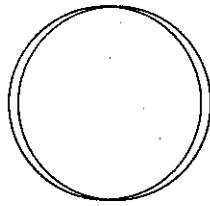


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INTERIM REPORT BY THE COMMISSIONS  
TO THE CHURCHES AND FELLOWSHIPS OF THE  
UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST ASSOCIATION

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Commission II

# THEOLOGY AND THE FRONTIERS OF LEARNING

The function of this Commission is (a) to review and clarify basic assumptions or beliefs found within the denomination, (b) to intensify the confrontation of our religious faith with new knowledge in the various fields of learning, and (c) to facilitate constructive thinking towards creative religious philosophy and convictions for our time.

This Commission was established in response to a situation in American life today which may be characterized as the emergence of a new climate of opinion. This is evidenced by new awareness, altered perceptions, new, often startlingly novel concepts and ways of thinking, penetrating insights, and deeper understanding, coming from the arts, novels, drama, poetry, science, including the social and human sciences, from philosophy and ethics—indeed from the

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whole range of creative, imaginative thinking and study.

### **Our Intentions and Working Assumptions**

In this report, we are taking religion to be the way in which men in community (or alone) relate to, express, or symbolize that which gives meaning to their lives and ultimately sustains their being.

By theology we mean a critical and creative intellectual attempt to express, clarify, defend, reconstruct, or reform a religion. Theology is rooted in experience, in an historical heritage, and must be able to relate to cultural developments of its age.

To suggest that the theological enterprise must have experiential roots is to say that theology is not an academic affair, but must somehow be grounded in the religious life of the community which it serves. Whenever a religious group is challenged, whether from outside contact or internal diversity, theologizing takes place.

Our definitions, it should be noted, are purely descriptive. They do not help us identify a "good" religion or theology. They do serve to remind us, however, of the necessary relationship of religion and theology. Religion always stands first. Theology, moreover, never acts in a vacuum but is always related to some living religion. Even those rare occasions in history when new religions have been born are no exceptions. The prophet-founder—e.g. Moses, Buddha, Jesus or Mohammed—reacts against some present practice, restructures his own experiences and catalyzes a new group experience.

We may further observe that the vitality of any religion or religious innovation is dependent upon the intensity of the experiences it evokes within the group *and* by the credibility of its explanations to the believers.

We see that learning at the frontier, wherever disciplined, is creative imagination being focused upon significant problems—problems of meaning, relationship, concern, control, quest for human betterment. The frontiers of learning are usually interpreted to indicate the more formally organized and validated body of knowledge which this Commission was instructed to explore. While recognizing that this has necessitated a narrowing of its inquiry to what scientists and scholars accept as knowledge, nevertheless the Commission has not rejected or ignored what is relevant to, and important for, theology and religion in several other areas.

Some of us include in the term "frontiers of learn-

ing" contemporary discussions of ethics, history, psychotherapy, the arts, and religious experience. By necessity, the Commission has not been able to move into all these areas—for example, there are other Commissions on the arts and on ethics. In fact, while our discussions have tended to focus on the sciences (physical, biological, social), they have also moved broadly into the areas of psychotherapy, history, philosophy and ethics, and religious experience. Historians of ideas have noted that all these fields share, each in its own way, the elements of a common set of tools for inquiry towards richer truth, including such tools as imaginative postulation, logical calculation, and empirical observation.

In our focus upon the modern sciences, we have understood the sciences as comprising that sustained scrutiny of human perceivings which (1) transforms perceiving into symbols and concepts; (2) relates conceptualized events to classes of events; (3) relates the thus-derived propositions to previously scrutinized and validated propositions; and (4) extends men's abilities to predict or understand these new perceivings.

People live in a cultural world by which they transform the actual world into a symbolic world of meanings and human values, which have been earlier formulated in their theology and expressed in their religion. In turn, these have reflected the available knowledge and understanding of the world and of man. As these have been altered and revised, theology and religious practices, as expressed with greater or less delay, have undergone change, sometimes far-reaching in its implications. Too often has there been a reluctant acceptance of the new knowledge and its meaning and consequences for human living. Our Commission feels that reluctance to incorporate the new meanings of the sciences stems in part from an inadequate understanding of the contemporary scientific enterprise. Within the frontiers of learning, the sciences are obviously of major significance in this respect.

#### **The Theological Situation in Contemporary Liberal Religion**

The Western religious tradition is generically Judeo-Christian. This description means far less than is generally assumed. The fact is that a number of *religions* have coexisted within this larger Judeo-Christian framework, each of them generating a specific *theology*.

Many centuries of Christians, for example, saw

the world as an evil and corrupting place. They built monastic oases in which the "truly spiritual life" could be lived as a preparation for man's real destiny in an other-worldly paradise. Their theology reflected this attitude and practice.

Equally sincere Christians, especially in the last two centuries, have deemed the world a realm to be improved and perfected. The "truly spiritual life" was dedicated to this task. They, too, generated an appropriate theology.

Until quite recently these two groups, along with many other Christian variations, shared a common language and symbol system—i.e. the Judeo-Christian heritage. The two groups cited could both refer to "Jesus as Lord." When they came to specify the consequence of this lordship, however, almost opposite imperatives emerged: to escape the world is one thing; to transform it is quite another.

So wide has been such diversity in Western civilization that one can no longer speak meaningfully of a Judeo-Christian *religion*. To label some individual or group as "Christian" is almost meaningless, in that the label conveys little as to outlook or practice or thought.

In short, there is no useful point in debating whether we are Christian, Jewish, Buddhist or something else. The significant issue is not the label but the mode of experience and thinking we choose to value. Once this choice has been made, we shall probably find that a number of linguistic and religious traditions can express it with equal adequacy.

The hope of our Commission is that this report (and next year's final report) will stimulate serious conversations in our churches which will lead us toward greater integrity in theological matters and increased clarity in our understanding of liberal religion—and in our description of it—to ourselves and to our neighbors.

We are convinced that some consensus undergirds our free churches now as it always has in the past. This consensus is discovered as we act together and evaluate our actions. It is deepened and strengthened by full and free discussion.

We hope that the work of the Study Commissions will renew this discussion and thus preserve us from the dangerous illusion that silence indicates agreement or that diversity in itself is somehow a commendable proof of responsible freedom. Too often our theological silence and our proclaimed diversity have simply masked a fundamental indifference. That theological conformity has usually heralded the

death of religion is only part of the truth of the matter; a lack of theological vitality will produce the same effect.

We see a number of theologies as essentially capable of resonating more creatively with a growing body of scientific knowledge. Those that gain and live by this vision will not only help mankind survive, but will guide and enrich our future. Some of these theologies now exist, albeit in embryonic form, within present religious liberalism. They are rivalled by non- and anti-scientific theologies on today's world scene (and even, to a much lesser extent, within liberal circles).

The free churches of Christendom have foresworn the mechanisms whereby uniformity could be coerced. We, too, stand in this tradition. It is our opportunity to transform the rivalry of theologies into a true dialogue. By this we mean an earnest competition in which each expects to learn, none claims absolute truth, and all are bound by common rules of evidence. The development of the sciences affords ample proof that this kind of competitive dialogue can produce a growing consensus. We covet something similar for liberal religion.

#### **Theological First Principles**

We can best understand religious liberalism by examining and discussing theologies in terms of their theological first principles, i.e., their ways of describing Reality. To ask this is to ask what is their criterion of truth. Knowing this, we can determine how the parts of the theological system are related. Certain topics are discussed in every theology, e.g., man's nature and destiny, the world, good and evil, truth and error, God.

Past theologies have begun from a number of starting points. We will comment briefly on these theological starting points. Many of them nurtured former liberal theologies; some of them still so function. In making its comments, the Commission claims no special authority or finality. As we said before, we hope to intensify discussion of these theological issues, and therefore invite criticism and correction.

**1. Supernatural revelation.** A god has spoken, or acted in history, or shown himself in some indubitable way. The god is not just a part of nature or history, equally discoverable anywhere or at anytime, but is somehow above and beyond the natural. Within this position there is a great variety of viewpoints regarding the positive revelatory value of nature and Scriptures.

**2. Mystical knowledge.** Within all of man's historic faiths there have been religious orientations which claimed some special, direct experiential knowledge of a One. All the elements of the Many are then seen as aspects of this One, sometimes merging with it, sometimes not.

**3. Reason.** In the seventeenth century, some thinkers attempted to base religion upon principles derived purely and intuitively from reason. Such principles, making no appeal to revelation or special experiences, would be universally valid.

**4. Nature.** Especially in the eighteenth century, many deistic religious thinkers argued that the natural world as understood by the sciences furnished clear evidence of order, causality, time, virtue, immortality, and even a creator. A number of "natural theologies" ensued which obviated supernaturalism and mysticism.

**5. Man.** Reactions to the widespread and dominant mechanomorphic science took a variety of forms in the nineteenth century. All were agreed, however, that the fundamental truth and meaning of life was to be found in some extra-rational aspect of man's experience. Man's intuition of moral duty, his sense of an infinite, his apprehension of values, his sense of dependence, his feeling of awe, his dread of existential meaninglessness, his intuition of some direction to human history—all provided starts for religious movements.

**6. Jesus.** On the basis of historical studies in the last century, many felt that a theology could be based upon the humanity and ethical teachings of Jesus of Nazareth (i.e., the "Jesus of history") that would evoke devotion and commitment where creeds and dogmas were no longer compelling.

When we survey our present religious climate, that of American Protestantism, it is clearly characterized by theologies based upon some combination of supernaturalism and humanism. The more sophisticated versions are existentialism and a neo-orthodoxy which stresses values and meanings which allegedly are not and cannot be derived from science.

#### **The Commission's First Principle**

Two queries about basic theological premises are in order: (1) Can the Commission point to a premise that will more effectively interrelate theology and the frontiers of learning? (2) How will such a premise affect the various theologies within present religious liberalism? As to the first, we believe we can. Our attention must fix, clearly and steadily, upon *men's*

*best apprehensions of the reality which produced and sustains man in all the dimensions of his being.*

By emphasizing the evolutionary aspect of the universe we mean to correct the tendency of earlier natural theologies to overlook the living and human qualities of our total experience. We do not necessarily claim uniqueness or newness for our formulation. It bears many affinities to some versions of Christian liberalism, as well as to some modern versions of naturalism, pantheism and scientific humanism. We see merit, however, in a more neutral formulation which may rise above the partisanship that has marked some of these movements.

Our formulation is not a new suggestion from the Commission, but a reaffirmation of the "continuity principle" which has been a central theme of a century and a half of religious liberalism. The ancient Vedic assertion that "Truth is one" has become an increasingly validated surmise. We would say that we have faith in the continuing applicability of this principle.

We come now to our second query: How would this premise, with its assumption of increasing knowledge, affect the variety of theologies which now coexist within the boundaries of religious liberalism? Each of these variations represents a relatively stabilized relationship between religion, with all its aesthetic-cultic components, and theology—theology being understood as the intellectualized component. Since this situation is transactional and not dependent, changes in theology can affect religion (as well as vice versa).

By bringing each of the present liberal theologies into sustained dialogue with the world of the contemporary frontiers of knowledge, modifications will eventually be reflected in our varieties of religious thought and practice. They will grow closer together and stimulate one another even more fruitfully. Our varieties are of inestimable value and potentiality. That they will (or should) ever merge completely is doubtful.

This process of moving closer without merging may be conveniently illustrated on a world scale. Both lily and lotus may remain fruitful symbols for their respective groups, West and East, even while their past and potential similarities are assayed. Similarly, the Christ and the Buddha may continue to symbolize human fulfillment, even as dialogues on the theological plane assimilate past meanings from the opposing traditions and incorporate meanings

from the frontiers that are in fact new to both traditions.

None can foresee the full religious richness and symbolic fecundity of the impact of the frontiers of learning upon our theologies, but we are certain that this impact is both inevitable and desirable.

#### **A Theological Confrontation with the Frontiers Of Learning**

Before discussing the encounter of theology with the frontiers of learning, we must make some introductory remarks concerning our examination of the frontiers. Although we have been considering areas such as history, religious experience, etc., our major focus has been upon the sciences.

At the beginning of our report, we defined science as a sustained scrutiny of human perceivings. We must now describe this process as it relates both to contemporary science and to our basic theological premise. We can best begin by stating several things we do *not* imply.

Modern science is not an adequate religion. Nor would it become a religion by the addition of a few consonant hymns and psalms. Nor do we want a religion based *simply* on science. Finally, we do not think that there could or should be some *one* religion that would be consonant with science, rendering all previous religions untenable.

#### **Some Notes on the Frontiers of Learning**

Our concern with the "frontiers," the more recently discovered territories of learning, recognizes that the unprecedented explosion of scientific ideas in this century has lifted us onto a new terrain where the old nineteenth-century concepts of the warfare between science and religion are no longer relevant. It has been repeatedly stressed among us that liberal theology in the twentieth century has an opportunity that far transcends the opportunity offered in the previous century to reformulate religious ideas in the light of contemporary frontiers of learning. In this relatively brief report we can only mention some of the characteristics of the present frontiers of the sciences which some of us feel to be particularly significant for a new growth of theology, that "critical and creative intellectual attempt to express, clarify, defend, reconstruct, or reform religion."

A careful scrutiny of the definition of science given in the preface of this report will reveal that the sciences no longer are simply a matter of "common sense" or sensory observation of the material world.

The physical sciences particularly have succeeded in penetrating beyond the realm of the tangible and visible (material) entities observed in our common-sense world. Often the "realities" they discuss are "out of this world" and are paradoxical or even an affront to our common-sense way of thinking about things—yardsticks that change their lengths because of their motion; matter that dissolves into energy; the indeterminacy of traditional cause and effect mechanisms; conscious beings that are special arrangements of chemical molecules; electronic machines that think and feel.

The physical sciences are commonly said to have matured ahead of other fields because they have been the first to develop an extensive system of imaginative, intangible and invisible entities not immediately apparent from common-sense observation of the data, and yet superbly powerful in explaining them. The advanced sciences can no longer be seen as simple fact-gathering or observing. They demand also a disciplined intuition and projective quality of imagination, features they share with art and religion.

One of the most significant fruits of the physical sciences for theology may be this new, common-sense-violating picture of the nature of the reality in which we live and move and have our being. The biological and psychological sciences also are currently reaching startling new breakthroughs by different avenues on this same problem of human ways of knowing, breakthroughs which are demolishing the conceptual structures that have traditionally separated mind and matter, reason and emotion, body and spirit.

The Darwinian concept of evolution, which has profoundly affected theologies for the last hundred years, is now being radically revolutionized by the impact of several areas of science. The new picture of the creation and nature of man, and of the powers that brought him into being and sustain his life, far transcends that of Darwin's time. For that matter, so rapid is scientific progress now in this area, that the developments of the past decade or two overshadow those of the past century or two. Evolutionary theory today has cosmic dimensions, and man's nature is tied to the history of a book containing millions of words written in a chemical four-letter alphabet, yet the book is so small as to be invisible to the naked eye. So clear and so strong is this theory that scientists are commonly talking about the existence of life, sentient life like ours, throughout the cosmos. The creation of man and his future destiny, his mind, his feelings and emotions, his loves and his fears, his

self-sacrificial motivations, and even the cosmic requirements for his ethics and his salvation are being discussed by astrophysicists, biochemists, neurophysiologists and others, all in common context of cosmic evolutionary theory.

The social and psychological scientists, whose conceptual schemes of reality interlock with those of the biological and physical scientists, have begun to describe the biological and cultural genesis of religions and moral codes, the chemical and psychodynamic grounds of mystic experience, and the cosmic role and meaning of man in terms of the same evolutionary parameters. Man is seen as a child of an evolving, life-creating and sustaining universe; and man himself is now privileged to play a role consciously in this life-enhancing process to the extent that he recognizes, understands and cooperates with the underlying reality which is the source of his being.

These frontiers of learning in the sciences would seem to offer no longer just a challenge but also new and rich resources for theology and religious living. No single model or system of ideas is adequate for all fields of inquiry. In each area different methods and conceptual tools are effective. The adequacy of the conceptual system or model is measured by its usefulness in comprehending those events or experiences defined by the problem in each case. Yet as the sciences advance it becomes increasingly clear that the understanding of any area of human experience is increasingly being enriched as the ideas explaining it are integrated with the ideational systems of other disciplines and as they tend to merge into a seemingly potentially unified whole of all knowledge, as suggested by the very names of such areas as psychobiology and biophysics. Some of us would propose that this totality of knowledge does not exclude theology in its attempts to explain to men those powers or aspects of reality which give meaning to their lives and ultimately sustain their being.

#### **The Meanings and Value of Theological Terms**

Many liberals find it difficult to discuss religion in theological terms. We all hesitate to speak on some of them, especially God, salvation, faith, truth, death, universe, time, salvation, etc., knowing that we can never satisfy either ourselves or others by the words we use or even by the thoughts we leave unsaid. Yet we must discuss with utter frankness, even though we may be very negatively critical. It has been said that these theological terms have so very many dif-

ferent and often contradictory meanings, no longer acceptable to intelligent persons on the frontiers of knowledge, that they can no longer have any valuable meaning for us today.

In contrast to this assertion, it may be said that just because the word *God*, for example, has had such a host of meanings—even contradictory ones—for so many generations of human experience, and because the idea as expressed in other languages than English has had so many different meanings ranging from the largest and most expansive thoughts human beings have been able to imagine to even the crudest and most narrowly naive ones, it is a word that should *not* be treated roughly or casually. Surely some one or more of these many different meanings must be true to the realities of human experience on this planet. It seems a little like saying, "I no longer believe in America because I cannot believe that Uncle Sam is real." If our generation is wise, it surely will not casually discard all of the elements of meaning that have at one time or another been gathered under that word *God*. It will instead re-examine all the varied meanings, asking, "What experiences called them forth?" and then choose with discrimination those that still seem to be soundly based on modern man's understandings and insights. This is important because *God* (whatever the meaning) has been standing for the perspective from which one's life is seen, and has been for millions the central core of religion.

#### **Analogues**

1. The cosmos we know is evolving or developing in time. Life in this universe is characterized by creativity. God is an appropriate devotional name for this process.
2. Life and man are products of this creative evolution.
3. Life, including man, whenever found throughout the universe, is sustained and guided by this creative process.
4. Man has potentiality for good and strives for its fulfillment even when inhibited by a particular culture or state of ignorance. He "sins" when he blocks this fulfillment in himself or others.
5. A critical and developing reason is a powerful aid for theology and religion even though limited by the postulations and criteria to which it appeals.

As long as we consider theological concepts as entities that have been received full-grown, we get nowhere. The word *God* has symbolized both the Alpha and the Omega—the beginning and the end—both the First cause and all causes and effects; and also a possible all-embracing purpose or a unified multiple of on-going purposes and ends. The word *God* has symbolized humanity's different answers to its two most basic types of questions. What is the source and ground of our being? And what are the possible purposes for our being? The *word* itself gives no substantive answer. It may, however, symbolize man's confident expectation that there are answers and that trying to imagine finding some answers, living by them, testing their worth, and creating new answers when old ones no longer satisfy, is supremely worthwhile.

#### **Some Analogues and Contralogues**

Let us become more specific in regard to theological assertions to which the frontiers of learning are relevant. We shall term "analogues" those theological assertions that we commend for your serious positive consideration. Beside them, we will state paired "contralogues," current theological assertions which in the Commission's view are challenged by the contemporary frontiers of learning. In presenting our list of analogues and contralogues, we are fully aware of the ambiguities such terse statements will have.

#### **Contralogues**

1. A transcendental, perfect and timeless God created the world.
2. The purpose of creation centers and culminates in man.
3. The redemption of man occurs through the divine action of God in Christ on this planet.
4. Original sin characterizes man, i.e., he is naturally and inescapably inclined to evil.
5. Reason is a misleading criterion in theological and religious matters.

6. There is no non-temporal dimension to the meanings in history. Man can discern meanings in history. Moreover, apart from time, man can find no meaning.
  7. Biological and cultural evolution are evidences of progress, and it is clear that man himself now has powers and responsibilities for his continued evolution.
  8. The death of individuals is a necessary precondition for the species and the advancement of human culture. Human values and achievements transcend death.
  9. Man need not be separated from the ground of his being. Redemption is precisely man's discovery of, and cooperation with, the creativity characteristic of the universe.
  10. Given the changing potentialities of human development, there can be no perfect man.
  11. Belief becomes important only when it informs life-fulfilling action.
  12. All aspects of life are potentially accessible to scientific study.
  13. The function of religion is to integrate all of man's behaving with the creativity of the universe.
  14. The beckoning mystery of the universe has already become for many persons, and will become for more, the most effective source of awe and reverence.
  15. God is the symbol by which we may denote the cosmic sustaining powers which produce life, man, personality and human values.
  16. Our growing knowledge of the profoundly mysterious cosmos is found increasingly valuable in guiding life and thought.
  17. The same integrity that motivates self-development often demands sacrificial suffering, or even death, for the sake of human values. The values of the individual, the society and the species are inseparable.
  18. Those human adaptations, conscious or unconscious, which further evolution are the results of the stimuli the universe brings us, whether we regard them as painful or pleasant.
6. Since human history is inherently ambiguous, its meaning will become apparent only at the "end of time."
  7. History is characterized by man's impotence; and progress is an outmoded illusion.
  8. The fact of death inevitably enshrouds human existence in feelings of dread (or "ontological anxiety"). Personal immortality removes the fear and sting of death.
  9. Man is estranged from the source of his being (alienated from God) and cannot redeem himself by his own efforts.
  10. Jesus exemplifies human perfection.
  11. Correct belief in matters of faith is more important than moral behavior in achieving salvation.
  12. Some aspects of life (e.g., values) are inevitably outside the scope of the sciences.
  13. A major function of religion is to cultivate those values that lie outside the scope of the sciences.
  14. The achievements of the sciences are most likely to give man a false sense of pride and self-sufficiency.
  15. The cosmos described by the sciences reveals only an impersonal power, heedless of man. This is no God.
  16. God is the ultimate mystery and therefore has no value or significance in life or thought.
  17. To deny the self, as taught in Christianity, is to block human fulfillment.
  18. Because the cosmos is indifferent to human suffering caused by disease and natural disaster, there can be no God.

#### **Some Suggested Strategies for Religious Liberalism**

In the light of its deliberations and its understanding of our denominational histories and the present moment in Western civilization, the Commission

commends five strategies to the Unitarian Universalist Association and its member churches.

1. **Avoid partisan labels.** Our denominational future will be best served if we avoid identification with exclusive partisanship within any of our movements



(such as Liberal Christianity, Naturalistic Humanism, Ethical Culture, etc.). We do not detract in the least from the vitality or contributions of such movements if we recognize them for what they are—movements capable of growth and evolution and therefore by no means necessarily exclusive or inevitably unable to incorporate other valid viewpoints. Individual churches and members will continue to cluster around different orientations, partly because of our richly diverse backgrounds. For our Association, however, the tradition of religious liberalism can sustain increasing dialogue and, hopefully, an increasing area of consensus, such as now is appearing within the frontiers of learning.

**2. Intensify our dialogue with Ecumenical Christianity.** Inasmuch as our historic roots are in the Judeo-Christian tradition, we should welcome the theological vitality that is returning to that tradition, as exemplified in the World Council of Churches. While the new membership basis of the Council makes participating status impossible and undesirable for us, we should increasingly both learn from and bear our witness to our Christian fellow-religionists.

The growing significance of interdenominational theological schools further illustrates the trend within Christian circles. It might be desirable if our ministers and educators could acquire some part of their educational experience in this kind of intellectual climate.

**3. Intensify the dialogue among the historic religions.** Until recently, Judaism and Christianity have been the religions most active in reconceiving their

various theologies in a confrontation with modern science. This is due to the Western genesis of science and its complicated historical relationship to the Judeo-Christian traditions.

Today, all the major faiths are in varying degrees relating themselves to the culture of modern science. This leads to the emergence of a number of non-Western liberal theologies which become our natural counterparts. The International Association for Liberal Christianity and Religious Freedom (I.A.R.F.), to which we belong, can become a workable platform for liberal interfaith dialogue on the relevance of the frontiers of learning.

**4. Develop an Institute for Advanced Study of Theology in relation to the frontiers of learning.** Some continuing center or centers are needed if the vision of this Commission is to bear fruit. A university- or seminary-affiliated Institute would permit intensive and constructive dialogue between theologians, ministers, scientists and other scholars. Finances should provide for staff and resident fellows as well as invited visitors. Such an Institute might possibly be more effective if it were not under direct denominational control. Aid from foundations might be more available on this basis.

**5. Enrich the frontier-content of denominational curricula.** We must continue in our concern for relevant materials in the church school and also develop adult programs which are theologically stimulating and fruitful. The great number of Unitarian Universalists who live creatively along the frontiers of learning afford us an unparalleled potential.