
Librarianship for the Covenant

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What has the Cambridge Platform to do with concerns being raised by the movement called Occupy Wall Street? How does it intersect the lives of those currently labeled as “The 99 Percent?”

This essay is a personal reflection, growing from a professional and personal relationship. From 1986 to 1990, barely a Friday went by that I did not burst into the Andover-Harvard Library office of C. Conrad Wright, usually about 10:00 a.m., with questions such as these. Our relationship should have been a match made in hell. He was a solid Yankee Unitarian and I was a Midwestern Social Justice Unitarian reborn as a Pastoral Universalist. I presented myself initially with the statement that I was militantly congregational, to which he replied, “Do you know the definition of a congregation?” I gave some idealistic half-formed answer, to which he said, “There is a single definition of a congregation, and it is as follows: ‘A Congregational-church, is by the institution of Christ a part of the Militant-visible-church, consisting of a company of Saints by calling, united into one body, by a holy covenant, for the publick worship of God, & the mutuall edification one of another, in the Fellowship of the Lord Iusus.’” (Cambridge Platform II:6)

This was not the answer I was looking for, and it is not the answer that Occupy Wall Street is looking for now. But Conrad had a two-part methodological answer that we Unitarians need now more than ever.

The first part of his method, as I have shown, was to carefully examine the very text of the Cambridge Platform. The second part of his method was to use the tools of library science to carry forward the congregational vision laid out by the Platform and those who lived it. Since his death last winter, our Association has experienced a rising sense that this second responsibility requires additional attention.

Standing firm against a denomination that idolizes its utopians, Conrad promoted the superiority of institutions that muster and maintain enough strength, flexibility, and stability to serve a parade of generations amid changes in both personnel and circumstance. To examine the value of connecting Unitarian Universalism with the Occupy Wall Street movement, Conrad would have insisted that Unitarian Universalist congregations protect their long-term viability by remembering the Cambridge Platform distinction between church and state: "Congregations gather for the public worship of God and mutuall edification one of another."

This does not mean the Standing Order rejected a social contract; on the contrary, the same menfolk who assembled on Sunday for worship would meet again on Monday or Tuesday for Town Meetings. Bound and printed records of these meetings detail every kind of personal and public emergency from destitute widows to destruction by rampaging pigs. "We are the 99 percent" could describe the thoroughness of those town meetings.

The Cambridge Platform had a different name for the 99 percent – all of whom were required to either worship in, or pay taxes for, the support of the town congregation. "The Members of the Militant visible church walking in order ... either before the law, Oeconomical, that is in families; or under the law, National; or, since the coming of Christ, only congregational." Conrad always pointed out that in return for a lack of religious freedom, the Platform laid out an attainable ethical standard before which we are all supposed to be equal and self-sustaining members of an ethical and self-sustaining community, protected by institutions in proportion to the stewardship we provide. This same concept of "walking in economical and national order" – doing jobs, raising families, obeying laws – undergirds the Occupy movement, whose complaint is that citizens are growing dramatically poorer despite fulfilling the requirements of civil religion and possessing inherent, inalienable rights.

Unitarian Universalism struggles with its origins as a civil religion. Again and again, Conrad insisted that it is not only right but necessary for the Unitarian Universalist Association to accept its mortal condition as a finite body with the limited mission of "serving its congregations." Many UUs oppose congregational self-care by

arguing that our forebears were the sons, daughters, and vessels of social privilege, with a duty to redistribute, or at least to empower, the less fortunate. To this Conrad would respond, in effect, that we cannot make that assertion without using empirical and library science to determine the identities and lives of our true “visible saints.” And what we do know of our forebears contradicts the assertion that Unitarianism offered no service to people of lesser economic circumstance.

Humanist in theology, Harvardian by heritage, Conrad spent many invisible years poring over congregational pew records, genealogies, and congregational histories to get at the truth about Unitarian and Universalist forebears. This is the work that today’s Unitarian Universalist Association threatens to bury with him. Today’s Association has no database that can name substantial numbers of people who identify themselves as Unitarian Universalist. The Association has limited criteria to identify most ordinary UUs, and therefore is less able to gauge its own strength or weakness. To give an example, for many years I received two copies of the *UU World*, because I belong to two congregations; presumably I was therefore on the rolls as two adherents. If the Association can neither name nor define the current saints visible and militant, it has little hope of describing the invisible and triumphant, that is, the honored dead. And if it has no institutional structure for supporting congregational librarians, archivists, and historians, the Association has abandoned the work of finding, keeping and sharing this vital information.

Who were our 99 percent, and who are they now? Conrad pursued this information by promoting and supporting congregational historians and archivists. It is instructive that his family culture sustained his work: Conrad’s beloved wife was a librarian, and one of their children, Dr. Conrad Edick Wright, embodies that oneness today.

Being a devoted and active family member as well as a busy professional, C. Conrad sympathized with the dedicated volunteers who undertook major congregational work in addition to other commitments. But he did not challenge what he knew to be the migration of congregational librarianship and history out of our professional staffing requirements and into the overcrowded docket of volunteer callings. For the first three centuries of the Standing Order and Unitarianism, this university [Harvard] expected and trained our ministers to achieve

excellence in all aspects of congregational librarianship. As publishing and public education expanded in the nineteenth century, librarianship became a separate science and profession. Founded mostly by men, it quickly became a female occupation. James Freeman Clarke and Edward Everett Hale were among the Unitarian ministers who took the lead in founding Simmons College, which, among other colleges for women, gave women access for the first time to paid professional and intellectual pursuits. The extent to which professionally trained women were kept at home by social prejudice and family commitments, however, led twentieth-century congregations to rely on laywomen for volunteer staffing. Librarianship joined children's religious education and congregational hospitality as an outlet for women to develop skills and stature in their churches without financial compensation. When women entered the paid job world in force in the 1970s, congregational libraries fell by the wayside.

As much as he could, and in constant teamwork with Universalist Alan Seaberg, C. Conrad Wright worked tirelessly to forward denominational librarianship. Together they negotiated the arrangement by which the Andover-Harvard Library now collects, preserves, staffs, and makes accessible the archives of the Universalist Church of America, the American Unitarian Association, and the Unitarian Universalist Association into which they consolidated. This example, coupled with Conrad's constant return to the Cambridge Platform, asks us what we are doing today to preserve, link, and interpret congregational archives. These two devoted scholars, one Unitarian and one Universalist, constructed a denominational umbrella under which we local historians can operate and by which we can often find each other.

In the mid 1990s, the Unitarian Universalist Historical Society tasked Mark Harris and me to survey congregations on the care and condition of their archives. We found that many are doing locally what Conrad and Alan did in Cambridge: saving what they can and preserving it in their nearest academic, public, or historical library. With the rise of high-powered internet search engines, library science now has the tools on which to build and to link these levels and locations of work. This, in turn, allows us to recover the documentation of saints visible without building either a cemetery or a large building to house the knowledge.

Far from being an abstract task, the tedious updating of our librarianship plays a fundamental role in designing and achieving realistic social justice as part of our faith in action. During parishioners' lifetimes, congregational records provide immediate information on the internal strengths and weaknesses of each particular company of saints, visible and militant. Upon our demise, parishioners' records, enhanced with eulogies and final bequests, summarize for historical reference the words and deeds of those members of the 99 percent who chose to covenant together for mutual edification and public worship of a particular idea of God. Only this preserving and making available the record of our full people – not just the affluent pew holders whose presence sometimes defines our image, but those our forebears called “attenders” and we currently call “friends” – will allow our denomination to determine whether our concern with serving parishioners is different from our call to social justice.

As in the work of Conrad and Alan in earlier years, this task requires attention to technicalities and technologies. Since the opportunity comes from skills that transcend geography, it is time for us to take the Harvard model to regional centers. Because UUs still look to Harvard Divinity School for academic vision and denominational centralization, I call for a connection between the degrees offered here and the Master of Library Science, aspiring to restore fair work and pay to the stewards of the stories of our saints. What are reasonable job descriptions? At what level of polity – congregation or district – do we vest the decisions to hire, fire and evaluate? That is the religious side of the question.

The best archive is nothing without a usable finding aid and helpful reference professional, and this is why we can no longer fulfill our duty to history by keeping our full archives in our meetinghouses. Working with grants, work-study students, staff librarians and volunteers, the Association needs to develop and maintain the conservation, culling, indexing, and linking of our vital records. Just down the hall from where we sit tonight, Conrad spent decades providing a switchboard for scholarship on the saints visible and militant, walking together in congregation. He once told me that he sent personal thanks for every congregational history that he received, and I do not doubt it. He was also able to give me a description of what he had read in them.

This task lies beyond our seminaries as currently constituted, and properly devolves to the denomination. That is the proper location to build support for funding, staff, and ongoing calls for results from the congregations.

In these difficult economic times, why would the congregations want to put scarce dollars into librarianship? If it only means one more footnote on Emerson or Channing, I would be the first to oppose it—although I recently turned up an interesting Emerson story and know it must be shared. But that is a distraction, not a mission. The task of denominational history in this moment is not to find a few more liberal celebrities to publicize, but to redesign our self-image as an association of congregations of visible saints walking together in regular order, whatever that means to them.

This is a pastoral mission that may well determine whether this fragile association will survive. Guilt and pride are the emotional poles within which we build our identity. We are fortunate to live in an era when technology, professionalism, and covenants give us the tools to know, learn from, and celebrate our full range of saints, not just the famous. In Burlington, Vermont, I used the models of Conrad Wright, as well as Dean Grodzins, to compare lists of attendees, and people married and buried, with the list of residents in city directories. This kind of comparison greatly changes the picture of a Unitarian congregation. And in all the major fundraisers, I discovered that once I ticked off the first page of major donors, what confronted me was page after page of men and women who paid what they could, small dollars, even less than dollars, to hire ministers, fix roofs, and upgrade the music.

Doing this work in this way achieves a more completely documented and researched understanding of congregational history, and shows that the 99 percent of earlier days wanted the right and the means to assemble for liberal worship and mutual religious edification. This is not a rejection of activism for economic and political justice, but a vital reminder that workers aspire to keep and uplift their souls and safeguard the spiritual care of their communities.