

## A UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST ATHEIST READS THE GADFLY PAPERS

by the Rev. Dennis  
McCarty

My journey into atheism began at age sixteen. I had been reared in a pretty traditional Christian household, then I read a Hindu scripture, the *Bhagavad-Gita*. It astounded me that someone could be just as devout as I was, yet hold totally different religious sentiments from my own. By week's end I had become happily agnostic, and remained that way for decades. I got married, then divorced. I taught overseas for a while, studied Zen Buddhism, and eventually became a Unitarian Universalist minister. In the process, I also evolved into thoughtful atheism. I love to read any text that feeds my mind and heart: scriptures from various faith traditions, sociology, *Scientific American*, *Skeptical Inquirer*, astronomer Carl Sagan, paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould, anthropologist Ian Tattersall—the list is long. I love to read logical writing for its own sake. A well-reasoned legal decision, for example, is pure joy to read. (Judge John Jones III's decision in the *Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School Board evolution vs. "Intelligent Design"* lawsuit is a prime favorite.)

Alas, I cannot put Todd Eklof's *The Gadfly Papers* anywhere near that company. Eklof's writing is woefully slipshod. His "facts" are so one-sided as to not even merit the term. His grasp of Unitarian and Universalist history is superficial at best: below the minimum we have a right to expect from a Unitarian Universalist minister. He may have pretensions toward "logical reasoning," but his "logic" consists of much fog and very little reason. That, too, is below what we should expect from someone who claims an advanced degree.

I only finished reading his book because of my concern that readers unfamiliar with Unitarian Universalist history and our Association's controversies of 2017-19 will be *misled by Eklof's distortions, half-truths and outright falsehoods*. Someone needed to read him critically and uphold the values of honesty and logical reasoning. I saw few others willing to do that, at least in print, so I stepped up.

**THE THIRD ESSAY** I will begin with the book's final essay, because it is the most openly deceptive. I can't judge whether Eklof deliberately set out to mislead people, or merely misleads due to his own ineptness with fact and logic. I do have my suspicions.

He titles this essay "Let's be Reasonable," and calls it "A Rational Frame Regarding Charges of Racism and White Supremacy within the Unitarian Universalist Association."

That phraseology itself calls for a deeper look. Scientists who study the brain have demonstrated for decades that juxtaposing “reason” versus “emotion,” as Eklof does in this

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essay, is a scientifically obsolete fallacy. The vast majority of thoughts, intuitions, and decisions that take us through a day occur below conscious level. It’s not “reason” or “emotion,” one or the other. We make our way through life using both in concert, one playing off the other. *More than ninety five per cent of the decisions we make*, moment-by-moment, rise out of our unconscious, with only five per cent of input—or less—(PF 12-13) coming from the “reasoning,” conscious part of the brain. This percentage is the same whether we’re men, women, of European descent, or any other ethnicity.

Looking back at the premier thinkers of the Western tradition, people such as Aristotle, St. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and Descartes, their “logic” may be impeccable. But their conclusions are, all too often, demonstrably wrong. We need the test-and-replication of science. For all that we may elevate “reason”—in quotes—to the level of idolatry, reasoning alone, if not tested and confirmed by real-life experience, inevitably results in error. Science advances because scientists devise experiments to test their reasoning. Scientists happily declare that they often learn more from unexpected test results than when their “reasoned” prediction is confirmed by the test.

It’s also worth noting that the more important a life decision is—that is, the more it matters to the person making it—the more likely it is to be driven by emotion, rather than reason. This is because high risk/reward draws in the fear/pleasure/fight-or-flight portions of the brain, which are more economically wired than the more recently evolved “reasoning” portion. (Or as *Scientific American* columnist and *Skeptic* magazine editor, Michael Shermer noted in his book, *Why People Believe Weird Things*, Smart people believe weird things, too. Because they’re good at making up smart-sounding excuses for beliefs they hold for not-smart reasons.

Eklof either does not realize, or prefers to ignore, scientific realities around the brain’s function. What’s more, he ignores the fact that *pretensions* of reason and logic have a long and toxic history in the Western intellectual tradition. For thousands of years, men have claimed the mantle of “reason” as an emblem of superiority over “emotional” women. The same holds with European and Euro-American claims to cultural superiority over “lesser breeds without the law,” to quote Victorian poet, Rudyard Kipling.

This is also built into the United States’ own racist past, right through the 20th century. Here’s what black theologian James Hal Cone had to say about “reasonable” white liberals in his breakthrough book on black religion and liberation, *Black Theology and Black Power*,” published back in 1969.:

Since whites do not know the extent of black suffering, they can only speak from their own perspective, which they call ‘reason.’ . . . The liberal, then, is one who sees ‘both sides of the issue and shies away from ‘extremism’ in any form. The

white liberal wants to be a friend, that is, enjoy the rights and privileges pertaining to whiteness and also work for the ‘Negro.’

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My point is, first, that “reason” was long used as a claim of white male superiority over women and people of non-European descent. Second, even as theologians and activists such as Martin Luther King and James Hal Cone proved every bit as erudite as any Caucasian, Cone noted fifty years ago that the word, “reason,” was also a byword to impede African Americans’ struggle for equality.

That is, in the teeth of the civil rights struggle, when a white liberal said, “Be reasonable,” it meant that the black needed to “settle for less.” Because, as Cone put it, white liberals wanted to be seen as sympathetic—but did not want to risk their friendships and business connections within their own Euro-American circle.

Eklof displays ignorance of all this context. Moreover, while he pronounces on “reason” or “formal logic,” close reading of his text shows that he uses the *pretense* of logic and reason to *obscure the reality that his thinking is emotional, uninformed, and deceptive.*

That is, he laces his essay with proclamations, definitions, and complex jargon which have no function in the actual discussion—other than to distract the reader from shallowness and fallaciousness of his claims.

Editors and advanced writing teachers note that overuse of jargon is just, plain bad writing. It obscures the point you’re trying to make—*unless, of course, its real purpose is precisely that: to confuse the reader the way a carnival barker uses patter and motion to confuse the audience he’s tricking with his shell game!* I will provide examples as we go along, how Eklof does exactly that.

Finally, the proposition with which Eklof begins the final essay, “I know formal logic and you don’t, therefore you have to agree with me,” is a form of what’s called “an argument from authority.” Which is, itself, a logical fallacy.

**THE 2017 SOUTHERN REGION LEAD POSITION HIRE** Before we dive into Eklof’s text, though, we need a quick recap of the hiring decision he puts at the center of this essay. This will show that *Eklof leaves out crucial details.* These details are so central to the controversy, it is difficult to imagine that he omitted them by accident. The Southern Region Lead was a “plum” position, which drew multiple applicants. Among them were two sitting members of the UUA Board of Trustees. (Eklof claims only one, but that is false. There were two.) One, as Eklof notes, was the “Latina” who was later passed over for the position. The other, whom Eklof fails to mention, was Rev. Andy Burnette, who was chosen for the position.

According to UUA policy, *neither* should have been eligible without full Board of Trustees approval. UUA Board members were supposed to be off the Board for a year before employment as UUA staff, to avoid conflict of interest. UUA Director of Congregational Life,

Scott Tayler, who ultimately made the hire, solicited an agreement with Moderator (Board Chair,) Jim Key, to waive that policy for this hire. The full Board was not informed until after the fact, and there was never a proper vote to suspend the rule.

Eklof also does not mention that one term of employment was, logically enough, for the successful applicant to be located in, or at least near, the Southern Region. Furthermore, in the interview process, *multiple* applicants left their interviews feeling as though they had secured the position. This was inexcusable clumsiness on Tayler's part, and invited the controversy that followed. Eklof mentions only one, the "Latina," but other candidates were also given the same impression. Thus, flawed process pretty much guaranteed bitter feelings.

Eklof also fails to mention that Rev. Andy Burnette, the person Rev. Scott Tayler chose, lived far away from the Southern Region, in Phoenix, Arizona. What's more, after choosing Burnette, *Tayler agreed to Burnette remaining in Phoenix, even though it was two states away from the nearest Congregation he would be advising—and thousands of miles from most of them!* Logistics (and expense pertaining thereto) aside, it should have been obvious this decision would provoke resentment and controversy. Eklof conveniently neglects to mention any of this.

It should stagger any neutral observer that Rev. Scott Tayler failed to anticipate the anger of people who lived in the Southern Region, who thought they were successful candidates, when they learned they had been passed over in favor of a candidate who lived—and planned to remain—in Arizona. For the record, I feel sympathy for Rev. Burnette on this, it's human nature to negotiate the best deal one can for oneself. But the blindness to "good ole boy" hiring practices on the part of UUA leadership is astounding, considering that qualified women and People of Color did live within the region.

How convenient for Eklof to omit these details! Only with this back story in hand, can we begin to understand the widespread anger over this decision. Eklof suggests that only one person was angry, "the Latina," as he calls her, and that only she was passed over. That is untrue. Other people were passed over in the same way, and many people were angry at the faulty process.

**MORE FOGGY FACTS** We can now return to Eklof's pretensions toward "reason," "reasonableness," and "logic. Despite the fact that a white male from outside the Region received preferential treatment over female and non-white candidates from within the region, Ekloff maintains that accusations of racial bias are, in a logical sense, "not possibly" correct.(GF, 90)

He begins with a long, involved explanation of the logical term, "affirming the consequent."

Granted, he says, the percentages of people of color in supervisory positions in

the Unitarian Universalist Association are uncomfortably low.(GP, 89) But it “affirms the consequent,” he says, to suppose the disparity is due to racial bias within the association, even unconscious racial bias. (GP 81)

There are multiple problems here. First, Eklof plainly assumes “racism” was the only issue. Yet the multiple qualified women passed over—who lived in or near the region—shows that patriarchalism was at work, as well. As former UUA President William Sinkford as noted, racism and patriarchalism go hand-in-hand.

Furthermore, it’s worth following Eklof down this rabbit hole of “affirming the consequent.” The example he uses is clunky, so I’ll use an example I found in a handbook on logic and semantics. Suppose you have a basement room with no windows and a single light fixture for illumination.

“If the light is burned out, then the room will be dark” is a logically correct statement. On the other hand, “If the room is dark, then the light is burned out” is *not* logically correct. After all, the light could simply be turned off, the power could be out, etc., etc. That mistake in logic would be “affirming the consequent.”

Eklof accuses the UUA of bad logic, accusing it of saying, “The rate of poc hires in the UUA is low, therefore we have racist hiring practices.” This is, he says, “affirming the consequent.”(GP84)

This is a “straw man” logical fallacy on Eklof’s part, because the UUA did *not* draw that inference from just that one bit of data.

First, going back to our basement room—if you walk into the room and it’s dark, it *is* logical to observe, *prima facie*, “Hey, this room is dark.” Eklof does not mention that, nor does he mention that it’s just as logical to observe that the hiring rate of People of Color in supervisory positions in the UUA is low. (A condition he, himself, acknowledges as “concerning, to say the least.”) (GP 79) He also avoids mentioning the classic, good-ole-boy practice by which the Southern Region Lead hiring took place, under circumstances that were—at least in the written requirements—*not* allowed for women or People of Color. This is precisely how white supremacy culture works. We hire our friends. We bend the rules for our friends. We “forget” to tell applicants from outside our circle which requirements are real and which ones they need not worry about.

Eklof also fails to mention that the UUA had, for years, received complaints from People of Color about discrimination and insensitive treatment. This is not the first time Eklof omits crucial information, and it won’t be the last. That’s how he constructs his “straw man” logical fallacies. He omits facts and details, distorts the words and actions of others, then conveniently criticizes the distortions.

One might say that he uses what one might call “logic of congeniality.” If it’s congenial to the story he wants to tell, it’s logical. If it doesn’t fit—he leaves it out.

He goes on to say, “In the same way, to correctly argue the UUA has racist hiring practices and upholds white supremacy, the antecedents (conditions) leading to these racist consequences must be affirmed. The systems that lead to such racial disparity, that is, ought to be made explicit so they can be *reasonably* [here we go again] considered.”(GP 88)

In point of fact, those conditions *were* “made explicit” in the Commission’s report. Eklof just ignored them.

This is also one more situation in which the white guy refuses to believe the Person of Color is being hurt until the Person of Color convinces the white guy—to *the white guy’s full and complete satisfaction*—that the harm is taking place. Which will, of course, never happen, no matter the evidence, *unless and until* said white guy has a change of heart on his own and is willing to take the Person of Color seriously. In practice, that demand becomes an endless litany of moving goalposts. Note with Eklof: the proof was right there, in the report, but he ignored it. It will always depend on the emotional state of the person in power, who all too often, as in this case, clings to the comfort of keeping the existing power structure exactly as it is.

But there’s more. Eklof asserts that the UUA has no *overtly* racist hiring policies. Then he turns to sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s 2001 book, *White Supremacy and Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, ostensibly to research the possibility of what Bonilla-Silva defines as “color-blind racism.” I won’t go into detail for brevity’s sake, but the categories are 1.) “Abstract liberalism;” 2.) “Biologization of color;” 3.) “Naturalization of matters that reflect the impacts of White Supremacy;” and 4.) “Minimalization of racism and discrimination.”(GP 88-90)

Eklof “proves” the absence of color-blind racism by narrowly defining each category, confining them to word-for-word quotes from Bonilla-Silva’s book. Examples in the UUA hiring controversy don’t *precisely* match the *exact* wording in Bonilla-Silva’s book, Eklof says. Therefore the UUA does not practice color-blind racism either! (GP 90) “It is not reasonable [!] to conclude it is a racist organization,” he says, then adds that it is, therefore, “not possible” that we are practicing either overt or color-blind racism.”(GP 90)

This is a blatant distortion of Bonilla-Silva, who makes plain that “color-blind racism is subtle and complex. The categories are not definitions at all, but “frames,” as he explains them. They are “fluid,” “flexible,” and “pliable.” The way Eklof uses them is, in fact, exactly what “color-blind racism” is in action. “Actors” in a “racialized society,” like Eklof, “can tiptoe around the most dangerous minefields because the stylistic elements of color blindness provide them all the necessary tools to get in and out of almost any discussion.” (RWR 75-6)

Eklof repeatedly mischaracterizes Bonilla-Silva’s work, taking quotes out of context or misapplying them to his own ends. This seems to be all in a day’s work for Eklof, no different

from his blithe omission of crucial details in the Southern Lead hiring process.

Bonilla-Silva has continued to enlarge and expand his work for almost 20 years. I have his 2018 edition in my hands, and what Bonilla-Silva actually says is *completely opposite* to Eklof's claims about him. The manner of the Southern Region Lead hire fits Bonilla-Silva's category of "naturalization of matters that reflect White Supremacy." That is, in the words of Rev. Scott Tayler, the person he chose was "just a better fit." Eklof himself lives out Bonilla-Silva's "minimalization of racism and discrimination." In addition, "abstract liberalism" lies at the very center of the "religion of humanity" Eklof repeatedly advances in his other essays, which I cover in detail below. That is, denial of racial, ethnic, or gender differences, ableism, or differences in sexuality. Bonilla-Silva scrupulously avoids the term, "racist." But both Rev. Scott Tayler and Todd Eklof are, in Bonilla-Silva's terms, "actors" in our thoroughly racialized society. (RWR V XV) (As are we all—that is the meaning of what Bonilla-Silva calls, "color-blind racism.") Lacking in self-awareness as he is on this point, Eklof is hardly capable of pronouncing on Unitarian Universalist Association's struggle to overcome our own past failings.

**THE COMMISSION ON INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE** Following the blow-up over the Southern Region Lead hire, the UUA formed a six-person "Commission on Institutional Change" to look into the fiasco, interview those affected, and make recommendations. For me, reading their final report was a heartbreaking exercise. I doubt that anyone, even Rev. Tayler, meant harm. No one in power seems to have noticed the problematic, "good ole boy" staffing practice. (This seems understandable given that such practice would seem natural—until it's named by someone *outside* the favored circle.) Few structures were in place to guide hiring, and the ones that did exist were all too easy to ignore. Informality allowed bad habits. Bad habits led to bad process. Bad process ultimately blew up the system.

It was a case study in institutional dysfunction (and, yes, unintended white supremacy culture.) As Bonilla-Silva writes (and Eklof conveniently ignores,) "every white person is baptized in the waters of color-blind racism;"(RWR V, XIV) and "once a society is racialized, all actors" participate in that racialization.(RWR V, XV)

For the record, I consider Rev. Andy Burnette a dear friend. It may be "centering white experience" for me to feel deep sadness and sympathy for him—but my feelings are what they are. I am a human being. Andy did not create the white supremacy house of cards that was UUA hiring practice. He was, however, the guy standing under it when it (thankfully) collapsed.

A question to ponder, though, is how much Andy knew about the rule change from which he stood to benefit. Of deep concern to me is that multiple people close to the process charge

that Andy was Rev. Tayler's choice right from the beginning. If that is the case, it made the entire hiring process a sham.

I am not in a position to “prove” this, but it would certainly answer a crucial question—why the rule about hiring Board members was waived so early, without a proper Board vote. It also begs a second, troubling question: whether and how much Andy knew about his favored status. Andy is highly intelligent. I don’t see how he could have missed “connecting the dots.”

No less troubling to me, after considerable soul searching, is that I find *myself* in a poor position to condemn either Rev. Tayler or Rev. Burnette. How many of us, particularly straight white males such as myself, would speak up after getting ourselves onto the “inside track” for a position we really wanted? I blushingly must admit that I, too, have enjoyed similar advantage. My response was no better. Nothing seemed wrong with it at the time, but looking back I feel humbled by advantages I have enjoyed because of where/when and to whom I was born, and the circles within which I moved. (At age three-score-and-ten, I can also say that I increasingly experience situations where I suspect I am discriminated *against*, due to advancing age. Perhaps there’s something karmic in that.)

Andy is smart, capable, and charismatic. There’s little doubt he could have done the job. But that’s not the point. The point is: this is precisely how patriarchal and white supremacy culture maintain themselves. We hire within our circle: those we know best, whose capacities we already trust. So—a white UU minister on senior staff hired a white UU minister who was on the Board of Directors. Again—not denying anyone’s good intentions—but that’s incestuous.

We mean no harm, but harm follows all the same. Diversity in leadership hiring was a proclaimed UUA goal, but too easily “put off till next time.” This is precisely what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva is talking about. No one in this process was intentionally “racist”—he scrupulously avoids that term. But when a *culture* is racialized, we are actors within that culture. And I, too, *have been part of the problem* even as I thought I was being part of the solution. I look at undeniable patriarchal and white supremacy culture (and/or color-blind racism) within our Association, and I feel sadness that some of it feels all too much like looking into a mirror.

I would have to be a hypocrite to condemn Andy. “Do the best you can until you know better,” Maya Angelou famously writes. “Then when you know better, do better.” This hiring followed a historical pattern. Even if unintentionally, it discarded ideals we claim to follow. I humbly acknowledge my own shortcomings in this same area.

I believe Andy acted within his perimeter of ethical perception—but that does not clear him of all accountability. He did withdraw his application when the firestorm broke. I witnessed some (not all) the social media vitriol aimed at him in the aftermath. This was unfortunate. Some of it even splattered on me, setting off my own PTSD in the process. Andy Burnette is still my friend, at least as far as I’m concerned.

But if what happened to Andy on social media was unfortunate, what happened to the “Latina,” to continue with Eklof’s term for the woman of color passed over for the position, was

out-and-out criminal. She was not the only person who felt cheated, I know that from personal exchanges with others. She's just the person who, as a Person of Color informed for the Nth time that she was "not the right fit," even though she lived in the region and the winning candidate lived two time zones away, denied any grievance process for what she saw as unethical hiring—took out her frustrations in a public blog post.

I find it ironic that religious liberals can cheer an anonymous "whistle blower" who reveals unethical acts on the part of a President they dislike—but call for the blood of a whistleblower who reveals good-ole-boy hiring done with their UUA-donated money! That anyone associated with Unitarian Universalism could be as cowardly and cruel as those people who hounded this woman off the UUA Board and, subsequently out of her paid employment—is stomach-turning to me. Alas, the Commission affirmed, this is an all-too-common response to people of color who speak out in this almost-all-Euro-American tradition of ours. Shame on us.

As is his wont, Eklof misrepresents her blog post. And while it is true that Rev. Tayler cited "confidentiality" in refusing to explain why one person was chosen and others were not—given Rev. Tayler's cavalier handling of UUA policy and written requirements—I feel suspicious that he was protecting himself at least as much as the people he rejected.

I don't see how any caring person could read the Commission report and watch the aftermath, and not be heartbroken at the racism directed at this woman—and even at her children! Since when do Unitarian Universalists do such things to children? This demands a hard look, for all of us, at the racialized, sexist, good-ole-boy quagmire we allowed.

For all his protestations throughout the book that we should "assume best intentions," Eklof does not grant the Commission on Institutional Change that courtesy, nor does he grant it to the "Latina" candidate. His treatment of all of them is negative. Everyone has the right to their own opinion, of course, the report is not above criticism. But it deserves honest criticism, not the glib sophistry and deceit Eklof practices. After all, honest criticism requires that all available evidence be taken into account. As we repeatedly see, Eklof routinely omits facts that don't fit the story he wants to tell. Nor have we yet seen the worst of that.

One of his criticisms is that, in gathering information, the Commission conducted interviews with fifteen people. "Subjective"(GP 94,97) information, he calls it, darkly hinting that "subjective" information is worthless and, therefore, the Commission's conclusions are worthless.(GP 101) But this is what's called a "fallacy of origins," presuming information is invalid because of where it came from. After all, were information from "subjective" sources invalid, half of world history would need to be thrown out, as would much insight gained in the fields of ethnology and the social sciences. Moreover—while he considers the *Commission's*

interviews "invalid" Eklof accepts information from the few people *he* interviewed—at face value, as Gospel.

Eklof does not know what was said at the Commission's interviews, whether or what supporting documentation was provided, what questions were asked, how they were asked, or whether or how the questions were followed up. He also presumes that the members of the Commission were incapable of sorting out differing points of view.

The report mentions—and Eklof ignores—that “racial tensions were already at the breaking point in the system,” that is, within the UUA, “before the hiring decision was even made.” There's just one more in the long list of facts Eklof blithely ignores because they don't fit the story he wants to tell. Nor does he say much about UUA leadership's acceptance of the report and initiation of work toward improvement in the ways marginalized members are treated.

As far as Eklof is concerned, as he makes clear in his first essay, he has a display of nerves when it comes to any improved institutional standing for LGBTQI folx or POCI. Meanwhile, at no point does he express more than *pro forma* sympathy for those same people, or for women.

Numerous employees of color had been made to feel unwelcome at Unitarian Universalist workplaces by careless or insensitive Euro-American members. Eklof dismisses their claims as—again—“subjective.” Well, hell, yes, racism is generally a subjective experience for the person on the receiving end. But I, myself, have had multiple conversations with UU professionals of color who have been made to feel “less than,” who have even left their UU employment due to issues arising around their ethnicity. It saddens me that any minister would feel threatened or express annoyance at an organization that's trying to overcome its shortcomings. (Of course, he well may not see them as shortcomings.)

The report details numerous systemic problems, inefficient organization, lack of written policies or guidelines, failure to follow the ones that did exist, and also ways in which color-blind racism—white supremacy culture, if you will—played a role in hiring. I would consider the whole process an accident waiting to happen. Unsurprisingly, particularly given the quickness with which Rev. Tayler and other top leadership resigned, the aftermath played out hurtfully on social media.

The report actually provides several reasons opinions played out on social media. Eklof ignores all of them except one—which he jumps right on. He quotes from the report, “Resignations precluded the opportunity for further dialogue and full information disclosure. (GP 95,96) Instead the events were tried in the court of conjecture and social media.” The list of reasons may be a perfect summation by the Commission or it may not, but Eklof addresses *only* that single sentence, ignoring all the information that comes before or after. “By not explaining *why* turning to social media was the only alternative means of discussing the matter,” he writes,

“the report may also present a ‘false dilemma,’ (GP 96) meaning there may, indeed, have been other means of communication available, or those who chose to use social media did so. . . without considering other options to begin with.”

I'm not sure whether this constitutes a logical fallacy—or just patent dishonesty, ignoring clearly provided information and jumping to an ever more suggestive “may” and ever more ravenous “why.” To the extent it was the Commission’s purview to delineate institutional weakness and poor structure that contributed to the social media blow-up, they did that. It was not their task to wander endlessly through the weeds on that topic. Suffice to say, the social media blitz happened. Suffice to say, it was highly damaging.

But this is one more example of Eklof’s practice: a scarcely relevant criticism which distracts from the broader context he prefers to avoid: the “house of cards” organizational structure and “good ole boy” hiring practices, which resulted in a hire that was justly criticized by increasing numbers of people. It’s the just criticism that Eklof seems determined to pretend never existed (or at least, wasn’t just.) Ignore the reasons or not, the social media debate took place, it was bitter, and people were harmed. I only witnessed part of it and it set off my PTSD.

The report alludes to other reasons the vitriol exploded so quickly on social media, but Eklof ignores them, as well. Let us put into words what he so studiously refuses to acknowledge: poor hiring process, playing out in an atmosphere of white supremacy culture, in which people of color already felt marginalized—led to a catastrophic result. I do not see where the report claims that harm was intended. It simply lays out the effect of poor structure and terrible process. These are lessons we ignore at our peril.

Let us conclude this section, however, with Eklof’s treatment of the “Latina,” whose frustrated (and courageous) blog post “outed” the color-blind racism of UUA hiring procedure, and precipitated the changes that followed. It can, perhaps, be summed up with the systems psychologist Edwin Friedman’s observation that, in a dysfunctional system, the person who *names* a problem will be *viewed* as the problem.

This is what Eklof does. He dismisses, out of hand, all the sloppy process and lone ranger hiring decisions. We have only her word, he says, that she was even qualified for the position in the first place. Her description of events “remain only a fraction of what must have been said.”(GP 83 84) This is a classic “argument from silence” logical fallacy. Eklof was not privy to any of those conversations, so has no idea what was or was not said. She’s “subjective” and biased, he states, while, in refusing to acknowledge non-congenial fact, he shows himself to be far more biased. But in his mind, the “logical” person (himself, despite his repeated deceptions and omissions) “must reserve judgment” as to what actually happened.” (GP 83-84) This begs the question—is he actually “reserving judgment?” Or is he once more just refusing to acknowledge a fact that does not fit the story he wants to tell?

I can’t imagine why Eklof felt he needed to further denigrate and insult this woman or the stand she took. She and her family paid a high enough price following the events in question. Granted, he does not mention her by name. But the report he repeatedly cites does, and her name is common parlance in various articles and blog posts dealing with the hiring travesty, easily obtained by anyone with a racist axe to grind. Having already suffered years of racialized

abuse, this woman didn't need Eklof "hanging her out to dry" all over again. To me, this adds real irresponsibility to Eklof's litany of deceit and omission.

For me, this was the point at which this book descended from merely annoying (and occasionally laughable in its inept writing and chopped logic,) into inexcusable prejudice and misanthropy. Nor is Eklof innocent of the harm some of his readers practiced in his name against marginalized people at the 2019 UUA General Assembly. His illicit charges became a cudgel with which some of his followers accosted People of Color, trans people, etc., demanding that they, personally, answer his nonsense accusations. Genuine harm took place. Many LGBTQI folks and People of Color were seriously called to doubt the sincerity of good-faith Unitarian Universalists.

We who desire that our tradition "practice what we preach" in welcoming all seekers, not just Euro-Americans, should be equally offended. We are doubly hard-pressed to make our welcome real and visible in the face of Eklof's screed and the most bigoted of his followers.

**SLEIGHT-OF-HAND DEFINITIONS** As another example of Eklof's logic-chopping: toward the end of their report, the Commission on Institutional Change goes into a list of reasons why a "reconciliation" process would be unlikely to be fruitful. The report features seven bullet points on this issue, beginning with the fact that reconciliation requires "a climate of honesty, accountability, and disclosure," but that most religious professionals of color "do not feel safe to tell their truths because of what they have experienced from congregational leaders, colleagues and many of the systems set up to support them." Witness what became of the "Latina" who spoke up after the Southern Region Lead hire: she lost her position on the Board. She later lost her employment. Her family was threatened. She still receives condemnation. It would be more than natural that other People of Color would look at her fate and say, "Oh-h-h-h, no. I'm not stepping into that trap."

After listing several more disheartening conditions, the Commission notes that, "The time for 'reconciliation' may be passed. What may be needed is what author Melvin Bray calls a 'truth and transformation' process which looks at not reconciling us to equity under an outmoded system but reimagining a system of equality, inclusion, and innovation.

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Typically, Eklof ignores the content before and after that statement. He ignores the call for "truth and transformation." He quotes only the clause, "The time for reconciliation may be passed." (GP 93) This out-of-context quote is a standard tactic for him. He compares it unfavorably to "truth and reconciliation" processes in Rwanda and South Africa, using the comparison to imply that the whole report lacks worth. I can't see this approach as other than deliberately deceitful.

It's also a false analogy, even on its own terms. Truth and Reconciliation worked in

Rwanda and South Africa, not least, because the forces who had wielded unjust power were no longer in power. If they were to remain in the country and survive, they had no choice but to come to the table with the—formerly subservient—people who were now in control. No such conditions exist in the UUA. We are still a predominantly white-controlled organization. Of the white leadership responsible for the hiring decision and subsequent blow-up, three had already resigned, fleeing the scene of the accident, and a fourth had died. Thus, the principles were no longer available for “reconciliation” work in any event.

To return to another Eklof tactic, he often holds forth at length on logical/semantic terminology, not as *clarification*, nor for *explanation*, but purely for the purpose of *obfuscation*. That is, he uses long, irrelevant explanations as smokescreens to hide the weakness—or outright deceptiveness—of the point he’s making.

This tactic is variously known as a “proof by verbosity,” “argumentum verbosium,” or “proof by intimidation.” Those are different terms for the same logical fallacy. Under any name, the reader must look past the brain-numbing jargon, into what Eklof is actually saying and doing.

One quite lovely example is the Commission on Institutional Change report’s use of the term, “white supremacy culture.”

Eklof launches into a several-page discourse on the difference between “intensional” and “extensional” definitions. (GP 103-5) An “extensional” definition of “white supremacy,” he explains, would be listing white supremacist groups: “Ku Klux Klan, Aryan Nation, Skinheads,” etc., etc. As an example of an “intensional” definition of white supremacy, he turns to the Oxford English Dictionary. “The belief that white people are superior to all other races. . . .” (GP 104) He lectures for another page or so, then turns to a sociological definition of white supremacy, and notes that this “intensional definition is similar to the [dictionary’s] lexical definition cited earlier, though [the author’s] extensional explanation. . . .” (GP 105) yada yada, and goes on for another page or so before concluding that, no, the UUA is not guilty of “white supremacy.” (GP 106)

Of course, a truly perceptive reader will already have figured out the punchline to this story.

Through these endless pages of high fog-index discourse on definitions of “white supremacy,” we find that the term Eklof defined at such length—is *not* the term the Commission

used! That is, he pretends to define the Commission’s term, “white supremacy culture,” by turning on his fog machine and endlessly holding forth on the significantly different term, “white supremacy.” This is what’s called a “weasel word logical fallacy.” It’s vintage Eklof.

The Commission report itself defines their term clearly: “White supremacy culture’ refers to the unspoken beliefs and cultural practices which reinforce an institution’s white-centered practices.” As other sociologists put it—and Bonilla-Silva agrees, though with slightly different terminology (RWR V 16)—white supremacy culture is so much a matter of

habit (“cultural practices”) and so much the water we all swim in, (“baptized in the waters of color-blind racism,”) that we don’t even know we’re even doing it.

This explanation does not, however, fit the story Eklof wants to tell. So he ignores it and defines a different term. Again, I suppose it is possible that Eklof is careless enough to miss the distinction. It’s also possible he is deliberately trying to mislead us. Neither possibility makes him a source we can trust.

When I pay attention to my own actions and reactions as a Euro-American, I can certainly recognize times I’ve participated in white supremacy culture. I have taken comfort in beliefs and assumptions that are racial and cultural, not scientific and logical. They don’t go away. One can only try to become sensitized to them so that, if one pays close attention, one can begin to work around them. (This is, after all, what Implicit Bias tests are all about, the function they serve. I’ve taken such tests, which have confirmed my level of what Bonilla-Silva would call color-blind racism.) Like the (African American) author of one article on white supremacy culture I read in *Education Week* magazine, I, too, am a “recovering perpetrator of WSC.”

The difference between me and Todd Eklof is that I admit my weaknesses. You can’t begin to recover from a condition you’re unwilling to admit you have in the first place. Then again, if Eklof has to engage in the deception that fills this essay in order to prove to himself that he (and the UUA) have no racial bias—I can only, humbly, suggest that his energy would be better spent dealing with the problem, rather than pretending he’s somehow above it.

**ROBIN DIANGELO AND EKLOF’S MISREPRESENTATION OF SOURCES** In the last part of his third essay, Eklof tears into Robin DiAngelo’s article, “White Fragility,” in the *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, a peer-reviewed journal for educational professionals. DiAngelo later expanded this article into her book, *White Fragility: Why It’s so Hard for White People To Talk about Racism*, which Eklof has not read. He does give DiAngelo credit for extensive documentation in the journal article, but he then complains that “most [of] the references cited are meant only to support the truth of propositions she’s asserted without explaining why they should be considered true.” (GP 117)

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This is what’s called a “demand for perfection” logical fallacy, similar to “moving the goalposts.” Eklof can’t fault her for lack of documentation, so he does the next best thing, complaining that each citation is not adequately explained. Yet many a writer—including Eklof himself—uses citations in the same way. Journal articles and scholarly papers often have word limits, after all. Redundant explanation is neither required nor encouraged. In essence, Eklof faults DiAngelo for doing the same thing he does.

He further attacks her research by comparing it unfavorably to research done by his preferred sources Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s 2001 book, *White Supremacy & Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era*. Bonilla-Silva’s research is just, plain better than DiAngelo’s, Eklof suggests,

largely because Bonilla-Silva uses more statistics and primary research. (GP 120) The hint, of course, is that we should accept Bonilla-Silva and reject DiAngelo. This is a blatant false dilemma based on his misrepresentation of Bonilla-Silva's work. While they use somewhat different terminology, Bonilla-Silva *agrees* with DiAngelo. As previously noted, Eklof repeatedly takes Bonilla-Silva's words out of context to make it appear that Bonilla-Silva agrees with him, instead. He may actually believe that himself, who knows?

The most precious example of this is that, while Eklof *claims* to have exhaustively investigated DiAngelo's sources, he fails to notice that DiAngelo repeatedly draws upon—Eklof's own guy, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva! (WF 155, etc.) Bonilla-Silva is apparently an excellent source when Eklof uses him, but a poor source when DiAngelo uses him! Moreover—and this matters—DiAngelo uses Bonilla-Silva's current work, while Eklof has not bothered to read anything Bonilla-Silva has written in almost twenty years. Had Eklof read more recent work, he surely would have listed it.

Even better, while Bonilla-Silva does not use DiAngelo's exact term, "white fragility," he certainly describes what white fragility looks like, which she quotes! (WF 110; RWR [IV] 68)

This begs the question: why did Eklof not mention Bonilla-Silva as one of DiAngelo's sources? Did it not occur to Eklof that she had, plainly, read more current work by this source than Eklof had? Was Eklof so careless that he just didn't notice? Or—again—is this another instance where Eklof fails to mention a fact simply because it doesn't fit the story he's trying to tell? Such misrepresentation of sources and events is unending in this book. Whatever Eklof's motives are, this does not deserve to be called "research" or "scholarship." It is particularly irresponsible given the way his book has been used to attack marginalized people, based on his egregious inaccuracies. **ON TO CODDLING AND RELATED CONCEITS**

Having completed Eklof's third essay, I believe we're better prepared to take on the book's first essay, "The Coddling of the Unitarian Universalist Mind." We don't need fog lights

quite as badly for this essay. It is so poorly written, it might help to have a wry sense of humor, however.

Eklof riffs off Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt's book, *The Coddling of the American Mind*. Lukianoff and Haidt lament that American college education is going to the dogs because of what they call "safetyism" and "identity liberalism." The fact that these things bother them—and the outrageous state of tuitions, fees, and student loans doesn't merit even a peep of concern, suggests to me that they're really just "concern trolling" on education. Scholarship may be their proclaimed worry. But behind that, cultural change and more loudly-voiced concerns for marginalized persons is their actual motivation. Older Americans have long condemned students for doing what students have always done: exercise their own freedom of speech in

sometimes-strident ways. As one example, my own generation was condemned for demonstrating against the Viet Nam War. Time revealed who was right on that issue! Lukianoff and Haidt are doing nothing new. “Kids today. Where will it all end?”

Following them, Eklof proclaims that “identity liberalism” is not just a bane on university campuses, but in Unitarian Universalism, as well. Eklof also refers to this as, “identity politics,” (GP 8) a term beloved of conservatives. (Conservatives will complain, for example, that it is “identity politics” to say African Americans ought to be able to vote, or that Identity Evropa ought not beat up transgender folx. But it’s NOT identity politics for conservatives to block voting rights in Georgia or beat up Trans people.) But I digress.

Aping Lukianoff and Haidt, Eklof condemns “left-wing violence” born of such concerns. (GP 1, 2, 3, etc.) To be plain, in my view, violence is bad no matter who does it. The rub is, I’m not aware of any Unitarian Universalists being violent at any church or in General Assembly, or anywhere else. But there’s a continual implication-by-association in this essay that such (overstated) campus violence is actually, somehow, related to what Unitarian Universalists do.

After condemning “identity politics,” Eklof writes: This was demonstrated, for instance, during the UUA’s 2017 General Assembly in New Orleans, its first gathering following the election of Donald Trump. Yet, instead of focusing on a collective response to the impacts of this shocking political disaster for liberals or ministering to those still experiencing degrees of anxiety and grief just a few months past the election, the assemblage dwelt almost exclusively on internal accusations of racism and white supremacy resulting from a hiring decision.” (GP 9)

It is typical of Eklof that he fails to mention that immediately before the New Orleans General Assembly, the Association’s three highest-ranking officers had resigned rather than face accountability for that “hiring decision.” Also, their Moderator, who chairs GA Plenary Sessions, had died. The Executive Director of the UU Ministers Association had also resigned, rather than face accountability for a racially insensitive outburst of his own. It would be impossible for such a slate of personnel changes at the highest level to *not* dominate proceedings. Not to mention

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the racial blow-up connected to the resignations—which was about much more than just a “hiring decision,” which was merely the catalyst. As discussed above, racial tension had been building within the UUA and UUMA for years.

Eklof is just being Eklof in omitting such relevant facts. But it’s worth sitting with that quote for a different reason as well. Eklof denounces the UUA for working on internal racism and organizational structure precipitated by years of building tension—rather than providing pastoral care for the “anxiety and grief” of non-identity “liberals,” due to national election results. Since Eklof repeatedly expresses lack of concern for conditions faced by Unitarian Universalists

with “identities,” one must conclude that the non-identity liberals to whom he refers can only mean members of the Euro-American, binary majority—such as himself.

For example, what about President Trump’s by-then proclaimed intent to put Hispanic children in cages, ban Muslim travel, and Trump’s rhetoric about violent neo-Nazis, then demonstrating in Charlottesville, being “fine people?”

Not a word from Eklof. Crickets. For all his denunciation of “coddling the Unitarian Universalist mind,” then, one can only conclude, from this page of his text and all that follows, that his real problem is that we are coddling the *wrong* Unitarian Universalists. Other than a (very) occasional *pro forma* declaration, he expresses little-to-no sympathy for Unitarian Universalists of Color, LGBTQI Unitarian Universalists, or even women.

He does add, right after the aforementioned statement on hiring discrimination, “This matter surely needed to be addressed, even more thoroughly and honestly than it was.”(GP 9) So apparently, the 2017 General Assembly did too much about racism in hiring. At the same time, they also did too little. And also did it dishonestly. I was never able to discern what he was getting at with “honestly.” He went on without further explaining that.

**TRANSGENDER FOLX SHOULD KNOW THEIR PLACE** As I just mentioned, Eklof expresses deep concern for the “anxiety and grief” of Euro- American liberals like himself, while one must search to find such expressions of concern for what he considers “identity” groups. He expresses real you-will-not-replace-us fear at times, for example, that the UUA website will someday “include a preponderance of persons who are not white and male.” (GP 45.) Why this should bother anyone is beyond me. But Eklof repeatedly worries about mistreatment of white males. (GP 45, 49, 57)

My own suspicion is that he’s not self-aware enough to even realize he’s doing this. Whether that is correct or not, there is a real level of fear being expressed.

He provides a typically “Eklof” version of the controversy/criticism of the first *UUWorld* magazine article on transgender Unitarian Universalists. (GP 23) Others have detailed his

inaccuracies on that controversy, so for brevity’s sake (his penchant for misrepresentation being abundantly documented elsewhere in this review,) I will not repeat what others have already explained.

He follows his account with what I see as light treatment—even disdain—for the idea that trans folx would desire to speak out of their own experience, rather than having a straight, white person describe what their lives mean to straight, white people. One could, I think, write a thoughtful essay on this point: contrasting the dominant culture’s feelings around a marginalized group versus the marginalized group’s own feelings. (And let’s be honest, no one is more marginalized than transgender folx. Assaults on transgender people run into triple digits each

year. The number of *fatal* beatings in the first eight months of 2019 alone, is eighteen. Those are just the ones we know about.)

But Eklof makes the idea—transgender people wanting to explain their Unitarian Universalist experience, rather than have it explained for them—sound rather silly.

That's striking to me. Eklof is a white male who climbs into a pulpit each Sunday and speaks whatever's on his mind, *knowing* that people will hear him and his words will be repeated and commented upon. Yet he fears exclusion and censorship of white males. (GP 49, 57) Meanwhile, a trans person faces a possibly fatal beating just for walking down the wrong street at the wrong time. The world pays little attention to that constant threat, and even a fatal beating may not make the news. Yet to Eklof, the idea of a trans person wanting to tell their own story in their own words—rather than have their lives described for them in terms of what they mean to straight people—is silly.

One needs to sit, let that hypocrisy sink in for a moment. I initially meant to write, "The smug is strong with this one." But having read farther, it's smugness that masks real fear of loss of white male privilege.

**A NOTE ON HOUSES THAT JACK BUILT** I can't resist an occasional smile over the inept writing in this book, particularly the opening essay. One symptom is a penchant for *seriously* "run-on" sentences. Editors and writing teachers sometimes call them "house-that-Jack-built" sentences. A sentence should be a concise thought. Good writers do vary sentence length and rhythm, to help the reader stay engaged. But that does not mean sentences that go on and on, shift between subjects and thoughts, and finish up in some different realm from whence they began.

I'll provide a full quote of one of the better "howlers" below. Suffice to say, there are multiple candidates for "worst" among poorly constructed sentences.

Poor writing does matter, however. Sloppy writing often correlates with sloppy thinking. That's eminently the case with *The Gadfly Papers*. Eklof's book is poorly thought out, full of

deceptive quotes, statements, and logical fallacies, ideas are left hanging as the author moves on to the next rant.

Just as important, fast, sloppy writing often provides what poker players call "tells." An observant poker player watches the other players' faces and even how they physically handle their cards. Careless fidgets and expression changes can provide clues to what cards the other players hold. "Tells."

Ditto with careless writers. You can get a read on thoughts and motivations that the writer himself may not be aware of.

For example, I just mentioned a couple of “tells,” in which Eklof revealed his deeper concern about preserving the status of binary Euro-American males like himself. He occasionally plugs in a quick, *pro forma* endorsement of equality for the marginalized. But the broader context of this book invariably returns to his baseline: that social justice work is to be done at the comfort and convenience of Euro-Americans, that Euro-Americans should set the timeline and the agenda, and that “our” Unitarian Universalist Association should not allow marginalized identities to push us out of our comfort zones.

Beginning about page 12, he talks a lot about a “religion of humanity,” and “community,” (GP 12) but it remains a humanity/community in which Euro-Americans still hold the reins. So that when he talks about “safetyism,” “narcissism,” and “coddling,” I believe he’s projecting. Because, of course, to those who enjoy white privilege, equal treatment for the marginalized comes across as preferential treatment, while equality feels like loss.

That said, let me offer one of the better “house-that-Jack-built” sentences, as Eklof worries about his potential loss of privilege. “Secondly, and even more troubling for me, has been recognizing the parallels between what’s now happening on college campuses and what’s also happening within the Unitarian Universalist Association, even though individual autonomy and freedom of conscience have been essential to its meaning dating at least as far back as 1568 when the Edict of Torda, human history’s unprecedented religious toleration law, was issued by King John Sigismund Zapolya, the Unitarian King of Transylvania.” (GP 3-4)

Whew! Going from violence at the University of California, back 350 years to the King of Transylvania. That’s an achievement! It’s a journey from which he never seems to return.

Not only is this one of many laughably disorganized sentences—and paragraphs—it also shows another noteworthy “tell.” Eklof can draw no actual connection between sporadic violence on college campuses and any kind of violence among Unitarian Universalists. The “violence” he finds so troubling consists of non-congenial (to him) words and ideas only. It is truly ironic that a person who repeatedly rejects and condemns words and ideas that fail to center his own ethnic group should accuse others of “censorship” and “suppression.”

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Because the “violence” he cites is only in his own mind, he throws a stream of words and superficial history to hide the speciousness of his claim: thus, the irrelevant story about the King of Transylvania. He spends the following sentence, as well, telling a longish story of King John Sigismund and his Chaplain, Francis David. You might call this a “salvation by verbiage” logical fallacy. But of course, as I note in analyzing his third essay, this is standard practice for Eklof.

**A LITTLE U AND U HISTORY** Now to dip into one of my favorite topics, religious history. I do not call myself a historian. I am a fan, though. More importantly, I have read enough primary sources, particularly early nineteenth century Unitarian and Universalist sources, to consider

myself knowledgeable.

Listening to Eklof's on-line sermons, he seems to consider himself an expert in many fields, including history. On that one, at the very least, he's dead wrong. His interpretations of our tradition's history range—frankly—from careless to clueless.

For example, his shout-out to Arianism (GP 12) starts out as just careless. Arianism was *not* the original idea of Christianity. Arius of Alexandria, for whom it is named, was born more than two centuries after Jesus of Nazareth died. As Christian historian Bart Ehrman's books lay out in detail, various Christian factions held doctrines that ranged all over the map during that time, and for hundreds of years after. I'm going to give Eklof the benefit of a doubt on this one, though since he came out of a Christian—Baptist—tradition. I'm guessing that if he had proofread this passage more carefully (or proofread it at all,) he'd have caught that mistake.

More important within Unitarian and Universalist history, however, Arianism also was not the "belief in Jesus's humanity and his humanitarian teachings." (GP 12) Arians believed in the divinity—Godhood—of Jesus. He was, however, a lesser—created—being, apart from God. In technical terms, his divinity was not *homoousious* (of one substance) with God.

The doctrine that Jesus was not divine at all, but fully human, developed more than a thousand years later, and is called Socinianism. Eklof mentions Socinianism, (GP 13-14) but does not seem to understand the difference. This matters to Unitarian Universalists, because the two different doctrines have very different histories and are connected to two different takes on Unitarianism. In point of fact, his entire depiction of humanism shows little understanding of our actual history.

There's no excuse for such errors. This history is basic to Unitarian Universalist ministry and some is also basic to informed Christian ministry. It's easily looked up in a variety of sources. I don't know whether to ascribe such mistakes to carelessness, sloppy research, or ignorance born of laziness.

More technical are mistakes he makes around one of my favorite topics, the theology, life, and death of Michael Servetus. (GP 13) For one thing, Gutenberg's invention of the printing

press did not, at least initially "make it more possible for people to read the Bible for themselves." (GP 13) For one thing, from the 1300's on, the Roman Catholic Church made it a crime punishable by death to even possess a Bible in a vernacular language. That's why, arguably, Martin Luther's most revolutionary act was not posting his Ninety-Five Theses in 1517, but translating the Bible into German in 1522. (Almost a hundred years after Gutenberg.)

In fact, in 1536, before England's King Henry VIII fully broke with the Catholic Church, religious scholar William Tyndale got burned at the stake for the crime of—smuggling English language Bibles into England. That should be an example of how important *translation* was—

long after the printing press was invented.

Which brings us to Michael Servetus. Neither the printing press nor Biblical translation enabled Servetus to “read the Bible for himself.” He was, first of all, a genius at languages. Linguistics was his primary field. He made himself an expert on Scripture in its original Hebrew and Koine Greek, as well as the Latin Vulgate Bible.

Nor did his study of the Bible cause him to abandon the Christian Trinity, as Eklof claims. Servetus lived and died a Trinitarian Christian, although an unorthodox one. His comments *On the Errors of the Trinity* were what we would consider mere technical adjustments.

Not that even technical tweaks were acceptable to religious authorities in Servetus’ day. But more serious was what theologians call Servetus’ *anthropology*, that is, his view of the human condition vis-a-vis God. To Catholics, Lutherans, and John Calvin’s Reformed Church, human beings were “fallen” from God’s grace, powerless, and incapable of achieving any kind of good on our own: “inherently depraved,” as Calvin put it. To Servetus, we *were* capable, through reason and diligence, of understanding and meriting Divine approval.

What likely got him into even more trouble than that was his personality. He was conceited and outspoken to the point of real obnoxiousness. He offended most of the religious scholars of his day. The one he offended the most—intentionally—was Calvin. Calvin didn’t admit it, but his letters show that Calvin wanted to kill Servetus long before Servetus fell into Calvin’s hands. We have documentation that Calvin’s hatred—and ultimate burning at the stake—of Servetus arose as much from their personal feud as from Servetus’ doctrinal heresies. Calvin and other religious authorities were also successful at suppressing Servetus’ writings. Unitarianism wasn’t “reborn” (GP 13) because of anything Servetus wrote, not least because *Servetus was never Unitarian*. Rather, later scholars found through their own study that the Trinity was not actually supported by Scripture. Thus, Unitarianism kept popping up like toadstools, particularly in Eastern Europe.

The Servetus information is somewhat obscure even among Unitarian Universalists, so errors there are, I suppose, understandable. Still, if Eklof is going to proclaim himself an expert on Unitarian Universalist history—to the point that he feels justified making proclamations about

our movement’s future—is it too much to ask, that he actually understand that history? Or that, if he chooses not to learn what he’s talking about, that he leave the history alone? As for the general Christian history, any scholastically-minded Christian would be able to lay out the tenets of Arianism and Socinianism, since they’re discussed in Christian history, as well.

The philosopher, Plato, observed that “the empty vessel makes the loudest sound.” As a self-proclaimed “expert” on philosophy, among other fields, one would think Eklof would have taken the time to “fill his vessel” more carefully on the history of this tradition. Loud though they may be, false premises inevitably lead to false conclusions. Having failed to build a reliable

foundation in Unitarian and Universalist history, it is unsurprising that Eklof's conclusions turn out to be ramshackle and fatally flawed.

**SOME THOUGHTS ON NAME-CALLING** I want to reiterate—in no way are these comments meant to be an *exhaustive* collection of the misstatements, logical fallacies, and outright deceptions in Todd Eklof's book. There are simply too many. To cite each one would just be to repeat myself *ad nauseam*. This piece is only a representative sampling for anyone who has not read the book, or who has not had time to read it carefully enough to pick them out independently.

We now turn to the book's use of language, which is anything but scholarly. This is particularly true of the first essay, a windblown pasture strewn with steaming heaps of invective. At various points in the first essay, Eklof compares the UUA's anti-racism, anti-oppression, multi-cultural efforts to the French Revolution's Reign of Terror and Joseph Stalin's purges, (GP 38) then to Adolf Hitler as "the embodiment of evil." (GP 47)

He also refers to "Puritanical pressures," (GP 23) "enraged" self-righteousness, "inquisition," "heresy trial," and most of all, "witch hunts." (GP 37) This is not scholarship. Nor is it analysis. It is not logical argument. Invective is only invective.

Moreover, if heaping such insults upon already marginalized people is not hurtful language, someone needs to explain to me what the term, "hurtful," even means. Whether it's *intentionally* hurtful is hard to say, since, based on this book as well as sermons to which I've listened, Eklof's mind just seems to work in hyperbolic terms.

He also approvingly quotes *The Coddling of the American Mind* for using such terms as "Maoist," "McCarthyite," "Jacobian," and his apparent favorite, "witch-hunt." (GP 38.)

Someone also needs to explain to me, if it's wrong for Donald Trump to throw such terminology around, how is it somehow correct for a Unitarian Universalist minister to use it—or for that matter, ostensibly liberal journalists? The only difference I can see is that Eklof and his sources are slightly more literate than Trump in their insults.

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It's also disingenuous to name-call in this fashion, then turn around and claim that he's trying to have a sincere discussion of issues.

He also notes, "It may seem equality and freedom go hand in hand, but in practice they are at great odds. . . . An extreme emphasis on equality can result in societies that are unbearably oppressive." (GP 54)

This is a statement I would expect from Fox News or the editorial page of the Wall Street Journal, but not a "liberal" minister. It reveals Eklof's obvious distaste at efforts toward equal treatment of our marginalized members: that a Person of Color or LGBTQI person would dare to

aspire to respect and self-determination on an equal footing with Euro-Americans! It is, however, consistent with the rest of the essay, in which he repeatedly expresses real concern for white males, but proportionate concern for no other demographic.

Even more remarkable, as an example of radical equality, Eklof gives us—the Soviet Union and suchlike communist regimes! (GP 54-55) He declares at length how “the overbearing State they erected enforced equality upon its citizens by restricting individual freedom.”

This is not just right-wing rhetoric, it is a perfect example of someone holding forth—at volume—with no idea what he’s talking about!

The Soviet Union and related regimes did suppress individual freedom, but not for the sake of equality! Rhetoric aside, the Soviet Union, East Germany, Communist Romania, North Korea, et. al., were rigidly hierarchical. Party bosses and their cronies lived in luxury. The laboring rank and file were reduced to drab squalor, kept in line by the military and secret police (the KGB in the Soviet Union, the Stasi in East Germany, Romania’s Securitate, on and on.) Those who stepped out of line were punished in a brutal prison system or by execution.

That someone can cite Stalin’s blood purges on one page, then hold forth on how Stalin made people *too* equal just a few pages later is nothing short of breathtaking. This is yet another point where one must question Eklof’s honest intentions. Can it be possible that he actually believes such patent nonsense himself?

Or at least—if he’s going to compare people like me—as a Unitarian Universalist minister—to Jacobins, Hitler, McCarthy, and Soviet communists—I wish he would at least make up his mind which!

**A WORD ON REAL WITCH HUNTS** Eklof likes *The Coddling of the American Mind*’s use of such terms—as he quotes them —“Maoist, Jacobian, and above all, witch-hunt.” (GP 38) As I noted previously, the only thing that separates this kind of talk from what Donald Trump spits out is that this might be slightly more literate. But I fail to see a difference in spirit.

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Moreover, I have personal experience with a couple of the terms Eklof takes such seeming delight in. I can tell you from my own experience—McCarthyism and witch-hunts are no fun at all for someone on the receiving end of the real thing.

In 1954, my father, Paul McCarty, was terminated from his job as an electrician at the Paducah, Kentucky, Gaseous Diffusion (nuclear enrichment) Plant, and subsequently blacklisted as a security risk. It turned out that J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI had been keeping a file on my father, full of erroneous information, since before the Second World War.

My father had never been a communist, nor had he been a “fellow traveler.” He was a politically naive farm boy from Iowa, who worked hard for a long time to earn his ticket as a

union electrician. (Of course, the “union” piece, by itself, might have been enough for Hoover.) He served throughout the War, first as a Radio Operator, then as an Electrician’s Mate, mostly in the Pacific Theater. Much of that time was spent on an ammunition ship, which is particularly dangerous duty. They supplied ammunition for the Marianas campaign, Manus Island, and at Iwo Jima. At Iwo Jima, they came under enemy artillery fire, suffering serious damage. Fortunately, the hit did not set off a secondary explosion in their deadly cargo. A couple of ammunition ships did explode during the war, and they never found enough pieces of the crew members to bury.

That’s what my father lived with during the War. Then he came home to find the government he had served to the best of his ability—blacklisted him. He went to his grave without ever finding out what he had done that caused Hoover’s FBI to conduct secret, blatantly inaccurate surveillance on him. But he was just one of tens of thousands of American citizens who lost jobs, lost careers, even wound up killing themselves over the disgrace of being labeled “communists” or “communist sympathizers.” All too often, as in my father’s case, this was done on faulty evidence or no evidence at all.

I personally witnessed how my father shrank inside himself over the years, due to difficulty finding employment. This was never related to his work ethic. Everyone I ever talked to who had worked with him, referred to him as “a good electrician and a good guy.” It was totally due to government-applied stigma.

I watched our family gradually lose cohesion as we moved from city to city as my father sought work. I would be put into one elementary school, then pulled out and moved to another school in another city six months later. This happened time after time. I have since learned, these years provided the first seeds of my own Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

That’s the way it is with a *real* witch hunt. *Real* McCarthyism. That Eklof and *Coddling’s* authors use such terms so loosely and carelessly, so gratuitously, without an instant’s thought—much less concern—for the thousands of very real men, women, and children (like me) harmed by the very real thing, says a great deal more

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about them than about university campuses or the Unitarian Universalist Association. It makes me seethe. The terms they use so glibly: “witch-hunt,” “reign of terror,” “Maoist,” “blood purge” describe the real suffering and death of real people. None of that seems to matter to these authors. It doesn’t even occur to them. Their words are just flails with which to assault those with whom they happen to disagree.

How could I possibly have an ounce of respect for them? And if I seethe as Eklof glibly cheapens the oppression my family and so many other families endured, how can I not sympathize with the linguistic concerns of people more marginalized than I am: People of Color, people with disabilities, Transgender and other non- binary people? Words mean things. They convey attitudes. They establish hierarchy.

Heedless language is just one more demonstration: Eklof may pretend to use “reason.” But his actual argument is pathetically emotional. Pathetic in the sense that he feels so discomfited by social changes, he slings the language of real atrocity—with no thought what those words actually signify or what they mean to someone who experienced the real thing. On that level, his obvious discomfort, I can feel a glimmer of compassion for him. That’s compassion he fails to show for others, however, as this lack of sensitivity demonstrates.

Related is Eklof’s oscillation between whining and mockery of Unitarian Universalist work toward more inclusive language in hymn/song lyrics. (GP 34-35) There is actually a thoughtful conversation to be had here, but Eklof never has it.

Language is endlessly fascinating for me, writer and songwriter that I am. It can be rapier-fine and precise at times, club-blunt and imprecise at other times.

Changing language concerns are, for a baby-boomer like me, genuinely challenging. As a songwriter, I’ve been asked to change lyrics to reflect concerns around ableism, gender, and other human variables. I confess that I resented it at first. Yet I can also say, the added thought and reflection have more often led me toward *stronger* lyrics than weaker ones. That’s a point worth serious consideration.

It seems to me that if Eklof really wants to claim a “religion of humanity,” he should be willing to take into account the concerns of all humans—not just able, Euro-American humans like himself. He and I obviously differ on this.

**CULTURAL APPROPRIATION AND HUMILITY** Eklof closes out his first essay by drawing once more, at length, from *The Coddling of the American Mind*. The authors (and he) return to the rhetoric of equal rights, quoting Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce, “The earth is the Mother of all people, and all people should have equal rights upon it.” (GP 58) Of course, quoting is easy. *Observing* equal rights—equal access to justice and the good things of life—requires thought and hard work.

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For example, let us reflect that, as with other indigenous Nations, the Nez Perce got booted off the land they occupied and placed on a small reservation. Some of them tried to fight back, but Euro-American culture—my culture and Eklof’s—relentlessly drove them to a reduced, impoverished state, in which they still reside. The land they once occupied was exploited for its mineral, timber, and recreational resources, while the Nez Perce Nation, today, ekes out a living with 35% of their population below the federal poverty level.

That’s oppression. Yet I have never had an indigenous person (or any other Person of Color, for that matter,) ask me to feel the least bit of shame that I am part of the cultural demographic that perpetrated it. I have been asked—and I agree—to feel a sense of humility at what I have inherited that I did nothing to earn, that has been denied to others.

Growing up mostly in the Rocky Mountain West, I do feel humility, benefitting as I do from the ouster of Ute, Paiute, Kiowa, and Cheyenne peoples (among others) of my native state. Ekloff has likewise benefitted. He resides and makes a living on land which the Nez Perce once roamed. Yet he quotes Chief Joseph with no hint of curiosity what that quote's real origins are, or its implications for the Nez Perce or the descendants of Chief Joseph themselves. Rather, he uses those words exactly the same as the insults I cited earlier: with no thought toward their real meaning.

That lack of curiosity, I suspect, is one reason he's so inept with history. For him, historical anecdotes and quotes are nothing but tools of manipulation against those with whom he disagrees. They have no significance or interest in their own right. The real Nez Perce people vanish into meaninglessness for him. He heedlessly uses the words outside any context or concern for the people who spoke them. To him, even considering "identity groups" (including the Nez Perce,) just turns "life [into] a battle between good and evil people," with "the main axes of oppression usually point[ing] to one intersectional address: straight white males." (GP 59)

Ah, those poor, picked-on, straight white males! Why do I not feel picked on, I wonder? Is it just that I'm not smart enough to realize how picked-on I am, the way Ekloff is? Or is it because I have the humility to look at my demographic's past without flinching or taking it personally?

History is history. If we look at the history of oppression of indigenous people, people of African, Latin, and Asian descent, not to mention women and LGBTQI people in the United States—are we to somehow pretend that it never happened? As a straight, white male, I cannot see how it's picking on me or anyone else to acknowledge history, or that those historical patterns still exist.

Meanwhile, Ekloff glibly compares anti-racism anti-oppression multi-cultural work to Hitler, Stalin, Mao Tse-Tung, and Senator Joseph McCarthy, among others. Then he has such

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lack of self-insight as to claim *someone else* is turning life into a battle between good and evil people?

Projection much? I will close by mentioning, once more, that Ekloff repeatedly calls for the assumption of best intentions. (GP 21) In discourse between equal partners, that really can be best practice. But it demonstrates a profound misunderstanding of social power differences. To burlesque a bit, a human being and an ant may have equally good intentions, at least within their realms. But the effect of the human being accidentally stepping on the ant will not be the same as the other way around, no matter the excellence of either one's intentions.

To move that into the human realm, historian Fawn Brodie's biography of Thomas Jefferson honors the good intentions of that statesman—again, at least within his own realm of perception. But those good intentions were cold comfort for the slave, Sally Hemmings, who

bore Jefferson six children with no say in the matter. Nor did they help those children or their descendants, who were denied any portion of their famous ancestor's material wealth or regard in the public eye. Jefferson's good intentions might be assumed, but slaves were only slaves. The more stark the power differential, the less relevant are good intentions.

Meanwhile—again—despite his repeated *requests* for assumed best intentions, Eklof himself grants that courtesy to no one.

**SO—WHAT KIND OF DIVORCE ARE WE EVEN TALKING ABOUT?** Eklof titles his second essay “I Want a Divorce.” It's hard to know what to say about an essay in which even the author doesn't seem to know his purpose in writing it. Even Eklof supporter Scott Wells has observed, this essay doesn't deserve serious consideration. Resigned to reading Eklof's entire book, however, I will consider it despite that warning.

My best guess is that Eklof intends it as yet another jab at religious diversity and “identity politics.” I'll address that point more below. But first, we need to return to Eklof's minimal understanding of Unitarian and Universalist history.

The highest assessment I can manage on that point is that Eklof's historical understanding is superficial. He has done the reading *required* by the Ministerial Fellowship Committee, the credentialing body for Unitarian Universalist ministers. We know this because he proudly—and repeatedly—cites those texts. But those books are just survey reading. They provide the minimum, basic understanding of our past. He shows no in-depth knowledge of Unitarian Universalist (or even general Christian) history. This results in numerous blunders.

As one example, he has a shallow understanding of the differences and similarities between Unitarians and Universalists in the early days of the United States. “Theology and class,” he says, as though that covers it.

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But that doesn't cover it. There was theological discord among early Universalists, for example. Universalist patriarch, John Murray, (of whom Eklof has read,) was a “Restorationist.” He believed that sinners received a period of divine punishment after death, and only then were restored to God's good graces. Hosea Ballou, on the other hand, (whom Eklof does *not* seem to have read,) was an “Ultra-Universalist,” preaching that everyone went straight to heaven.

These were not small differences in belief to the people who held them. It led Murray's wife, Judith Sargent Murray, to denounce Ballou from the pulpit after Ballou had preached at their church. (John Murray had suffered a debilitating stroke, so she was acting in his stead. The nineteenth-century Universalists were more open to the empowerment of women than the Unitarians would be for another century. We should respect that worthy heritage.)

The greater point, however, is that Ballou's theology was actually quite similar to that of Unitarian icon, William Ellery Channing, who preached at Boston's famous Federal Street

Church. The two men's pulpits were within blocks of one another, but they were not friends, for reasons I'll get into below.

On the Unitarian side, Eklof mentions New England's "Standing Order" Churches with no depth of understanding of their influence or origin. (GP 64) They were not just instrumental to the development of Unitarianism, but to American democracy. Briefly, the Standing Order Churches were the original network of churches founded by the Puritans. Eklof correctly notes that they were supported by public taxes. But they were much more than that. As meeting places, they were the spawning ground for democratic debate and decision-making in New England. Their theological development was also more complex than he suggests. There was general theological agreement after the seventeenth-century Antinomian Controversy (a story in itself,) but it didn't last. It was, in fact, the Standing Order's polity of congregational independence that allowed Arminianism to develop among some ministers, then Unitarianism.

Equally important to both Unitarianism and Universalism was that—democratic spawning grounds that the Standing Order Churches so long were—they were also central to *political* power in New England. The Unitarians were inside that circle of political power. The Universalists were outside. Eklof does superficially allude to this. (GP 64) But it also meant that New England was rife with Unitarians in public office, while Universalists were not even allowed to run for office. This remained the case well into the nineteenth century. Just one ramification was that Universalists formed a key part of the movement to "disestablish" the Standing Order Churches—that is, stop public funding, sending tax money to those chosen churches. Meanwhile, Unitarians fought like tomcats to perpetuate such funding. Public funding of Standing Order Churches only ended in 1818 in Connecticut and 1832 in Massachusetts, over the prostrate, writhing bodies of Unitarian judges and legislators.

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The point being that, yes, there were class differences, as Eklof states. But more importantly, Unitarians clung to *political* clout and power, not least to feather their own parish nests. While Universalists were held outside that circle. This is a difference between the two traditions—the embodied tension between the powerful and the powerless—that a thoughtful minister should be at pains to carry into every Unitarian Universalist parish. We receive different historical blessings from the two traditions, and should honor both. So that "identity politics," that concern for those in the margins which Eklof so derides, can be included among our gifts from the gentle-but-determined Universalists, evolved as American society evolved.

Moving into mid-to-late nineteenth century Unitarian theology and history, Eklof seems to be totally lost. Knowing so little of the essential backgrounds of our two religious antecedents, by what stretch of the imagination does Eklof believe he has foundation for proclamations on what our future should be?

He misunderstands the function of the American Unitarian Association, claiming that it did not "allow" congregations to join. (GP 67) The A.U.A. was a product of the congregational system of the Standing Order Churches. Their independent polity fostered theological

differences between “Orthodox” Trinitarian Congregationalist ministers and “liberals” dubbed “Unitarians” by the Orthodox. Intended as insulting nickname, the Unitarians later took it as their own. In this process, the American Unitarian Association organized as a group of *individuals*, particularly Unitarian ministers. Churches still had mixed Unitarian/Orthodox membership well into the nineteenth century. It was never a matter of churches being “allowed” to join, but Eklof plainly does not understand this..

The Unitarian tradition was born in bitter controversy, Eklof does not seem to understand that, either. He makes passing mention of the Unitarians’ Transcendentalist Controversy, which roiled Unitarian theology for decades. But he seems not to have fully understood it. He then states that the “Universalists were, ironically, more theologically diverse than the Unitarians.” (GP 65)

I’m not sure what his basis is for that statement. In mentioning the beginnings of the National Conference of Unitarian Churches, (GP 67-68) he is ignorant of the conflict that immediately sprang up because of Unitarian religious diversity. The first National Conference blew up because free-thinking Unitarians, opposed to the mention of Jesus Christ in the Conference Bylaws, walked out after a vicious floor fight. Unitarian ministers such as Francis Ellingwood Abbott, Octavius Brooks Frothingham, and Thomas Wentworth Higginson joined Unitarian luminaries such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Lydia Maria Child in forming the Free Religious Association. Their ranks included agnostics like Frothingham, scientific theists like Abbot, spiritualists like Emerson (who acknowledged the influence of Buddhism, by the way,) as well as non-Unitarians.

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My point is that, Eklof’s claims to the contrary, controversy and religious diversity are the marrow in Unitarian bones, and have been for the better part of two centuries. If he can’t even grasp this most basic fact of our history, what business does he have proclaiming our future?

There is plenty of documentation for the Unitarian theological diversity which Eklof claims didn’t exist. He cites the American Unitarian Association’s 1936 Commission on Appraisal Report, (GP 62) but he seems not to have read the entire thing. Had he read a bit farther, he would have found a listing of the theological strains Unitarians claimed at that time, almost a hundred years ago.

The 1936 Unitarians listed *nine* theological categories, acknowledging that then, as now, a person might be part of more than one. There were those who attended for community; those who attended for conscience and for self-improvement; Rationalists who exercised “intelligence in religion;” Mystics; Humanists (distinct from Rationalists in their emphasis on social justice;) Theists; Evangelicals (seeking forgiveness of sin and the practicality of prayer;) traditional Christians; and, finally, followers of non-Christian religions.

In other words, since 1936, only the percentages and a couple of details have changed. We were religiously diverse then. We’re religiously diverse now.

Yet Eklof insists that such diversity is “an identity crisis” which did not exist prior to the 1961 Unitarian Universalist merger! And that it prompts people to “describe themselves as Buddhist UUs, Christian UUs, Pagan UUs, Humanist UUs, etc. etc. Such descriptions would have been both unnecessary and inconceivable prior to the merger.” (GP 69-70)

His historical cluelessness is profound. He doesn't even know information in a source he claims to have read!

He mistakes natural process and ease around the language of religious diversity—evolving with us for almost two hundred years—as a crisis. Poor fellow. It may be a crisis for him. But that's a problem in his own perception, not in Unitarianism and Universalism's long history of religious seeking, innovation, and debate.

**SLOPPY METHODS PRODUCE SLOPPY RESULTS** When I was sharing, on social media, a day-by-day account while reading Eklof's book, someone messaged me to ask if I'd noticed “the mistake on the cover.” I was scratching my head about that until another friend sent me a photo of the original version, handed out at June's UUA General Assembly. On that cover, “The” appears in 20-point type right above the full title, *The Gadfly Papers*, in 48-point type. So that the original title was actually *The The Gadfly Papers*. *The The Gadfly Papers*. I can't think of a better embodiment of the carelessness shot through this book!

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By the time I ordered my copy, the first “The” had been removed. It still said “Volume One” at the bottom, though. The same friend sent me a screenshot from the “The Gadfly Papers” Facebook page, in which Eklof explains that a.) he was mimicking the front cover of 1971's *The Pentagon Papers*, but that “no one got it.” And b.) that he anticipated (he said) that others might be inspired to add further volumes to his Gadfly collection.

Given Eklof's many other inaccuracies, I don't know whether to believe either of those statements. Nor will I take the time to confirm//deny them. Life is too short. But in an ironic way, they nicely sum up the personality we're plainly dealing with.

Returning to Eklof's second essay, he issues yet another charge that the Unitarian Universalist “identity crisis” “suppresses” UU Humanist “free speech.” (GP 73-74)

Let's take a look at this. Eklof has written a manifestly ill-informed, inaccurate book, yet he still has his position as minister at the Spokane UU Church. Rev. Andy Burnette, for all that he was treated unreasonably harshly on social media, retained his ministry at the Chandler, Arizona, UU Church. The UUA President, Chief Operating Officer, and Congregational Life Director did resign their positions rather than face accountability over the Southern Region Lead hire. But at least some of them received sizable severance packages, contrary to UUA policy.

Meanwhile, the person forced out of her position on the Board and, later, her employment because of what she said about that fiasco, was the “Latina” Eklof also criticizes. If anyone’s free speech were violated, it was her, not the humanist, Eklof.

Beyond that, though, it really is difficult to know what to make of this thoroughly muddled essay. It concludes by suggesting that “members begin seriously discussing the dissolution of the UUA.” (GP 77)

That’s actually the first time Eklof mentions “dissolution.” He starts out with the subtitle, “A Case for Splitting the Unitarian Universalist Association.” (GP 61) He claims throughout the essay that 1961’s Unitarian Universalist merger produced an “identity crisis” due to the same “identity politics” and “you’re suppressing free speech” snarks that fill the first essay.

One should note, constant repetition of the same charges do not constitute fact. They only constitute repetition.

At any rate, the natural inference up until the last couple of pages would be that Unitarians need to “divorce”—to use Eklof’s term—from Universalists. What this would even look like is hard to imagine, since relatively few people are still with us who were adult Unitarians or Universalists when the merger took place. For the broad majority of Unitarian Universalists, including myself and Eklof, the Association as it is currently constituted is the only Unitarian Universalism we have ever known.

Nor does anyone even still think in terms of “Unitarians” versus “Universalists.” The Unitarian Christians (or for that matter, Trinitarian Christians—there are some) within our ranks,

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at least the ones with whom I’ve spoken, don’t consider themselves “Universalists.” The various other theological leanings among our ranks may use “Unitarian” as a term of convenience, but would be hard-put, I think, to explain themselves in terms of one root or the other. Still, Eklof claims that differences between Unitarians and Universalists are “irreconcilable,” without explaining what that means or addressing the fact that our real membership hardly ever even distinguish between one and the other. “The merger has not successfully reconciled [our] disparate theological traditions, nor has it even tried,” he claims. (GP 75) We have—again—fallen under “the spell of identity-based ethics, politics, and liberalism.”

I have searched for any kind of actual reality that might lie behind this rhetoric, and found nothing.

Then Eklof must have gone and gotten a cup of coffee, or perhaps had a good night’s sleep before continuing. Because in the very next paragraph, he laments the loss of “our ancient devotion to the *shared calling that once bound these two traditions together.*” (Italics mine.) A “shared calling” which, in the previous paragraph, never existed in the first place! (GP 76)

Well, no matter. We’ve gone to the dogs. Universalism is dead in the water, it will perish if left to its own devices. (GP 76) But Unitarianism, he claims, still might retain a little of

its “commitment to reason, freedom of conscience, and our common humanity.”

It’s interesting to me that, to Eklof, the Universalists’ steadfast opposition to political privilege in New England, tolerance and support for suppressed religions in early nineteenth century America, and advancement for women a century before the Unitarians caught up, does *not* constitute “commitment to. . . freedom of conscience, and our common humanity.”

One must presume, therefore, that Eklof intends the same “religion of humanity” proclaimed in the first essay, in which Euro-American male humanity still calls the shots and doesn’t exert itself worrying overmuch about the “identities” and “feelings” of non-binary and non-European-descended humanity. I think that’s a kind of privileged “humanity” the Universalists would happily eschew.

“For these,” he writes, at any rate, “I hope a renewed commitment to Unitarianism alone will be a better alternative. . . that can finally move forward toward our common [!] goals because we have connected with our historic past.” (GP 76)

Common goals and a historic past, that is, which he seems unable to decide whether they ever even existed or not! Or to be more precise, as I laid out previously, he worships at the altar of a Unitarian past that never existed. For all the world, this sounds to me like Eklof channeling Donald Trump: “Make Unitarianism Great Again.”

He’s not talking about “dissolving a marriage,” even though he starts out by indicating that he is. In “seriously discussing the dissolution of the UUA,” he seems to be talking about

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uncomfortable Euro-Americans like himself going off and organizing their own church. Or something. I can’t even be positive about that much.

There is something deeply problematic in writing an essay in which the author himself seems unable to comprehend his own intent. Or at best, does not realize what he’s writing about until the final three paragraphs. It speaks not just to a lack of logical organization in his own mind, but also to a failure in self-awareness. Is he writing just for effect, like an insect stinging someone just to watch them jump? Does he desire for Unitarian Universalists who happen to be humanist to join a specifically humanist organization with him? This exemplifies a mind that would let a typographical gaffe appear on the front cover of his book, while assuming he would so inspire others that they would want to write more books just like it.

The upshot, I suppose, is Eklof wanting to go off with people who agree with him, leave the rest of us behind, and do—something. Which both begs the question—and possibly answers it—why he bothers to take the time to write and extensively promote a book which condemns the organization he no longer wants to be part of. But I note that he still accepts his paychecks as a minister within that organization with no sense of the irony in that act.

Turning to the title he chose for his book, the word “gadfly” has multiple meanings.

There is, of course, the actual gadfly--a horsefly--which, operating purely by instinct, administers a painful bite, then feeds on the blood. Having suffered such a bite, I can tell you they hurt like the dickens and take a long time to heal. Second definition is a human kind of gadfly, who attempts to improve society by posing difficult questions: irritating hopes of provoking innovation. That sobriquet was applied to the philosopher, Socrates. I would wager that Todd Eklof claims to be following in his footsteps.

But Eklof asks very few questions. Rather, he turns to polemic and invective against those with whom he disagrees. He "punches down" at the disadvantaged. That's not what Socrates did. Causing hurt in service of a higher good is one thing. Heaping hurt and disdain on people whose life experiences one has never bothered to even try to understand--is quite another. The third definition of gadfly is such a person: one who merely irritates without making useful suggestions. Eklof can be said to fit the definition of #3, or metaphorically, even #1. But Socrates he's not.

**AN AFTERWORD ON THE AFTERWORD** I conclude with a quick look at Eklof's Afterword, in which he cites some of his own social justice work. This includes legislative advocacy, making educational documentary videos, and social justice ministry, both from the pulpit and on the street. It's only fair to note that this is real work, and some of it has achieved real results. Eklof's supporters protest that—how could his

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book possibly undermine racial and gender equity when he has years of genuine social justice work behind him?

That strikes me as a fair question. Yet taking his book as a whole—not even counting the logical sleight-of-hand and outright deceit that fill its pages he also expresses continued white fragility to the point of repeated paranoia about what he sees as mistreatment of Euro-American males like himself. He repeatedly diminishes, even belittles, the concerns of trans people, People of Color, and women. He sees no problem with attitudes in UUA leadership that resulted in hierarchical, white-males-at-the-top hiring patterns.

So I think what I see in Eklof is a Euro-American man who lacks self-awareness and has far more patriarchal and white supremacist notions in his subconscious than he realizes or will ever admit. Or to put it differently—he would be happy to go out and stomp the streets for “Black Lives Matter” as an example—but would feel uncomfortable if those same black lives were directing the operation. He is plainly squeamish about having non-Euro-Americans, particularly non-binary folk at the top of the UUA, directing policies that affect him. Like a lot of Euro-Americans, I suspect the increasing numbers of non-white faces in our churches and our national organization, small though those numbers are, bring him distress.

I believe Eklof would willingly expend himself heroically on behalf of an oppressed minority group, as long as that group remembers who the hero is—him—and that they are mere characters in his heroic drama. What he refuses to do, as his book demonstrates, is be part of

the supporting cast in an oppressed group's own heroic struggle, their own self-determination. He still resides in a world where white males freed the slaves in the Civil War, where liberal white men extended the vote to women in 1920, where whites gained civil rights for African Americans in the 1960's, and so on.

What I see in his book is a man willing to work on behalf of others as his own, proprietary practice, but not willing to accept marginalized groups as masters of their own destiny. Particularly when they demand to be heard on their own terms. Particularly when their innermost religious beliefs manifest their own cultural heritage, rather than his.

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