Unless a Seed Falls: Cultivating Liberal Institutions

Dan McKanan
Harvard Divinity School

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I have inherited a paradox. As the inaugural holder of the Ralph Waldo Emerson Unitarian Universalist Association chair, I am accountable in some sense to a man who once told the graduates of this school to "cast behind [them] all conformity" to what they had learned at school, relying on themselves rather than on the institutions of "historical Christianity." But I am also accountable to one of those institutions—indeed, to the very denominational tradition that Emerson was leaving behind when he urged our students to "acquaint men at first hand with deity."[1] This level of institutional accountability in a Harvard chair has few precedents. Among my colleagues, only Francis Schussler Fiorenza has the name of a denomination in his title, and while the Charles Chauncy Stillman chair of Roman Catholic studies may contain its own paradoxes, I am guessing that the pope was not as intimately involved in its creation as Unitarian Universalist president Bill Sinkford was in the funding of the Emerson chair.

Fortunately, I come prepared to deal with institutional paradox. Like Emerson, I have an anti-institutional streak. Shortly after the election of Ronald Reagan (when I was just thirteen), I decided that governments would work better if, instead of making laws, they simply offered suggestions. They could use research to figure out what sort of individual actions would contribute most to the common good and then leave it to each person to act accordingly. Ten years later, I learned that this view has a name—*anarchism*—and that it has been espoused by a wide range of pacifists and terrorists, saints and demagogues. Despite repeated backsliding I

[1] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Divinity School Address," in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (8 vols.; Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 1971) 1:90.

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remain more comfortable with the pacifist strand of anarchism than with any other political philosophy.

All the same, I have spent the last ten years teaching at two Benedictine colleges, local embodiments of the most enduring religious order in the largest religious institution the world has ever known. And now I am at Harvard, a school that has lost more institutional wealth in the past year than any other university in history. Somehow I haven't been able to shake free of institutions.

In coming to Harvard, I have inherited a rich tradition of reflection on the balance between spiritual freedom and institutional responsibility. For many years, Conrad Wright taught Unitarian and Universalist history here, and one of the great themes of his scholarship has been the role of institutions within religious liberalism.[2] Wright worried—perhaps still worries—that while Unitarian Universalists know the rebellious stories of Emerson and Thoreau, they do not know the stories of the men and women who built congregational and denominational structures to carry those rebellious stories forward. The canon of liberal saints, Wright insisted, must include such men as Henry Bellows, Samuel Atkins Eliot, and Frederick May Eliot—denominational presidents who were patient and creative enough to keep both the Emersonian radicals and their antagonists within the Unitarian fold.[3] Wright's colleague James Luther Adams likewise insisted that the "voluntary association" was an essential building block of American freedom, warning generations of students that if an idea "does not incarnate, it will dissipate."[4]

My goal here is to build on this heritage by reflecting on the institutional ideas of a few religious liberals who are sometimes lumped with the anti-institutional Emersonians. Elizabeth Peabody and Adin Ballou were part of the rebellious second generation of Unitarians and Universalists, and they devoted their best energies not to congregations or denominations but to schools, peace and abolitionist societies, and experimental communities. John Haynes Holmes and Mary White Ovington were heirs of this tradition who lived two generations later, in the first decades of the twentieth century. They were tireless in building up the new institutional structures of the settlement house and "community church," as well as such enduring organizations as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the American Civil Liberties Union.

[2] Throughout this essay, I will be using the term "religious liberalism" in the way it is typically used among Unitarian Universalists. In this sense, it is a generic term that includes all those religious traditions that place first emphasis on such values as individual spiritual freedom, the use of reason, and tolerance for diversity, and that eschew any setting of "orthodox" boundaries around religious communities. I recognize that there is another sort of liberalism that is not defined over against orthodoxy, but thrives within doctrinally defined religious communities. I leave it up to those who are liberal in that sense to discern the extent to which my argument might apply to them and their communities.

[3] C. Conrad Wright, "Henry Bellows and the Organization of the National Conference," in *The Liberal Christians: Essays on American Unitarian History* (Boston: Beacon, 1970) 81–109.

[4] James Luther Adams, "Freedom and Association," in *On Being Human Religiously* (ed. Max L. Stackhouse; Boston: Beacon, 1976) 55–85.

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Along with dozens of other Unitarian and Universalist activists in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, these four could have offered a hearty "Amen" to every criticism Emerson lodged against conventional churches, but their real interest was in the shape of the new institutions that might displace the old. In theological terms, all were invested in what might be called *ecclesiology*—the doctrine of the church—though the "church" they envisioned was never easy for denominational leaders to recognize as such. They were practical as well as theoretical ecclesiologists, taking concrete steps to bring new institutions into reality. Had they succeeded perfectly or failed utterly, there would not be much reason to give this talk. But their mix of success and failure makes them worthy conversation partners. Personally, I value them as conversation partners because I share both their Unitarian and Universalist identities and their basic perspective on institutions, and I will be using the conversation to articulate my own ecclesiology as well as theirs. I hope this presentation will be challenging to other religious liberals, and at least interesting to those of other faith traditions.

Before I flesh out the liberal ecclesiology of Peabody, Ballou, Holmes and Ovington, I should say a few more words about Emerson. His consistent antipathy to institutions is revealed in the fact that he was almost as wary of his friends' new projects as he was of the traditional institutions of church and state, but the logic of his critique was not consistent. In his essay on "Self-Reliance," he cast institutions both as dangerous menaces—"Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members"—and as ephemeral phantoms—"An institution is the lengthened shadow of one man."[5] As is often the case, his criticism was more compelling when it included an element of self-criticism. Reflecting on his friends' plan to build a new society at Brook Farm, he confided to his journal that he "wished to be convinced, to be thawed, to be made nobly mad by the kindlings before my eye of a new dawn of human piety." His coldness lay in his continuing struggle to put his own vision into action: "I have not yet conquered my own house. It irks and repents me. Shall I raise the siege of this hencoop, and march baffled away to a pretended siege of Babylon?" Emerson concluded that to join Brook Farm "would be to traverse all my long trumpeted theory . . . that one man is a counterpoise to a city." These words make clear that the "one man" he had in mind was not an arrogant entrepreneur but a repentant Saint Anthony.[6]

Peabody, Ballou, Holmes, and Ovington would all eventually become as repentant of their institutions as Emerson was of his individuality. Just as Emerson began with an idealistic vision of the individual, these others were motivated first by an institutional idealism. Despite the failings of existing churches and governments, they believed that institutions could provide the soil in which free individuals would grow. Jesus himself, said Peabody, had pointed the way to a

[5] Emerson, "Self Reliance," in *Collected Works*, 2:29, 35.

[6] Ralph Waldo Emerson, journal, 17 October 1840, in *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks* (ed. William Henry Gilman et al.; 16 vols.; Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1960–) 7:407–8.

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mode of "organization which shall give freedom to [the] loving creative spirit" that is the divine life in every person. The U.S. Constitution likewise "was the greatest discovery in political science [that] the world had ever made" because it tried to give institutional shape to the core Christian principle "that there is an infinite worth and depth in the individual soul."[7]

My four ecclesiologists were optimistic about institutions because they saw themselves as heirs to three previous institutional revolutions. The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century had broken the overwhelming undemocratic power of the medieval union of church and state, opening at least the possibility of free religion. The American Revolution of 1776 had affirmed both individual rights and democratic governance in the political sphere and set the churches free to operate in their own, specifically religious, sphere. And the Unitarian and Universalist movements, born as denominations in the first decades of the new century, had inaugurated a tradition of liberal religion that was slowly breaking free from the constraints of dogma and tradition.

By 1840, when Peabody and Ballou began publishing their views on community, even the most recent of these revolutions was one generation in the past, and it was easy for them to see all of the unfinished work left in their wake. The American affirmation of universal human rights was denied in practice by the scandal of chattel slavery. Women, African Americans, and Native Americans were excluded from democratic participation in the young nation. The light of democracy did not yet shine on economic institutions. From the reformers' perspective, the human dignity of both the working and propertied classes was undermined by a system in which some people destroyed their bodies by overwork and others by over-indulgence. These problems had been exacerbated by the economic depression of 1837, and two generations later, they would be exacerbated still further by the rise of capitalist monopolies.

The four reformers also believed that the churches had not yet achieved their promised freedom. The separation of church and state certainly had been a promising step. Prior to the Bill of Rights, Christians had to choose between established churches that were beholden to monarchical power and small "sects" that claimed a spiritual status superior to that of their neighbors. The emerging system of American Protestantism transcended the dichotomy of church and sect, but from the liberals' perspective it was not a truly democratic religion. Nineteenth-century Americans were not working together to shape a shared spiritual life. Instead, they were competing in a religious free market in which congregations thrived only to the extent that they could rouse a mass constituency by means of emotional appeals or else maintain the financial backing of wealthy pewholders and donors.[8] In

[7] Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, "A Glimpse of Christ's Idea of Society," *The Dial* 2 (October 1841) 228, 224–25.

[8] For a thorough account of how the religious free market both did and did not express democratic idealism, see Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New

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either case, religious concern focused narrowly on individual salvation. This state of affairs was unacceptable to our four interlocutors. Each, in his or her particular way, believed it was possible to take the next step toward freedom and democracy in church, state, and economy. Indeed, they believed that the revolution would be most effective if it came to all three spheres simultaneously.

Like many second generation Unitarians, Elizabeth Peabody had a wide range of reform interests. With her sisters Mary and Sophia and brothers-in-law Nathaniel Hawthorne and Horace Mann, she was part of one of the first families of Transcendentalism. She launched her career as a reformer by serving as Bronson Alcott's associate at the experimental Temple School, and both Alcott and other reformers valued her for her quirky intelligence and congenial spirit. By 1840, her bookstore was the primary gathering spot for Bostonians interested in new European philosophies, and she herself was particularly interested in the travails of young ministers who chafed at the narrowness and conventionality of parish life. When a cluster of these ministers resolved to form an experimental community that would "combine the thinker and the worker . . . in the same individual . . . [and thus] permit a more simple and wholesome life, than can be led amidst the pressure of our competitive institutions," she signed on—not as member, but as a publicist.[9]

In two articles published in the *Dial*, Peabody laid out the social and religious vision that the Brook Farmers were too busy or humble to proclaim for themselves. The first, entitled "A Glimpse of Christ's Idea of Society," took on the ambitious task of identifying Jesus' true vision for both church and society. Peabody set herself in nuanced opposition to the "primitivist" way of thinking then popular among American Protestants. The primitivist goal was to restore the "true church" from "corruptions" imposed over the centuries, usually dating back either to the conversion of Constantine or to the rise of the papacy. Primitivists assumed, in Peabody's words, that Christ's institutional vision could be discerned by observing "what his immediate followers thought and did." On this basis, at least some primitivists (notably, the Shakers and the Harmony Society in Pennsylvania) had created utopian communities in which all goods were held in common. Peabody sympathized with these communities, and she certainly was no admirer of Constantine, but she was convinced that the primitivist starting point was fundamentally wrong. The apostolic church was no blueprint for the Kingdom of

Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

[9] George Ripley to Ralph Waldo Emerson, 9 November 1840, in *Autobiography of Brook Farm* (ed. Henry W. Sams; Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1958) 6. For more on Peabody, see Megan Marshall, *The Peabody Sisters: Three Women Who Ignited American Romanticism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005); and Bruce A. Ronda, *Elizabeth Palmer Peabody: A Reformer on Her Own Terms* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999). On Brook Farm, see Sterling Delano, *Brook Farm: The Dark Side of Utopia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 2004); and Carl Guarneri, *The Utopian Alternative: Fourierism in Nineteenth-Century America* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991).

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God, and even the apostles probably had not "consider[ed] their churches anything more than initiatory."[10]

Peabody's corrective had two sides. The first was Emersonian: Jesus calls us not to mechanical imitation but to intuitive self-reliance. "Like every great soul," she wrote, "Jesus remands us to our own souls." To follow Jesus is not to look like him but to develop our inner divinity as fully as he did his: "Raphael and Michel Angelo might have been one with God, no less than was Jesus, but they would doubtless still have been painters and sculptors." The other side of Peabody's corrective was to call for a "reconciliation of outward organization with the life of . . . individual souls." Regarding "social organization" neither as "indifferent" nor as "supreme object," Christians were called to create institutions that would "cherish and assist" in the "perfection" of souls. "The final cause of human society," she insisted, "is the unfolding of the individual man into every form of perfection, without let or hindrance, according to the inward nature of each."[11]

On these grounds, Peabody was sharply critical of existing institutions. Medieval Catholicism had managed to go off to both extremes, treating its own structures as "supreme objects" even as it displayed "indifference" to the evils of the political order. But American society was little better: "[B]efore the judgment seat of [Christ's] sayings, how do our governments, our trades, our etiquettes, even our benevolent institutions and churches look?" Anticipating the central theme of the Social Gospel movement, Peabody suggested that the problem could be corrected only by recognizing that Jesus made no distinction between the church and the "kingdom of heaven," here understood as a reference to a just social order. Rather than seeing their churches as associations apart from society, Christians were thus to reorganize "society itself, on those very principles of Love to God and Love to Man, which Jesus Christ realized in his own daily life." Until "not only every church, but every trade, every form of social intercourse, every institution political or otherwise" is conducted on the basis of the golden rule, Peabody declared, there will be no true church on earth.[12]

In the second article, Peabody explained how Christ's idea of society was being realized "on a very small scale" by the Brook Farmers. She singled out several aspects of the Farm's constitution for special praise. The Farmers were committed to sharing in all aspects of the community's work, both physical and intellectual, at a common rate of wages. This practice would preserve social equality and express "the great truth, that all labor is sacred." By limiting the total hours of labor, the Farmers would achieve "leisure to live in all the faculties of the soul." Their refusal to impose any creedal boundaries would safeguard their freedom to promote "individual self-unfolding, in the faith that the whole soul of humanity is in each man and woman." The many ministers in the company would, even if they chose to work as pastors,

[10] Peabody, "A Glimpse," 214, 215.

[11] Ibid., 216, 220–21, 217, 226.

[12] Ibid., 217–18.

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be economically self-sufficient and thus preserved from "that virtual dependence on their congregations, which now corrupts the relationship." Most importantly, the community would devote its best energies to the work of education, thus affirming Peabody's principle that "in the true society . . . education is the ground Idea. The highest work of man is to call forth man in his fellow and child."[13] (Peabody also shared a couple of salutary warnings with the Farmers, among them to avoid the "mammon of unrighteousness" in the form of "endowment."[14])

For the next six years, the Brook Farmers did indeed strive to usher in the kingdom of God on earth, creating a mostly harmonious society in which economic, political, and religious practices were radically democratized. In this, they were hardly alone. These were the years in which, according to Emerson, there was "not a reading man but has a draft of a new Community in his waistcoat pocket."[15] Peabody's old colleague Bronson Alcott had his community at Fruitlands. A cluster of Garrisonian reformers built a community around silk cultivation in Northampton, Massachusetts. Dozens of other groups embraced, with varying degrees of fidelity, the utopian blueprints of Charles Fourier—ideas that Brook Farm would formally espouse halfway through its lifespan. Of all the communities that explicitly sought to balance cooperation with radical individuality, the most enduring was the colony of "Practical Christians" established by Adin Ballou at Hopedale, Massachusetts.[16]

Ballou represented a different strand of religious liberalism than did Peabody. A largely self-taught preacher, he had been called to the ministry through a series of visions and paranormal experiences. He migrated from the primitivist Christian Connection to the Universalists, siding with the Restorationist faction against the then-dominant "ultra-Universalist" theology of his distant cousin Hosea Ballou. Even among the Restorationists, he and a few of his minister friends met congregational resistance to their strong preaching against slavery, war, and alcohol abuse. A change of affiliation to Unitarianism was of little help, and so the friends resolved to "maintain ourselves [financially] outside of our profession" by creating a cooperative community.[17]

Declaring themselves to be "Practical Christians," Ballou and his comrades believed that true Christianity had more to do with right practice than right belief. Disavowing all but the most general statement of Christian doctrine, the Hopedalers

[13] Elizabeth Peabody, "Plan of the West Roxbury Community," *The Dial* 2 (January 1842): 362–64, 368; and Peabody, "A Glimpse," 228.

[14] Peabody, "Plan," 370–71.

[15] Ralph Waldo Emerson to Thomas Carlyle, 30 October 1840, in *The Correspondence of Thomas Carlyle and Ralph Waldo Emerson* (ed. Charles E. Norton; 2 vols.; London: Chatto and Windus, 1883) 1:308–9.

[16] Edward K. Spann, *Hopedale: From Commune to Company Town, 1840–1920* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1992).

[17] Adin Ballou, *History of the Hopedale Community: From Its Inception to Its Virtual Submergence in the Hopedale Parish* (ed. William S. Heywood; Lowell, Mass.: Thompson & Hill/The Vox Populi Press, 1897) 13.

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were extravagantly specific in the moral demands they placed on themselves. Repudiating slavery, war, alcohol, licentiousness, oathtaking, corporal punishment, cruelty to animals, party spirit, covetousness, voting, and "the lust of domination," they promised affirmatively "to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, minister to the sick, visit the imprisoned, entertain the stranger, protect the helpless, comfort the afflicted, plead for the oppressed, seek the lost, lift up the fallen, rescue the ensnared, reclaim the wandering, reform the vicious, enlighten the benighted, instruct the young, admonish the wayward, rebuke the scornful, encourage the penitent, confirm the upright, and diffuse a universal charity." [18]

Elizabeth Peabody was not unaware of the Hopedalers' efforts, but neither was she wildly enthusiastic. Her Emersonian sensibilities were violated by the restriction of membership to those who take the "temperance, abolition, nonresistance pledges, the pledge not to vote, etc." In a curious blend of gender-exclusive language and sly feminist wit, Peabody described herself as "a temperance man, an abolitionist, a non-resistant, and [one] who does not at any rate vote" and insisted that any membership "test," whether creedal or behavioral, "makes their community a church only, and not *the* church of Christ's Idea, world embracing."[19] Her critique struck a chord with other reformers. The Fourierist Albert Brisbane described Hopedale as a "sect" that could not "act universally," while abolitionist Lydia Maria Child faulted them for "fencing off an enclosure."[20]

These criticisms set off a series of prickly but ultimately illuminating responses from Ballou. What exactly is a sect? he asked. After toying with a series of dictionary definitions, he repudiated the usual understanding of "sect" as a small intense organization with distinct religious beliefs and practices. A sect, rather, was any group that put its own well-being ahead of universal righteousness. From this perspective it was possible to argue that the mainstream churches that tolerated war and slavery were actually *more* sectarian than Hopedale since they did so in order to maintain their own social status. "*They are sectarians* who love their party better than they do true righteousness."[21] One might well ask to what extent the great denominational leaders were themselves "sectarian" by this definition!

The real antidote to sectarianism, Ballou was sure, could be found in utopian communities that only *seemed* to be sectarian. But within the communal movement, Ballou contrasted three strategies for combating sectarianism. The first was "an utter abandonment of social organization, authority and legislation—leaving every individual free to act wholly uninfluenced by names, forms, tests of fellowship, conventional rules, or any other social consideration." Ballou knew that some anarchist communities had been organized on these terms, but he dismissed them as inherently contradictory: "Man's social nature cannot be annihilated." The second

[18] "Standard of Practical Christianity," in Ballou, *History*, 3–8.

[19] Peabody, "A Glimpse," 31.

[20] "The West Roxbury Community," *Practical Christian* 3 (3 September 1842) 31.

[21] Adin Ballou, "Sectarianism," *Practical Christian* 3 (25 June 1842) 10.

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approach, clearly associated with Brook Farm, was to organize "on the general grounds of united pecuniary interests, and personal congeniality" while excluding "all established religious and moral tests" and allowing "each individual soul to work out self-perfection from its own internal inspirations." The problem with this "plausible and captivating" theory, Ballou argued, is that in practice people will only join such an association if they share the implicit religious and moral views of its "leading minds." "Elective affinity will follow the laws of nature. Then what is such an Association but a sect?" It will be prone to "at least a degree of sectarian ambition and exclusiveness," or if by some chance it truly achieves religious diversity, it runs the risk of exploding.[22]

Compared to these two alternatives, Ballou suggested, there were obvious advantages to a community that strives "to organize society on the basis of a religious and moral test which substitutes fundamental truth for fundamental error, essential righteousness for mere opinion and ceremonial, principle for expediency, and freedom for bondage." Still, he insisted that the Hopedalers bore no hostility to those who formed communities on other bases, and they were certainly open to the possibility that they had not attained to the fullness of truth. "We only acknowledge and endeavor to follow that to which we have already attained—not doubting that if there be more in reserve for us, we shall the better prepare ourselves for it by fidelity to our present convictions."[23]

So both Brook Farm and Hopedale moved forward, each applying its own understanding of "Christ's idea" to politics and economics as well as religious life. Both were, as Ballou predicted, relatively homogeneous in ideology and thus avoided the explosive religious conflicts that wracked some more inclusive communities. They were, by virtually all reports (except that of Peabody's brother-in-law Nathaniel Hawthorne), good places to live. Both published journals that inspired far-flung sympathizers to embark on their own experimental reforms, but neither managed to catalyze the hoped-for transformation of society as a whole, and each eventually lost its will to carry on in isolation. Brook Farm disbanded when a fire destroyed its new community building, right in the middle of a vigorous debate over how fully to embrace Fourierist principles. Hopedale succumbed to the logic of its mixed economy, which allowed two individual investors to gain a disproportionate share of the community's stock and then pressure the others to abandon economic cooperation.

Ironically, both Hopedale and Brook Farm were succeeded by liberal religious congregations. When Hopedale's joint stock company dissolved, a reorganized "Hopedale Community" continued to sponsor a church, school, library, lyceum, and program of mutual aid, and relatively few Hopedalers left their homes.[24] The other enterprises faded away, but the church itself has survived to the present. In

[22] Adin Ballou, "Sect, Sectarian, Sectarianism," *Practical Christian* 4 (20 January 1844) 70.

[23] Ibid., 74.

[24] Ballou, *History*, 289–91.

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Brook Farm's case, the Unitarian minister William Henry Channing had begun offering voluntary services at the Farm during its final months, and after the Farm's demise, a few Farmers who had participated in those services joined with others to form the Religious Union of Associationists. Usually meeting in homes, the Religious Union sponsored talks on political and spiritual topics, pioneered interfaith dialogue, and invented a new sacrament that used bread, water, and fruit to symbolize wisdom, love, and joy.[25] With this, communities that had begun in a radical critique of congregations set apart from society wound up embracing the congregational form as the closest they could come to the Kingdom!

Elizabeth Peabody was first to anticipate this ironic turn of events. While the Hopedalers and Brook Farmers were planting potatoes and building schools, she was observing from a distance and reading up on a variety of historical analogues. In a series of seemingly unrelated articles, she took a giant step away from her earlier claim that the ideal church would be indistinguishable from society as a whole. Reflecting on a recent study of religion among the Dorian Greeks, she claimed that the Dorians had anticipated the principle of church and state separation by worshipping Apollo rather than Zeus, who as supreme creator was identified with the state. Highlighting the parallels between Apollo and Christ, she credited the Dorians with introducing individuality into a cultural tradition that had previously valued only the social whole.[26] And in a series of letters on American denominations, written for a Polish friend, she praised not the Unitarians but the Baptists as the denomination most in harmony with American democracy and the "genius of the gospel." The Baptists' congregational polity and working-class status freed them from the temptations of political power, while their fidelity to the "rite of immersion" gave them spiritual vitality. The proudly local Baptist congregations shared a unity that was "vegetative" rather than "architectural," and their influence on the larger culture was all the greater because it was almost invisible.[27]

Writing more directly about Brook Farm, Peabody renounced her belief that traditional churches were to be lost, "like the morning star, in the deeper glory of a kingdom of heaven on earth, which we then fancied Socialism would bring about." She was now convinced that "initiatory institutions will have an office as long as men are born children" and that "a tremendous tyranny is necessarily involved by constituting society itself the VISIBLE church of Christ." In a still-evolving world, the church would always be a "select body" of individuals who are committed to live by their ideals and gradually infuse them into the larger society. Such a church was a necessary safeguard against the potential of even the best organization to become

[25] Octavius Brooks Frothingham, *Memoir of William Henry Channing* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1886) 225.

[26] Elizabeth Peabody, "The Dorian Measure, with a Modern Application," *Aesthetic Papers* (Boston: The Editor, 1849) 64–111.

[27] Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, "Letters on Religion in America, No. 2," *Christian Register* 24 (13 September 1845). The entire series ran from 6 September 1845 to 11 April 1846.

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"petrified." "Let the Fourierists see to it," she warned, "that there be freedom in their Phalanx for churches."[28]

By means of this reversal, Peabody intensified her earlier emphasis on Brook Farm's educational mission. A community or congregation could justify its separate existence so long as it engaged in "initiatory" practices that bore fruit in society as a whole. Perhaps without realizing it, Peabody had come around to Adin Ballou's ecclesiology. The way to avoid sectarianism is not to tear down all walls but to make sure that one's own institutions live for the sake of society as a whole.

Peabody's new insight, of course, did not correct the undemocratic character of church, state, and business in the United States. And so it should not surprise us that, two generations later, another religious liberal would articulate an ecclesiology that was virtually indistinguishable from that expressed in "Christ's Idea of Society." This was John Haynes Holmes, an heir of the Transcendentalists whose grandfather had helped publish the works of his pastor Theodore Parker.[29] Serving a New York City congregation from 1907 until his retirement decades later, Holmes found himself near the vital center of the Social Gospel movement. Convinced that the "affirmation of solidarity as contrasted with individuality" was "the new spiritual truth of this age," Holmes worked tirelessly to reconcile this insight with the liberal tradition of "salvation by character."[30]

Taking a position to the left of mainline social gospelers, Holmes declared that social salvation was the entire work of religion. The "revolutionary function of the church," he declared in the optimistic years before World War I, was to be the "active agent" rather than the "passive witness" of salvation. "In the past, [the church] has been a place of refuge, where men could flee for safety; in the future it will be an armoury, where men may come to arm themselves against 'the rulers of the darkness of the world.'" Calling for an "indefinite extension of the field of religious activity," Holmes insisted that "there is not a question . . . which the minister has not a right—nay, an obligation—to discuss in his pulpit in the name simply of religion. There is not a task of practical reform which the members of the church have not a right—nay, an obligation—to undertake in the name of religion."[31]

Clearly, Holmes's vision of religion had everything to do with institutions, but it nevertheless set him in opposition to most of the stewards of the institutional church. Though Jesus, in Holmes's view, had been an "agitator of revolution," the "social significance" of his teaching had been "almost wholly lost" by the third century. The

[28] Elizabeth Peabody, "Fourierism," *The Dial* 4 (April 1844) 482.

[29] On Holmes, see *I Speak for Myself: The Autobiography of John Haynes Holmes* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959) and Carl Hermann Voss, *Rabbi and Minister: The Friendship of Stephen S. Wise and John Haynes Holmes* (2d ed.; Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1980).

[30] John Haynes Holmes, *New Churches for Old: A Plea for Community Religion* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1922) 173.

[31] John Haynes Holmes, *The Revolutionary Function of the Modern Church* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1912) 177, 178, 181.

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churches were corrupted by individualism, otherworldliness, class divisions, and a distinction between sacred and secular that Holmes regarded as an "astonishing delusion." Above all, they were marred by a denominationalism that diverted attention "from the real evils of organized society to the unreal evils of theological error." One might think this charge would not apply to the creedless Unitarians, but Holmes reserved his most scornful language for his own denomination: "The one great united endeavor of the Unitarian churches, in spite of their pretensions to a gospel of applied religion, is not the serving of society but the supporting of a missionary association which is devoted to 'maintaining old Unitarian churches whose natural lives are already spent, and building new Unitarian churches which cannot maintain themselves.'" The situation in the churches was so dire, Holmes concluded, that the existing church might need to die and be replaced by "a new religion, with a new church as its organized expression."[32]

When Holmes wrote those words, he was still a minister of the Unitarian denomination. His decisive break with denominationalism, and in particular with the great Unitarian institution builder Samuel Atkins Eliot, came during World War I. An absolute pacifist, Holmes defiantly opposed the pro-war denominational resolution supported by Eliot and former U.S. president Taft, then serving as lay president of the Unitarian General Conference. Accused of treason by the denominational paper but supported by his congregation, Holmes resigned his denominational fellowship and ratcheted up his rhetoric. Denominational "churches as organizations," he declared, "are an intolerable interference with the program of modern life." A democratic faith required "new churches to supplant the old."[33]

The path Holmes proposed was as surprising as Elizabeth Peabody's endorsement of Baptist polity. In hundreds of rural communities, declining Protestant congregations had consolidated to form nondenominational "community churches." Though most of these were more theologically conservative than Holmes, he saw them as "a splendid first step . . . toward the new democratic religion of the future." The reason was that they imposed no doctrinal membership tests but welcomed all residents of the surrounding community: "they are members of the church for the same reason that they are members of the town meeting—*because they are citizens!*" They could thus fulfill Elizabeth Peabody's original vision of a church that was not an "institution apart" but "itself the community."[34]

The ideal of the community church allowed Holmes to sharpen his longstanding faith in the religious character of democracy itself. The "exact antithesis" of democratic religion, in Holmes's view, was Protestant denominationalism. His reasoning echoed Emerson's denunciation of "corpse-cold" Unitarianism and Ballou's analysis of sectarianism. Denominational churches, Holmes charged, were trapped by the theological debates of past centuries and thus unable to tap

[32] Holmes, *The Revolutionary Function*, 200, 205, 213, 206, 207–8, 223.

[33] Holmes, *New Churches*, vii-viii.

[34] Ibid., viii, 211, 220.

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into the "main current of life." Thus cut off, a denomination tended "to become an institution not of public service but of private possession and interest."[35]

Holmes sympathized with the Unitarian effort to establish a more inclusive fellowship and with the efforts of Protestant ecumenists to lower the boundaries separating their denominations. But he viewed these efforts as fatally flawed because they assumed that existing church organizations were an indispensable starting point. Liberal ecumenists assumed "that life cannot go on without the churches," when in fact, said Holmes, "life *is* going on without the churches!" A better reform would "return not to the churches but to society," for "it is never the institution which is central in life, but the people out of which the institution is made. Not the church is holy, but humanity!"[36]

One surprising implication of Holmes's vision for the community church was a new perspective on the separation of church and state. He praised this as "one of the supreme achievements of modern civilization," one of the finest fruits of American democracy, but democracy's work was not yet complete. In the wake of World War I, wrote Holmes, democracy was "speaking a new challenge, even of those institutions which it has itself conceived and made." It was radically transforming both church and state, stripping them of their tendency to serve private interests rather than the common good. Once church and state were *fully* democratized they would not need to be separate, but would both be "absorbed by the community," functioning as "coordinate branches of a single fellowship in which the people are at work for the expression and service of their common lives."[37]

In building up the renamed Community Church of New York and its sister congregation in Boston, Holmes hoped to bring to fruition the promise implicit in the rural community churches. Both congregations welcomed as members all who lived nearby, though the vast majority declined to exercise their democratic prerogatives. Both sponsored a range of programs and forums intended to engage the whole of life. Holmes also published *New Churches for Old*, just as Ballou had published *Practical Christian Socialism*, in the hope that others would take his vision and run with it.

Much was achieved as a result. The Community Church of New York was a base of support for radical, socialist, and pacifist political movements through the red scares of the 1920s and 1950s. It was one of the pioneers of racial integration within Unitarianism, but that achievement was possible only because it never ceased to be a denominational church. Far from being "the first step in the disintegration of all existing churches,"[38] as Holmes had hoped, the Community Churches became ever more fruitful contributors to the evolving project of Unitarian Universalism. As with Brook Farm and Hopedale, the community church was, in the end, a

[35] Ibid., 97, 27, 63..

[36] Ibid., 71–72.

[37] Ibid., 189–90, 212, 210.

[38] Ibid., 299.

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congregation after all. Holmes seemed to have made his peace with this, for in his autobiography he identified just two life regrets: that he had not spent enough time with his children and that he had not spent enough time with his congregation. "All the while," he mused, "there stands the home church, like the home base in baseball, which marks the score and keeps the game alive."[39]

Every generation's innovations, then, came back to the congregation. Again and again some religious liberals—and I would count myself among them—have dreamed of a more inclusive, more democratic fellowship, and again and again we have returned to this familiar form, so little different from the churches of our orthodox sisters and brothers. How might those of us who identify with the radical dreams of Peabody, Ballou, and Holmes make sense of this?

My own response—my own ecclesiology, so to speak—takes its starting point from Jesus' instruction to his disciples in the days just before his crucifixion. "Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit."[40] Read as a metaphorical prediction of a supernatural resurrection, this text has little appeal for religious liberals. But—along with the dozens of agricultural images that dot the gospels—it can also be read as an invitation to see the correspondences between spiritual or, in this case, ecclesial experiences and natural phenomena. Death and resurrection, in this view, are part of the deep structures of the universe, and they apply as much to our institutional dreams as to the seeds we plant in our gardens.

This way of thinking comforted Adin Ballou as he contemplated Hopedale's failure to usher in the Practical Christian Republic. The Hopedale Community, he conceded some years after the fact, was not to be "resuscitated . . . on the ruins of our former venture," but in God's good time it would "have a glorious resurrection . . . of which its earlier manifestation was but the harbinger and prototype."[41] John Haynes Holmes's ally, Henry Jackson, similarly presented his vision for the community church, requiring that such a church must be free "to serve the community rather than itself, losing its life as an organization, if need be, for the sake of the cause."[42]

Like Ballou and Jackson, I have been captivated by the idea that failed institutions might hope for resurrection. My second book, *Touching the World*, dealt with a cluster of intentional community movements that hoped to transform society as a whole, and one of the things I wrestled with in that book was the fact that such communities do not always endure. Ultimately, I devoted a chapter to the idea that *any* community that hopes to change the world must be open to death and resurrection. An early draft of that book dealt with Brook Farm and Hopedale, as well as the contemporary Camphill and Catholic Worker networks. Reflecting

[39] Holmes, *I Speak*, 287.

[40] John 12:24.

[41] Ballou, *History*, 291–93.

[42] Cited in Holmes, *New Churches*, 341.

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on the ways these communities may have "resurrected" the spirit of the earliest Christian Church, I then noted,

> The fate of the Jerusalem church, significantly, was not that different from the fate of Brook Farm and the other Associations. Without clear rules that mandated sharing, [the apostles'] "organization" faded away almost as soon as it had begun, yet it was replaced by a "spirit" that has inspired new ventures in Christian community from Saint Benedict to the present. Likewise, the spirit of [Brook Farm and Hopedale] may be alive today in Camphill and the Catholic Worker, and the spirit of those two movements may live on in sharing households and sustainable farms long after their names have passed from the lips of scholars, visitors, and friends. . . . It may be that the death of each movement, as a distinct institutional reality, [is] a necessary step on the path to a renewed society.[43]

That's what I thought in 2005. But this reading, I now see, avoids the fact that Hopedale created a congregation that *did not die* but is still living today. More generally, my earlier interpretation did not take Jesus' invitation to think in organic terms seriously enough.

Birth, death, and new birth are not the *only* natural phenomena that might help us understand the fate of our institutions. When a seed falls into the ground, more is involved than the question of whether it dies or lives. It falls into a soil community in which many things are already dying, being born, or in the middle of their life cycle. The seed encounters a soil structure already shaped by the roots of earlier plants, the tunnels carved by earthworms, the nutrients released by microorganisms—and perhaps by the steel cut of a plow or the harsh poison of a pesticide. Even the manner in which the seed is dropped may increase the likelihood that, at one extreme, it is choked out by weeds; or at the other, it becomes a monoculture, itself choking out the biodiversity of the field in which it is planted.

So if religious liberals are to think of our institutions as seeds, it is not enough to ask whether they will live or die. We need to consider all the complex ways in which they will interact with their environment. Will our congregations seek growth at any cost, or will they try to discern the right size for their particular mission? Will they define themselves in opposition to other congregations, or will they celebrate their neighbors' achievements as much as their own? If we must have congregations that are set apart from the larger community, can we still make the good of the whole community the measure of our congregational health?

Here, there is much to be learned from the way that the Hopedalers participated in the abolitionist and peace movements of their day, from the way the Community Church of New York lent its institutional prestige to the fledgling NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) and ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union), or from the way Elizabeth Peabody made the micro-institution

[43] For the published version of this passage, see *Touching the World: Christian Communities Transforming Society* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2007) 155.

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of her bookstore into a resource for the mini-institution of Brook Farm. In each of these instances, there is more to be learned than I have time to say, but I do have time to share a bit of insight from the work of John Haynes Holmes's ally, Mary White Ovington.

Like Holmes, Ovington was a Unitarian heir of the abolitionists. Her grandmother had attended the Connecticut congregation of Samuel Joseph May, a leading abolitionist, and she herself was raised under the staunchly liberal preaching of John White Chadwick at Brooklyn's Second Unitarian Church. She grew up with "heroic" stories of Frederick Douglass and the "great group of men and women who had risked all for freedom," but it was only in her forties that she began devoting her own energies to the cause of racial justice.[44] As executive secretary, board chair, and treasurer of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, she has been described by her biographer as the "balancing genius" who brought together the founders of the NAACP and ensured the association's birth.[45] Like Peabody, Ballou, and Holmes, Ovington dreamed of a new institution that would achieve the promise of American democracy.

To the extent that Ovington was indispensable to the founding of the NAACP, there is no truth in Emerson's claim that "an institution is the lengthened shadow of one man." For Ovington's role, beautifully documented in Carolyn Wedin's biography, was not to impress her own personality on the institution, nor was it to crucify herself in the hopes of being resurrected. It was, rather, to put her gifts and her desires at the service of the organic whole.

As an interracial organization committed to the full civil rights of African Americans, the NAACP faced three obstacles, any one of which might have destroyed it. First, Northern whites, even those with abolitionist roots, did not *know* their African American brothers and sisters. And so, as soon as Ovington felt the call to interracial work, she apprenticed herself to as many African Americans as possible: prominent businessmen, impoverished slum-dwellers and the nurses who served them, revivalist preachers and socialist agitators, partisans of the conservative Booker T. Washington and the radical W. E. B. DuBois. These teachers were "unendingly kind," enriching Ovington's life as they empowered her for her work.

Though Ovington tried to learn from African Americans of all ideological stripes, she soon found herself a partisan of those leaders—among them Monroe Trotter and Reverdy Ransom as well as DuBois himself—who believed that Washington's "Tuskegee Machine" was blocking the emergence of new approaches to racial justice.

[44] Mary White Ovington, *Black and White Sat Down Together: The Reminiscences of an NAACP Founder* (New York: Feminist Press, 1995) 4.

[45] Carolyn Wedin, *Inheritors of the Spirit: Mary White Ovington and the Founding of the NAACP* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1998) 105–11. Wedin's assessment of Ovington's centrality reflects the appropriate fondness of the biographer. For other accounts of the NAACP's founding, see Manfred Berg, *"The Ticket to Freedom": The NAACP and the Struggle for Black Political Integration* (Gainesville, Fla.: University Press of Florida, 2005); and Gilbert Jonas, *Freedom's Sword: The NAACP and the Struggle against Racism in America, 1909–1969* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

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From the perspective that she came to share with DuBois, the second obstacle to the founding of the NAACP was the fact that Washington's approach to race relations, which emphasized industrial education rather than civil rights, had already captured the imagination of white philanthropists. Young black activists could gain access to white wealth only by pledging absolute loyalty in exchange for Washington's endorsement. As an admirer of DuBois, Ovington was appalled by this situation, but she recognized that a direct attack on Washington would achieve little. Instead, she used her own independent status to change the ecology linking black activists to white funders. When an idealistic young leader presented her with Washington's endorsement, she commented casually that she did not support Washington's program, and immediately, the "mask" dropped from the man's face and they began to strategize together. When she heard an activist give a radical speech at a northern event and a conservative one in Washington's presence, she merely caught his eye, trusting that his awareness of her awareness would do its own work. Likewise, she called on her wealthy white friends to consider alternatives to Washington.[46]

The third obstacle was the sheer ambition of those wealthy friends, as well as of the man Ovington admired most, W. E. B. DuBois. Several different men would have liked to make the NAACP into the lengthened shadow of themselves. Ovington's task was to keep this from happening, without sacrificing the particular gifts that each brought to the organization. She did this mostly through a patient ministry of listening and translation. When the prominent white liberal Oswald Garrison Villard demanded that DuBois's authority as journal editor be subordinated to his as chairman, she took his concerns seriously, acknowledged the merits of his criticisms, but then held his feet to the fire. "To you it means just Dr. Du Bois . . . but to me it means a confession to the world that we cannot work with colored people unless they are our subordinates. And everyone who believes in segregation will become a little more firmly convinced that he is right." (It is too bad that Villard's grandfather, William Lloyd Garrison, had no Ovington to hold him accountable in his jealous dealings with Frederick Douglass.) Ovington held DuBois accountable as well. It may well be that she saved him in the end from the jealous megalomania that destroyed the legacy of Washington.[47]

Mary White Ovington, in short, was one person who planted herself in the rich soil of an organization, just as each one of us is planted in a congregation or school or neighborhood, and just as I have been planted in the institutional paradox of the Emerson chair. Ovington's special gift was to grow in a way that helped the other seeds planted in the NAACP to bear better fruit. She did so, moreover, in a spirit of adventure and not of sacrifice. "My life has been so happy, so full of pleasant happenings," she

[46] Ovington, *Black and White*, 21–22, 24–25. For DuBois's own account of the Tuskegee Machine, see W. E. B. DuBois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (new introduction by Irene Diggs; Piscataway, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1983) 69–74.

[47] Wedin, *Inheritors*, 137–44.

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wrote in explaining her attraction of the sometimes "obstinate" DuBois, "that I feel singularly drawn toward people whose lives turn crisscross."[48]

As such, she stands as a model for institutions that wish to live for the sake of society as a whole. Just as Ovington lived in such a way as to help Villard and DuBois become their better selves, so a liberal religious congregation can practice a hospitality that will not only make itself more diverse but also help surrounding congregations become more welcoming. A liberal divinity school, too, can develop its own mission in ways that strengthen the missions of other schools. Even without dissolving into the community as a whole, an institution can live its way into a better environment.

I haven't written a five-hundred-page *Practical Christian Socialism* to spell out concretely how this might come about. I do hope that the Emerson chair will help catalyze a more fruitful partnership between Harvard and the two Unitarian Universalist seminaries, as well as between Harvard and the Unitarian Universalist Association. This fall we will host a national gathering of UU doctoral students, and I hope many of you will be able to join us for that event. For Unitarian Universalist congregations, one step might be to develop honoring rituals to be shared with other groups that do good work in our communities. Unitarian Universalists are often quick to advertise our differences from other religious communities, but what if we threw a party every time a Catholic parish opened a homeless shelter or an evangelical church put up solar panels? Another step could be for congregations to keep as careful records of what they hope to see in their communities as they do of their own numerical growth. We know exactly how many more sor fewer UUs there are this year than last, but do we know whether there are more or fewer children living below the poverty line in communities with UU congregations? What would happen if we took the latter number as seriously as the former?

I should give Emerson the last word. Reflecting on his friends' infatuation with the too-elaborate theories of Charles Fourier, Emerson noted wryly that "Fourier had skipped no fact but one, namely, Life."[49] For all his anti-institutional prejudices, Emerson knew intuitively what it took Peabody, Ballou, Holmes and Ovington a lifetime to learn: no institutional scheme can fully control the bubbling creativity of life itself. At the same time, those others also learned what Emerson could not see: our institutions are as "vegetative," in Peabody's phrase, as the individuals who participate in them. Our congregations, our denominations, and our divinity schools have been planted with many seeds. They have grown up not in the straight rows of our democratic dreams but in the tangled thicket of life itself. Still, within this thicket, "the grass grows, the buds burst, the meadow is spotted with fire and gold in the tint of flowers." In the "refulgent summer" of our institutions, it is "a luxury to draw the breath of life."[50]

[48] Cited in Wedin, *Inheritors*, 141.

[49] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Fourierism and the Socialists," *The Dial* 3 (July 1842) 88.

[50] Emerson, "Divinity School Address," 76.

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