieuwejaar noted, “very pragmatic ways of being religious together are grounded in our theological conceptualizing, and so our communities, our worship, our programming and our

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<sup>128</sup> John Corrado et al., “Moving Beyond Gender,” *Unitarian Universalist World: The Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association* 10, no. 14 (January, 1979): 4.

<sup>129</sup> “Non-sexist Guide,” *Unitarian Universalist World: The Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association* 11, no. 10 (January, 1980): 2.

<sup>130</sup> “UUA Board Approves Plan for New Hymnal,” *Unitarian Universalist World: The Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association* 17, no. 2 (January, 1986): 1.

symbols are changing as well.”<sup>131</sup> Nieuwejaar noted how the water ceremony, created by Carolyn McDade and Lucile Schuck for the 1980 Women and Religion Convocation re-envisioned how worship could exist and continued to be practiced in churches and conferences across the United States. She ended her article by examining the “web of interdependence of all of life,” a key idea in Unitarian Universalist theology. She acknowledged that “we must credit the changes in church life to multiple interwoven sources, women and religion among others” such as civil rights, gay rights, peace, and ecology movements.<sup>132</sup> Women and Religion’s influence helped make clear the idea that feminism and religion were not mutually exclusive but were in fact inextricably intertwined.

### **Mixed Reactions to Women and Religion**

Though Women and Religion eventually was successful in inserting more gender-neutral language into UU publications, there was some ongoing conflict over the issue. Even though Women and Religion had the support of the UUA president, when it came to individual church members, the reaction to Women and Religion’s critiques was mixed. So too, was the response to Women and Religion’s activism. Despite gains, many UUs in 1985 did not feel that the 1977 Women and Religion Resolution had been taken seriously enough. In a special issue of the *UU World* in 1985, the newsletter published responses to a call it had put out asking for readers’ views on the progress (or lack thereof) on reducing sexism. Women who firmly believed in the goals of the resolution made up the majority of the published submissions criticizing the limited progress since its passage. Articles with titles such as “Meager Results,” “Very Little,” and

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<sup>131</sup> Jeanne Nieuwejaar, “Feminist Theology Changes Church Life,” *Unitarian Universalist World: The Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association* 17, no. 11 (November, 1986): 3.

<sup>132</sup> Nieuwejaar, “Feminist Theology Changes Church Life,” 3.

“Recognition Lacking” argued that while the intention of the resolution was good, the implementation had been underwhelming.<sup>133</sup>

Priscilla Hinckley wrote to the newsletter saying, “There is a growing feeling that institutional churches, through beliefs and teachings, validate man’s dominance and women’s second-class citizenship. I believe that is as true of our church as any others.”<sup>134</sup> Her succinct denial of feminist progress within the UU church was not in spite of the Women and Religion Resolution but because of it. She had originally been thrilled at its introduction, but her congregation then voted down an Audit on Sexism. She was also increasingly frustrated that ministers frequently simply mixed the word “she” into their sermons, not adjusting the content or encouraging feminist activism in the church in order to combat stereotypes and gender norms that perpetuated women’s disempowerment within their faith community.<sup>135</sup> Her criticism of the denomination was not unique. Many women felt that the passage of the resolution was simply church members patting themselves on the back for a job well done as if that was the end goal and there was no more work to do.

Although this was a common critique, there was also a fair amount of praise for the resolution. One woman, Shirley Josephson, wrote in about how the Women and Religion movement helped her “be freed of the centuries old shackles on the female mind and *dare to imagine!*” It allowed her to visualize a God made in her own image.<sup>136</sup> The resolution gave Josephson hope that her great granddaughters would be able to grow up “whole and free and God-loving, if the work of the Women & Religion Committee continues.” Praise for the Women

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<sup>133</sup> Jeanine Lamoureux Emmons, “Very Little”; Priscilla Hinckley, “Meager Results”; Mary Lou Thompson, “Recognition Lacking,” *Unitarian Universalist World: The Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association* 16, no. 4 (April, 1985): 6-7.

<sup>134</sup> Hinckley, “Meager Results,” 6.

<sup>135</sup> Hinckley, “Meager Results,” 7.

<sup>136</sup> Shirley Josephson, “Finding the Goddess,” *Unitarian Universalist World: The Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association* 16, no. 4 (April, 1985): 6.

and Religion resolution carried on in later editions of the *UU World*. Just two months later, an article in the Beacon Press supplement argued that feminists had revolutionized contemporary theology. From “challenging sexism in religious communities to proposing radically new modes of worship and devotion, feminists are transforming traditional ideas of what it means to be religious.”<sup>137</sup> Although the progress made by the Women and Religion movement was not as great as some would have preferred, the effects were truly wide reaching, altering multiple aspects of Unitarian Universalist theology and practice.

## **Conclusion**

Feminism within Unitarian Universalism from 1975-1986 was as strong as ever. In 1985 the Unitarian Universalist Women’s Federation Biennial set an attendance record, with 364 people in the crowd, well above previous counts of less than 200.<sup>138</sup> UUWF president, Clarise Jefferson, when commenting on the convention’s success, noted, “UU women are interested in theology.” This simple statement sums up the feminist activism of Unitarian Universalism of this period. UU women were looking inward, combatting sexism in their own religion, and questioning how feminism and theology mixed together.

In 1986 the UUWF board voted to adopt a new mission, to join women together “for mutual support, personal growth and spiritual enrichment” in order “to work toward a future where all women will be empowered to live their lives with a sense of wholeness and integrity in a world at peace that recognizes the worth and dignity of each individual.”<sup>139</sup> It also detailed part of its purpose as to “create a wider understanding of the barrier-breaking possibilities for both

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<sup>137</sup> “Feminists Transform Contemporary Theology.” *Beacon: Supplement to the UU World* vol. 16 no. 6 (June 15, 1985): 1.

<sup>138</sup> Ellen Spencer, “UUWF Biennial Sets Attendance Record,” *Unitarian Universalist World: The Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association* 16, no. 7 (July, 1985): 12.

<sup>139</sup> “Mission, Purpose, Goals Adopted by UUWF Board,” *UUWF Journal: A Supplement to UU WORLD*, 4, no. 3 (October, 1986): 3.

women and men of a religion transformed to include and honor women's perspectives as well as men's."<sup>140</sup> This new mission is illustrative of the feminist activism that gained prominence within Unitarian Universalism in 1975-1986. It hoped to help all people; not just Unitarian Universalists, not just women. It aimed to bring women and men together to address issues of sexism, recognizing that men are also affected by the patriarchy and are necessary to dismantle it. And finally, it firmly connected religion and feminism.

The UU women's movement evolved from focusing on middle class women to striving to encompass as many facets of womanhood as possible, with a focus on self-criticism that was buoyed by the Women and Religion movement that started in 1975. Unlike the wider women's movement, which faced decreasing numbers and a generally lower commitment to feminist causes, Unitarian Universalist women responded to the disappointments of the 1980s by focusing their efforts inward with a united effort.

Unitarian Universalists respected and encouraged UU women's activism through the support of the UUWF and Women and Religion, even when it required acknowledging the faults inherent in their own denomination. Unitarian Universalist women were not afraid to look inward and examine their own complicity in sexism, and when others did not seem open to their criticism, they did not shy away, but intensified their efforts to appeal to more UUs and bring them into their movement. "With the hold the patriarchy has on all religions, how can one possibly be religious and a feminist too?"<sup>141</sup> For Unitarian Universalists, one was not a feminist in spite of religious identity, but because of it.

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<sup>140</sup> "Mission, Purpose, Goals Adopted by UUWF Board," 3.

<sup>141</sup> Matson, "UU Workshops Start Women Talking at Copenhagen," 3.

## Conclusion

Unitarian Universalist women were incredibly active during the 1960s-1980s. Though often forgotten in popular narratives both about the second wave of feminism and Unitarian Universalism, they were key in maintaining a dialogue between the two ideologies. UU women organized long before the wider women's movement in the 1960s. In the Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation long range planning meeting in 1961, participants clearly defined how they saw culture and women interacting with one another, with each capable of influencing the other. By the late 1960s, the wider feminist movement highly influenced UU women activists, with the UUWF adopting a more radical stance and more extreme tactics in order to bring the entire denomination into its fight for all women's rights. Rather than existing as an organization for UU women by UU women, it expanded to become an organization of Unitarian Universalists working for all women. By the mid 1970s and through the mid 1980s, Unitarian Universalist women returned to an inward focus in their activism, though this time with a more introspective approach. But rather than inadvertently creating an exclusive organization, as had happened in the 1960s, the UUWF and Women and Religion used critiques of the structural sexism within Unitarian Universalism to bring their more radical activist practices back home.

As is evidenced from the UUWF's intentional interaction with the wider women's movement, the two ideologies were not mutually exclusive, but in fact nourished each other for many UU women during this period. Liberal religious feminists were in abundance in the United States. From 1961-1986, UU women engaged in activist efforts both to help others and to improve the treatment of women within their own denomination. The legacy of UU women's rights activists can still be seen in Unitarian Universalist churches today in the gender neutral language in hymnals, the increased presence of settled women ministers, and the continuation of

ceremonies created by UU women. The water ceremony, for example, was created by women for a Women and Religion conference. It is still widely used as a yearly part of services in congregations across the United States.

The work done by UU feminists in the 1960s-1980s had a lasting effect on the hiring practices within Unitarian Universalism. In 1999, the *New York Times* published a front-page article about the growth of women in the Unitarian Universalist clergy. The relatively unknown denomination of about 200,000 members caught the eye of the news giant because women became the majority of active clergy members. This was a remarkably dramatic growth from women making up 3% of the clergy in 1968 to 51% in 1999. UUs were not alone in their increasing numbers of women ministers; this was part of a larger trend in the United States of a feminization of the clergy. However, Unitarian Universalists were leading the pack, due in large part to the activist efforts of UU women.<sup>142</sup> Unitarian Universalist women during the 1960s-1980s unequivocally proved to themselves and the world that religion and feminism are not inherently at odds with one another, but go hand in hand.

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<sup>142</sup> Gustav Niebuhr, "Following Mothers, Women Heed Call to Nation's Pulpits," *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Apr 25, 1999, <http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/docview/110140208?accountid=10226>.



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