

THE FLAMING CHALICE

An Accidental Symbol of Great Import



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Abstract

The emergence of the flaming chalice as a universal element of religious worship in Unitarian Universalism occurred spontaneously within the last few decades. Here I explore the significance of that emergence both historically and symbolically, with an eye both towards how the symbol came to be and what it could come to mean in the future. In this analysis, I pay special attention to the materiality of the symbol as it evolved from a two-dimensional seal during World War II to a three-dimensional lamp included in religious ceremonies as well as the significance of its physicality in the roles it has played. I end with a simple meditation designed to encourage spontaneous exegetical reflection on the symbol of the flaming chalice.

Part 1 — The History of a Universal Symbol

The first thing that happens in nearly any Unitarian Universalist gathering today (especially if there is a minister present) is the lighting of the chalice. In a denomination with no creed, no myth, no saints, no sacred text, it sits as one of the few symbolic acts that unifies the entire movement. It is often subtle, with little fanfare, but it is hugely significant.

The adoption of this symbol seems almost accidental in retrospect, and yet, in it we find a remarkably deep symbolism emerging out of a considerably iconoclastic tradition. The two elements of this symbol: the chalice and the flame, are both symbols that have a deep history both within and without Christianity. Though the adoption of the symbol of the flaming chalice appears not to have been premeditated, its universal adoption says a great deal about the faith to which it belongs.

Adding the Third Dimension

By 1993, when the Unitarian Universalist hymnal, *Singing the Living Tradition* was published, the ritual practice of lighting the chalice had become so widespread that a section of the readings is devoted to the practice.¹ A mere ten years earlier, the practice was only starting to spread across the country. Recalling her own experience, Diggitt McLaughlin wrote:

Moving to Boston in 1983, I attended both Arlington Street and First and Second and have no memory of a chalice's being lighted during either church's service.

Then, in 1986 I returned to the NY area and started attending First Unitarian of Westchester--that's the first place I recall seeing a chalice lighted at the beginning of a

¹ Unitarian Universalist Association, *Singing the Living Tradition*, (Boston, Beacon Press: 1993), 447.

service. In about 1988 I visited the church in Berkeley or Oakland (I forget which) and a chalice was lighted and I thought, "Ah, so this is a THING now."²

In 2001, Betty Jo Middleton published an article investigating when and how the flaming chalice was transformed from a two-dimensional logo representing the denomination into a three-dimensional ritual object. Citing Daniel D. Hotchkiss, she wrote: "By the late 1970s, some congregations had begun to light actual chalices with real flames in them."³

No doubt, the spread of the use of this ritual object, from the late 70s through the mid-80s, depended at least partially on its material availability. While some churches have received home made chalices from parishioners (First Unitarian Church of Oakland being one contemporary example) many of them were probably inspired by the availability to congregations marketed through the denominational newsletter. Phillip Hewett recalled:

I made an archival check of orders of service in the Vancouver church and find that it first appeared there in the fall of 1979. To the best of my recollection this was because the church had just purchased a metal chalice which had a butane cartridge in its stem with enough fuel to burn during the service. It was not formally extinguished at that point. These chalices were being marketed by a congregation in, I think, Wisconsin or Minnesota. Someone with access to old copies of the Christian Register might want to check for advertisements of this.⁴

Figure 1 shows an example of the sort of flaming chalice often seen in Unitarian Universalist churches today. This particular image is well known to UUs as it graces the cover of

² Diggitt McLaughlin, e-mail to *Uuhs-chat mailing list*, May 7, 2016, <http://lists.uua.org/mailman/private/uuhs-chat/2016-May/013759.html>

³ Betty Jo Middleton, "The Flaming Chalice: From Logo to Religious Symbol With Help from the Religious Education Community," *Unitarian Universalist Curriculum and Resource Developers*, Accessed May 20, 2016, <http://www.uucards.org/middchalice.php>

⁴ Phillip Hewett, e-mail to *Uuhs-chat mailing list*, May 9, 2016, <http://lists.uua.org/mailman/private/uuhs-chat/2016-May/013811.html>



Figure 1. A typical flaming chalice as seen in many Unitarian Universalist churches today. Image courtesy of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA).

the most recent edition of *the Unitarian Universalist Pocket Guide*⁵ and is of the same style seen in churches and fellowships across the country.

How the Chalice Came to Unitarian Universalism

Before the flaming chalice was a three-dimensional ritual object, it was a two-dimensional symbol. Figure 2 shows the evolution of the logo of the Unitarian Universalist Association from the 1960s to today. The resemblance between the first logo of the UUA (left) and the material chalice depicted in Figure 1 is plain, but it is worth noting that the material chalice was based on the logo, not the other way around. The two circles visible in the first two versions of the flaming chalice symbol represent the two traditions of Unitarianism and Universalism. (One might speculate that the absence of these two circles in the latest edition of

⁵ Peter Morales, *The Unitarian Universalist Pocket Guide* (Boston: Skinner Books, 2012)



Figure 2. Official symbols of the Unitarian Universalist Association over time. Images courtesy of the UUA.

the UUA's logo could represent the fact that the two traditions have finally merged as most UUs in the 21st century have only known it as a single combined denomination and not as the two denominations that preceded it.) The original UUA logo is itself is the synthesis of the logo of the Unitarian Service Committee (Figure 3, left) and a symbol proposed by a group of Universalist ministers calling themselves the Humiliati (Figure 3, right). The origin of both of these symbols go back to the 1940s.



Figure 3. Unitarian Service Committee logo (left) and Universalist symbol of the Humiliati (right).

The Unitarian Service Committee

According to Warren Ross, the flaming chalice came into Unitarianism (and, by extension, into Unitarian Universalism) by way of the Unitarian Service Committee (USC) during World War II. He wrote, “Deutsch started working for the USC, and Joy asked him to design a symbol for the Committee that could be placed on its documents to make them look official and at the same time symbolize the nature of its work.” He goes on to quote a letter Joy sent to the USC executive directory in 1941 in which he enclosed a sketch saying that he had not “any idea of forcing this upon the committee without consulting them, but . . . as a temporary expedient [and that] it might well become the sign of our work everywhere. It represents, as you see, a chalice with a flame, the kind of chalice which the Greeks and Romans put on their altars. The holy oil burning in it is a symbol of helpfulness and sacrifice.”⁶

In asking Deutsch to develop a symbol for the USC’s communications, Joy understood the importance of material signs. In *How Things Shape the Mind*, Malafouris wrote “It is precisely through those subtle, mundane, often unconscious affective channels that material culture manifests its dynamic character and its semiotic force.”⁷ He cites Andrea Pellegram who speaks of letterheads “designed to leave a unique mark on memory” and that “Everything about it says ‘special purpose’”. He goes on to say, “If materiality can be seen to affect the meaning of a message, even in a case where the message is clearly articulated through the use of written language, one can easily imagine the impact of materiality on the vast majority of cases where

⁶ Warren R. Ross, *The Premise & the Promise*, (Boston: Skinner Books, 2001), 88.

⁷ Lambros Malafouris, *How Things Shape the Mind*, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2013), 93.

the message is not explicitly inscribed on matter but rather is embodied and objectified through matter.”⁸

Deutsch’s symbol, meant to lend legitimacy to an organization trying to liberate persecuted people from the Nazis, turned into a symbol to unify a gradually forming religious movement. Had Joy not seen the communicative value in proper letterhead, would the flaming chalice ever have become the symbol of Unitarian Universalism? Perhaps.

The Universalist Lamp

Dan Harper identifies a separate origin to the flaming chalice, namely from “the Rev. Kenneth L. Patton, humanist, Universalist, and minister at the Charles Street Meeting House” from 1949 to 1964.⁹ “[Patton] led the experiment in trying to make Universalism a universal religion.” Harper writes, “the flaming chalice had its origins in the Charles Street Meeting House: At the beginning of each worship service, Patton lit a flame in a lamp the shape of which was based on Graeco-Roman forms, and photographs in the book [*A Religion for One World*] show that this lamp looked very much like early flaming chalices.”¹⁰

Unitarian Service + Universalist Perennialism

In either case, we have a denomination that is in the process of separating itself from its Christian heritage. In the former case, Joy wrote that the fact that the flaming chalice in its early

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Charles A. Howe, *The Larger Faith*, (Boston: Skinner Books, 1993), 115-17.

¹⁰ Dan Harper, “Do All Religions Share a Common Thread?” *UU World Magazine*, September 20, 2010, <http://www.uuworld.org/articles/religion-common-thread>

form “remotely suggests a cross was not in [the artist’s] mind.” In the latter, Patton had ambitions to develop a religion for one world. The Charles Street Meeting House had symbols representing no less than 65 of the world’s traditions (54 of which can now be found in the Fireside room of the Starr King School for the Ministry). The fact that Patton chose the ritual of lighting a lamp as center of his galaxy of religious symbolism is therefore significant. Though it is possible Patton knew about the adoption of the flaming chalice as the symbol of the Unitarian Service Committee, I doubt it would have influenced him, at least not directly. For one thing Unitarians and Universalists were still two separate denominations at that time. For another, while Joy’s intentions were extremely practical and timely—he wanted a symbol that would lend legitimacy to their committee’s efforts while liberating Jews from the Nazis—Patton’s intentions were to create a universal religion for all time. And yet, in these two men, we see the two sides of Unitarian Universalism today: on the one hand, very focused on social justice issues of the day; on the other, a nurturing home for spiritual seekers and perennialists.

The Communion Chalice

Boston Puritans

Both American Unitarianism and Universalism are responses to New England Puritanism¹¹, so it makes sense to look to this tradition for antecedents to Unitarian and Universalist symbolism. Puritanism itself is highly iconoclastic. As a result, the significance of the material tends to hide itself from public discourse. Mark Peterson wrote: “Among the most prominent objects that Puritans encountered in their religious lives were the silver vessels

¹¹ David Robinson, *The Unitarians and the Universalists*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1985), 4.

regularly used in the Lord's Supper. Yet despite the centrality of the sacrament to Puritan spirituality, very little is known about how Puritans interpreted these objects.”¹² Nonetheless, Peterson goes on to explore “how a devout Puritan might have looked at, and felt, and measured the spiritual value of communion silver.” Through the lens of Samuel Sewall’s writings, Peterson observed: “The visual, corporeal, and commercial metaphors through which Sewall expressed his relationship to God and to his fellow church members converge on the silver objects that occupied a central place in the ritual of the Lord's Supper.”¹³ More generally: “Silver communion cups taught Puritans to think of themselves as flawed vessels in need of refinement to be worthy bearers of the grace poured out by God.” This in spite of the fact that this meaning of the silver cup would not have been openly discussed among Puritans. If Peterson’s thesis is sound, we might consider this subliminal significance of the communion cup to have persisted into the Unitarian unconscious, waiting for when they needed a new symbol to represent their faith. But of course, the importance of the communion chalice did not begin with 17th century Boston Puritans.



Figure 4. Silver cup, given to the Old South Church, Boston, 1676. Image from Peterson, 2001.

¹² Mark Peterson, “Puritanism and Refinement in Early New England” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (2001): 308.

¹³ *Ibid.* 324.

The Chalice People

The suggested centrality of the chalice in the Puritan experience of the Lord's Supper is all the more significant when we consider that in the Roman Catholic church at that time, administering the chalice to the laity was considered heretical. Indeed, the importance of the chalice was so critical that the Hussites—the followers of the reformer Jan Hus—adopted it as their flag¹⁴ when defending themselves against crusaders following the condemnation of communion under both kinds in 1415.¹⁵ Hus, and his colleague Jacob of Mies, were early



Figure 5. 15th century depictions of the Hussitees at war against crusaders. Notice the chalice on the flags. Images courtesy of Wikimedia.

¹⁴ Ian Heath, “Hussite Flags” *Armies of the Middle Ages, Volume 2*, (Wargames Research, 1984) 129.

¹⁵ “Council of Constance 1414-18”, *Papal Encyclicals Online*, Accessed May 20, 2016, <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Councils/ecum16.htm>, Session 13 - 15 June 1415.

Christian reformers, appearing 100 years prior to Martin Luther. Among their most significant heresies was that of administering communion of both kinds—that is, both the bread and the wine—to congregants. Though he was neither unitarian nor universalist, American Unitarian Universalists like to claim Jan Hus as a spiritual predecessor because of his egalitarian approach to spirituality.¹⁶

¹⁶ David Hotchkiss, “The Flaming Chalice,” (Boston, Unitarian Universalist Association: 1993)

Part 2 — A Symbol for a Universal Religion

In Part 1, we explored the history of the flaming chalice in Unitarian Universalism and its antecedents in the communion chalice of the Christian tradition. In this section, I will explore possible interpretations of the symbol, not from a historical, but from a theological point of view. This might seem unwarranted and bold but I would posit that the most successful religious symbols gradually acquired their meanings over time after they were invented. For example, the ichthys, like the USC flaming chalice, was developed at a time of persecution in which the people resisting oppression needed a sign of recognition. The ichthys was convenient because it was easy to draw but would only be recognized by other secret Christians. In time, however, it adopted other meanings. By the fourth century, ΙΧΘΥΣ (ichthus) had become an acrostic for for "Ιησοῦς Χριστός, Θεοῦ Υἱός, Σωτήρ" meaning "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior"¹⁷ which itself was expanded into a mnemonic for Christian doctrine in Augustine's *the City of God*.¹⁸



Figure 6. the ichthys, courtesy of Wikimedia

This practice of reading on new meanings to old symbols is, perhaps, unusual in a culture in which our religions are heavily doctrinal, in which an authority, such as the magisterium, determines the one and only “correct” interpretation of a symbol or text. However, as Unitarian Universalism is, by its own reckoning, non-dogmatic, and indeed, arguably anti-authoritarian, such restrictions seem inappropriate. Unfortunately, after millennia of operating within the

¹⁷ Tuomas Rasimus, “Revisiting the Ichthys” in *Mystery and Secrecy in the Nag Hammadi Collection and Other Ancient Literature: Ideas and Practices* ed. 1. Christian Bull, Liv Lied, and John Turner, *Mystery and Secrecy in the Nag Hammadi Collection and Other Ancient Literature* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2012), 327.

¹⁸ Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, Wikisource. XVIII, 23.

doctrinal mode of religious practice, Unitarian Universalists are ill-equipped for spontaneous exegetical reflection.¹⁹ Congregants may be told something along the lines of, “It can mean whatever you want it to mean.” which is not very helpful.²⁰

From a Jungian point of view, we might argue that the fact that the flaming chalice was so rapidly and spontaneously adopted by Unitarian Universalists into their worship services suggests that the symbol is operating on an archetypal level. That is, in spite of the fact that the symbol comes with no explanation, it resonates in the psyches of a people who have eschewed all dogma.²¹ Daniel Hotchkiss, in his pamphlet on *the Flaming Chalice*, states:

The flaming chalice combines two archetypes—a drinking vessel and a flame—and as a religious symbol has different meanings to different beholders.

Chalice, cups, and flagons can be found worldwide on ancient manuscripts and altars. The chalice used by Jesus at his last Passover seder became the Holy Grail sought by the knights of Wales and England. . . . Sharing, generosity, sustenance, and love are some of the meanings symbolized by a chalice.

As a sacrificial fire, flame has been a central symbol for the world’s oldest scriptures, the Vedic hymns of India. Today, lights shine on Christmas and Hanukkah, Duvali and Kwanzaa; the eternal flames stand watch at monuments and tombs; and candles flicker in cathedrals, temples, mosques, and meeting houses. A flame can symbolize witness, sacrifice, testing, courage, and illumination.²²

Hotchkiss’s analysis, while brief, opens the door to new and deeper interpretations of the flaming chalice.

¹⁹ Harvey Whitehouse, *Modes of Religiosity* (Walnut Creek, Alta Mira Press: 2004), 303.

²⁰ Dan Harper, e-mail message to author, May 21, 2016.

²¹ It is worth mentioning that not all Unitarian Universalists approve of the adoption of this ritual practice. In an e-mail message to the author, the Rev. Harper related that his mother—who had been raised Unitarian—muttered under her breath, “graven images,” the first time she saw the chalice being lit in a service. (Ibid.)

²² Daniel Hotchkiss, “The Flaming Chalice”

The Chalice

Hotchkiss links the chalice to the Holy Grail. Like the Grail, the UU chalice is both Christian and not. That is, while the history and symbolism of each are certainly connected the communion chalice of the Last Supper, they also allude to pre-Christian traditions. In the case of the UU chalice, it was the Greco-Roman tradition.²³ In the case of the Grail, it was Celtic tradition. As Jessie Weston pointed out in the introduction to *From Ritual to Romance*, the Grail legend is simultaneously Christian and Pagan. It cannot entirely be explained in Christian terms, nor can it—at least not in the form in which it was written down—be understood without referring to its Christian context.²⁴ In this way, the Grail legend could be said to resemble Unitarian Universalism itself: both Christian and not at the same time.

Hotchkiss applies such meanings as “[s]haring, generosity, sustenance, and love” to the chalice, but first and foremost, it is a vessel. Considered in this way, it connects to a larger tradition in which we come to see ourselves as vessels for the divine. In the words of Emanuel Swedenborg: “Every created thing is finite. The Infinite is in finite objects the way something is present in a vessel that receives it; the Infinite is in people the way something is present in an image of itself.”²⁵

As a vessel, the chalice is archetypally feminine and as such recalls chapter 28 of the Tao Te Ching (Daodejing), the first 23 characters translated here by Stephen Mitchell as:

Know the male,

²³ Charles Joy, letter to Robert Dexter, January 31, 1941

²⁴ Jessie Weston, *From Ritual to Romance* (Cambridge University Press, 1920), 2.

²⁵ Emanuel Swedenborg, *True Christianity*, 158.

yet keep to the female:
 receive the world in your arms.
 If you receive the world,
 the Tao will never leave you
 and you will be like a little child.²⁶

The Flame

When interpreting the flame, we find some inspiration from Christian scripture such as the tongues of flame in the pentecost (Acts 2:3) and when John the Baptist said “I indeed baptize you with water; but one mightier than I cometh, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire.” (Luke 3:16) But when it comes to ritual practice, we find a wealth of material by stepping outside of Christianity. As near as Judaism, we find the practice of lighting candles to usher in the the Sabbath candles every Friday evening. Indeed, already has this tradition inspired UUs, providing 2 of the 9 chalice lighting readings in *Singing the Living Tradition*.

Deutsch and Patton were not drawing on the Jewish tradition however, but rather the Greco-Roman one, which some have speculated may be connected with Vedic worship.²⁷ Indeed, the lighting of fire in worship is still a regular practice in many parts of Asia today (see figure 7).



Figure 7. Agni Puja performed in Varanasi, India.
 Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/tine72/6973853009>

²⁶ Mitchell’s translation, along with many others for comparison, can be found at http://earlywomenmasters.net/tao/ch_28.html

²⁷ Numa-Denis Fustel de Coulange, *La cité antique*, 1864. See <http://remacle.org/bloodwolf/livres/Fustel/intro.htm> for an online version.



Figure 8. A Parsi-Zoroastrian Jashan ceremony (here the blessing of a home in Pune, India) Notice the vessel for the fire is a sort of chalice. Image courtesy of Wikimedia.

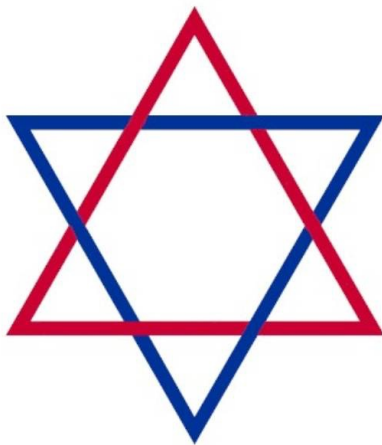


Figure 9. Seal of the Wise King Solomon or star of David, courtesy of the Gnostic Association — City of New York: “The upright (red) triangle has been associated with the element Fire, not just fire as we perceive it physically, but the inner nature of fire... The downward (blue) triangle has been associated with the element Water, Spiritual Water, that is, the Waters of Life.” Source: http://www.gnosticassociationny.org/seal_of_solomon.htm

Hotchkiss likens the flame in the chalice to—among other things—eternal flames. Arguably the most religiously significant eternal flames in the world would be the Zoroastrian fires. Zoroastrianism is considered to be the oldest monotheistic religion (the first unitarians?) and their worship is centered around fire. Comparing the Unitarian Universalist flame to an eternal flame is problematic in that the UU flame is most definitely not eternal. The lighting of the chalice is a regular part of worship and sometimes the extinguishing is as well. However, we may still be able to learn much from this ancient tradition.

The Flaming Chalice

In the Christian tradition, the chalice is a vessel for wine, but more generally, we can consider it a symbol of water. Thus, the flaming chalice is a symbol which combines fire and water, the *Atar* and the *Aban* of Zoroastrianism which act as agents of ritual purity (see figure 8). We saw the juxtaposition of water and fire with regard to baptism in Luke 3:16. We see this as well in an interpretation of the Jewish Star of David as being the intersection between the upward fire triangle and the downward water triangle (see

figure 9). This interpretation brings it in line with other symbolic unions of opposites such as the Taijitu in Daoism (see figure 10) as well as androgynous gods like Ardhanarishvara (see figure 11).

Practice

One of the appealing things about the flaming chalice as a ritual object is its simplicity. While most individuals will not own the sort of butane-powered metal flaming chalices used by congregations like the one depicted on the cover and in figure 1, anyone can gather together a cup and a tea light. Such a thing would not be sufficient for corporate worship but it is perfectly serviceable for an individual or small group.

As you are lighting the candle, you may wish to say some words which may be taken from a Unitarian Universalist source, such as *Singing the Living Tradition*, or from a Jewish prayerbook. One that first appeared in

Hannah Senesh's *Gates of the House*²⁸ was popular among the San Diego chapter of GLO (Gay Lesbian Outreach) in the early 1980s²⁹ and made its way into the UU hymnal. It reads as follows:



Figure 10. Taijitu or “yin-yang” symbol. Source: http://cdn.overclock.net/e/e4/e4826ec5_OCNYinYang.gif



Figure 11. A seated Ardhanarishvara with both the vahanas. Courtesy of Wikimedia

²⁸ Jacqui James, *Between the Lines*, (Boston: Skinner Books, 2001), 99.

²⁹ Betty Jo Middleton, “The Flaming Chalice”



Figure 12. The orans position from the the Catacombs of Priscilla, circa 3rd century AD. Source: http://www.cleansingfire.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/300dpi_edited-1.jpg



Figure 13. Old Unitarian Universalist Service Committee logo, resembling a worshipper in orans position. Image courtesy of the Unitarian Universalist Association.

Blessed is the match consumed in the kindling flame.
Blessed is the flame that burns in the heart's secret places.
Blessed is the heart with the courage to stop its beating for life's sake.

Blessed is the match consumed in the kindling flame.
Once the candle is lit and the match extinguished, you may

wish to adopt what is known as the orans posture for

meditation (see figure 12). This posture is thought by some

to be “the oldest posture for prayer”³⁰ Whether or not it

deserves that superlative, it is certainly old and widespread,

including the Zoroastrian tradition.³¹ What makes this

posture appealing is that it causes the body to physically

resemble the flaming chalice (see figure 13).

While in this posture, meditate on yourself as the chalice,

with the spiritual flame burning in your skull. Christian UUs

may conceive of this in terms of the Holy Spirit. Humanist

UUs may prefer to think of it as their own higher genius or

better potential self igniting within them. Mentally draw that

fire down into your heart and let it rest. Finally, imagine it

radiating outward toward the world recalling the commitment

to serve.

³⁰ *Didjareadit?* <http://slideplayer.com/slide/7230727/> slide 18.

³¹ See <http://heritageinstitute.com/zoroastrianism/worship/> for examples.

Conclusion

In his essay on *Puritanism and Refinement in Early New England*, Mark Peterson writes, “objects can and should be taken as texts. Even if no words are written on them, objects can be read as signs or references to something else”.³² In the second part of this paper, I have attempted to interpret the flaming chalice as though it were a text. As Unitarian Universalism is a non-dogmatic post-Christian denomination, it lacks any sacred text. In this way, it has more in common with the sort of folk religions which Whitehouse describes as operating in the “imagistic” mode.³³ While, in many ways, UU services continue to follow the pattern of the doctrinal tradition from which it was derived, it would seem more in line with the UU principles to focus more on iconicity than on rhetoric, allowing for more individualistic interpretation of symbolic meaning. The practice described in the section above is meant to enable, on a small scale, the spontaneous exegetical reflection associated with imagistic religiosity. Such a practice is still very far from a truly imagistic mode of religious practice, but it attempts to capture some of the value in that which has otherwise been lost due to our Protestant heritage.

³² Mark Peterson, “Puritanism and Refinement in Early New England,” 307.

³³ Harvey Whitehouse, *Modes of Religiosity*

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