

**Religion against Itself:  
Psychodynamics of Some Peculiar Television Commercials  
Produced by the United Church of Christ\***

By

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ABSTRACT

The psychodynamics of a series of television commercials produced by the United Church of Christ, in which members of various groups are ejected from services by “organized religion,” are explored as a way of understanding the dynamics underlying the organization. The UCC has adopted an approach to religion based on an exclusively maternal identification, rather than the traditional biparental model of the Christian church. The dynamics of the maternal church are discussed and compared with those of the biparental church. The exclusively maternal identification involves rejection of the father, who is represented as “organized religion,” rather than taking him as a model. It also makes psychological demands on the Church elite that they cannot fulfill. Hence, unacceptable feelings are projected into “organized religion,” the rejected father, and attacked through the vehicle of the commercials.

On March 28, 2006, the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported that the major TV networks had rejected an ad by the United Church of Christ, saying it violated their rules against controversial or religious advertising. The article by Wyatt Buchanan, a *Chronicle* staff writer, says:

The 30-second commercial for the United Church of Christ will begin airing on cable networks and Spanish-language stations next week. The ad, called “Ejector,” shows a gay couple, a single mother, a disabled man and others flying out of their pews as a wrinkled hand pushes a red button. Text on the screen reads, “God doesn’t reject people. Neither do we,” and a voiceover says, “The United Church of Christ. No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you’re welcome here.” The church tried to run a similar ad in December 2004 in which bouncers outside a church stopped gay couples, racial minorities and others from entering. The networks also rejected that ad.

Both of the ads, which are available on the UCC website <http://www.ucc.org> are well produced and slick, and end with images of happy and diverse groups of

people, evidently representing what the UCC has to offer. In both commercials, the familiar villains of political correctness have their places. In addition to the wrinkled hand, which is white and male, a stereotypic white middle-class family represents the membership of the church that excludes others. It appears to be their discomfort that provides the motivational basis for the ejections. They are not present among the happy and diverse people with whom the commercials end.

Blogger and political psychologist John Ray (2006), commenting on the article, said:

A Leftist church (probably with a minute membership) was ostensibly trying to advertise itself but did so only by misrepresenting the great majority of Christian churches. No follower of Christ rejects anyone from Christian services—any more than Christ rejected lost sheep—but some churches will endeavour to point the way to more biblical standards of behaviour. Deceptive advertising is rightly banned and this ad was grossly deceptive and defamatory

Doing a fast check through Wikipedia, I found out that, on one thing, Ray is wrong. The United Church of Christ cannot be said to have a minute membership. They say this about it:

The United Church of Christ (UCC) is a mainline Protestant Christian denomination in the United States, generally considered within the Reformed tradition, and formed in 1957 by the merger of two denominations, the Evangelical and Reformed Church and the Congregational Christian Churches. Currently, the United Church of Christ has approximately 1.3 million members and is composed of approximately 5,750 local congregations.

On another matter, Ray is certainly correct. The ads are defining the UCC as a church that differs from the others in that it does not reject people like gays. This definition only makes sense if it believes that such rejection is the norm among Christian churches<sup>1</sup>. And in fact, on its website it says "... the ad acknowledges the rejection that many have experienced from organized religion."

But as Ray observes, Christian churches, followers of one who famously gathered social rejects around him, do not, as a general rule, reject people from services. On the contrary, in a manner that almost anyone would regard as definitional, Christians believe that Christ, through his sacrifice, offers us redemption from sin, and that it is one of the main functions of the Christian church to extend that offer of redemption. The result is that Christians characteristically deal with those they regard as sinners by offering salvation; attempting to bring the individuals into the fold, not by expelling them.

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, the ads are not intended to be taken literally; their meaning is metaphorical. The question is what the metaphor represents. I assume, and I think we always do, that the metaphor itself is the best symbolic representation of the meaning of the metaphor. For our analysis, we need only to stipulate that we are analyzing the commercials as metaphors and not as literal claims.

To be sure, there are matters which some would not consider sinful and others would. They might well feel themselves rejected. But that will always be so, as long as one holds that anything is sinful. But that there is sin is the very premise of Christianity. Jesus did not die on the cross to abolish the category of sin; he died to redeem us from it. And if Christians do not reject sin, even though they welcome the sinner as a person with a redeemable soul, it is hard to say how they can possibly be Christians.

Yet the idea of Christians turning sinners away from services, absurd as it is, stands as nothing against the idea of Christians rejecting the disabled from services. The idea that followers of Christ, who largely ground their faith in the belief that Jesus worked miracles in healing the sick, would reject disabled people from services because they are disabled is more than absurd; it is bizarre.

The ads, that is to say, do not make a great deal of sense in their own right. That suggests that the way to understand them is not in their own right, but as the expression of irrational forces.

#### THE PURPOSE OF THE ANALYSIS

We can begin by focusing on a set of questions raised by the irrationality of the ads. First, what kind of attitude can it be that UCC believes other Christians have? Second, what is going in the mind of the UCC, or rather of the UCC elite<sup>2</sup>, that leads them to have the idea they have about other Christians? They certainly didn't get that idea about other Christians from reality, since in reality other Christians do not have it. So where did they get it? And finally, how can it be that, quite contrary to fact, they believe it is ubiquitous?

The answer I will propose provides a key to all of these questions. It is that the attitudes that the UCC attributes to the minds of other Christians are not in other Christians, at least no more than they are in the mind of UCC members. UCC believes they are in the minds of other Christians because it has projected them there. It projected them there because it couldn't stand these attitudes being in themselves. By projecting them outside, UCC seemed to solve two problems. It could get rid of the unacceptable ideas and it could give them a locus outside themselves, which they could find unacceptable, and in that way maintain their hatred of the ideas. The reason they find these ideas ubiquitous is that they are everywhere they are, or imagine themselves to be, for the simple reason that UCC

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<sup>2</sup> When I speak here about the mind of UCC, I mean the mind of the UCC elite; those members who have the power to define the activities of the UCC, and who have defined it in terms of a certain outlook. It is the outlook that this elite share, together with the psychological processes that leads them to have this outlook, which is of interest to me. I do not mean the attitudes of ordinary UCC members, or for that matter the attitudes of the ordinary members of any of the mainline denominations. These are often strikingly different from those of the elite, a fact that has led to great conflict within the churches. For example, the elite of the Presbyterian church, speaking in the name of the church, passed a resolution supporting economic divestiture from Israel and condemning its security barrier. Shortly thereafter, a general meeting of church members voted, with a 95% majority, to rescind that resolution.

brings them along. What we are seeing here is the externalization of an internal conflict. It is not a conflict between UCC and other Christians, but within the mind of UCC itself.

But what are these ideas, and why are they so unacceptable? For an answer to that, we need to address the psychology of political correctness.

Schwartz (2003) has argued that political correctness has an irrational element to it, and has developed a psychoanalytic theory to explain it. In this paper, I will follow his theory. According to this view, political correctness is based upon identification with the primitive image of an omnipotent, perfectly loving mother that we all carry with us in the deepest layers of our psyche. The infant is narcissistic; it experiences itself as being the center of a loving world. The primitive mother personifies that loving world, and hence is part of the narcissism of the child. She is the infant's fantasy of mother, not a real mother, but she is eminently available for identification.

The appeal of such identification, in terms of the power and the sense of one's goodness and boundless love, is clear enough. However, it will pose problems for our engagement with reality, both external and internal.

The problem regarding external reality is what to do about our experience with aspects of the world that are not loving. This is the question Freud addresses with his theory of the Oedipus complex. The objective reality of the world is not built around us, and does not care about us. In psychoanalytic theory, this objective, indifferent reality is personified in the father. We first encounter it in the form of the relationship that the father has with the mother, which does not revolve around us. He has taken mother's love away from us, we feel, and we respond to him with rage. But remember that the father here is only representing the indifference of reality. Rage against reality is obviously an unproductive strategy for living in the objective world. Ordinarily this rage is overcome by an internalization of the father, and the reality he represents, to form the superego. The formula for life, then, is to become like the father, accepting and living up to one's obligations in the world, and then you can have the mother, which is to say the world will revolve around you with love. We may refer to this set of dynamics as *Oedipal psychology*.

The solution that underlies political correctness, however, is quite a different one. In this psychology, we deny the objective character of reality, and hence the meaning of the father. Mother's omnipotence, her capacity to make our lives perfect just by her presence, would take care of us entirely, if her love had not been stolen by the father, who is seen here as an imposter. He has taken mother by force and subterfuge and stolen her love and beneficence from us.

Oh, he tells stories about how he achieved something in the world to earn a place with her, but they are lies, built around the central lie that the external world is indifferent to us. The world is not indifferent to us. If it were not for him, the fantasy continues, the world be a loving place, as it was when we were infants in our mother's arms. Those from whom he has stolen it, who are in PC terms the members of oppressed groups, are to be loved in compensation. Get rid of him and we will again be in the state of perfect bliss of union with mother. In the meantime, he is to be

hated for his theft of love and deprived of it in the future. Hating the father, trying to expel him, and loving those from whom he has stolen mother's love, give rise to a very different approach to the world. Schwartz calls it *anti-oedipal psychology*.

The problem regarding internal reality is what to do with parts of ourselves that are not loving.

The image of the primordial mother amounts to a deity. Our identification with this divinity requires that we have these perfect capacities ourselves. Being human, however, we never do. Our very humanity results in qualities that do not fit with a loving God. What are we going to do with these?

There are a number of such qualities. For one thing, as we have seen, there is recognition in our encounter with the father of our own incapacity and weakness. At the deepest level, the father, representing objective reality, bring us the news that we are human beings and therefore mortal. Within our identification with the primordial mother, these do not fit with our belief in our omnipotence. As we know, in the face of these experiences, we respond to him with rage and hatred. This problem has an internal aspect because rage and hatred are not feelings that fit within the loving goodness of mother, either.

Another set of problems arises from the fact that, given the state of fusion, identification with the mother is also identification with her loved children. We cannot tolerate life being less than perfectly loving for any of these children, since that also undermines the omnipotence of mother's love. That again is the occasion of rage and hatred, and there we are with the same problem.

But there is another problem, which is perhaps the most threatening of all, It is that, in truth, we do not really love these children, either, or at least not in the way the primitive mother is supposed to love them. Remember, the premise here is narcissism. Identification with the children works both ways. Their narcissism is also our own narcissism. We can love them insofar as we can identify with them, but insofar as they are not ourselves, they are competitors and threats; their very existence demands love and attention that should be coming to us. Hence, we feel rage and resentment toward them, and these do not fit at all.

None of these feelings can be tolerated, let alone all of them. But what are we to do with them?

One possible resolution is to combine our internal problems with our external ones. If the perfect mother is the guarantor of everything good, then the father, who has taken the mother from us, is the cause of everything that is bad. This means that every intolerable feeling that we have can be consolidated and located in the father, or at least projected into him as their cause, and attacked there.

Thus, "organized religion", insofar as it is imagined as the rejecting church, may be seen as the representation of oppressive external reality and also as a repository created for the purpose of receiving the projection of intolerable feelings.

Thus, by adopting its maternal identification, the UCC was also defining itself as the father's antagonist. Given the grandiose premise, offering love, by itself, could not constitute a sufficient way of being; it had to be accompanied by a

rejection of the father. These are two sides of the same coin. That is the complex dynamic that led to the creation of those peculiar commercials. And it is in the UCC commercials because it has come to be the central dynamic of the UCC. In large measure, it defines religion for them.

## TWO FORMS OF CHRISTIANITY

For psychoanalytic purposes, we may think of the ultimate object of religion the return to fusion with the primitive mother, which Freud (1914, 1921, 1923) calls the ego ideal: As we have seen, though, there are two routes to the attainment of the ego ideal, which we have called the Oedipal and the anti-oedipal. These give rise to two different conceptions of the nature of the church, which we may call the biparental and the maternal.

A church that takes an exclusively maternal orientation will be fundamentally different from a church that takes a biparental orientation. The promise of the biparental church, operating within the Oedipal dynamic, is, as we know, that if we become like the father, taking on and living up to the obligations in the father's understanding of reality, we can return to the state of fusion with the mother. In other words, if we fulfill the demands that God has made through religion, we can attain salvation and come home to God. At the same time, it also functions to explain why we have not attained the ego ideal; we have not entirely fulfilled those demands. In Christian terms, we remain sinners.

The maternal church, by contrast, operating in anti-oedipal psychology, does not require living up to these demands; it abolishes the requirement of becoming like the father. Instead, its program calls for reorienting our lives to be against the father. In so doing, it dissolves our separation from the ego ideal. It is now to be found within ourselves, if we can get rid of the father's intrusion. It offers us the ego ideal on the basis of inclusion in the body of the church, which in both Oedipal and anti-oedipal psychology is a maternal element. However, inclusion on the basis of who we are means that there is nothing separating us from the attainment of God; we are already one with God. Hence we must love as God loves.

This is quite an order. The problem is that our emotions are not under our control. We may experience God's love, Christians say, but when we do, it is a result of God's grace, and God is not under our control. Being only human, we cannot fulfill the emotional demands of perfect love.

What we can see in the commercials, explicitly in the group scenes at the end of the commercials, is identification with the mother; the UCC redefine their function in terms of maternal love. They will love each of us exactly as we are, and will make us feel perfectly loved in that way. This means that it has made demands upon itself and its members that they can not fulfill. Human limitations on the capacity to love and the limitations reality imposes on the efficacy of love keep us from the capacity for such fulfillment. But the maternal identification means that these limitations are not acceptable; hence they have been projected out. "Organized religion", insofar as it is imagined as the rejecting church, is the repository for those projections. The offering of love had to be accompanied by hatred of organized religion, experienced in this way.

Organized religion, then, in the mind of the UCC is religion as organized by the hated father, in this case represented by the wrinkled hand, and by the person from whom the bouncers receive their orders. Take away the father and the members of the church will be as happy, comfortable, and universally loving as the diverse folks in the group scenes that end the UCC commercials. Indeed, given how wonderful this alternative is, the hatred and contempt for the father is further explained.

The point here is that hatred and rejection of the father, and hence of organized religion, is part of the essential makeup of the maternal church. This is obviously quite a significant redefinition of the nature of the church and religion, and we can see it taking place all through mainline American Protestantism.

#### THE BIPARENTAL CHURCH AND THE MOTHER CHURCH

Consider an article in *First Things* magazine by Philip Turner (2005) the former Dean of the Berkeley Divinity School at Yale, and currently Vice President of the Anglican Communion Institute. His thought here is directed specifically at his own church, the Episcopal, but he means it to apply to all of mainline Protestantism within the United States, which would include the UCC.

Johnson begins by reporting that after serving ten years as a missionary in Uganda, he returned to the US to attend graduate school in Christian Ethics at Princeton. Subsequent to that, he took a job at the Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest. This is what he reports:

Full of excitement, I listened to my first student sermon—only to be taken aback by its vacuity. The student began with the wonderful question, “What is the Christian Gospel?” But his answer, through the course of an entire sermon, was merely: “God is love. God loves us. We, therefore, ought to love one another.” I waited in vain for some word about the saving power of Christ’s cross or the declaration of God’s victory in Christ’s resurrection. I waited in vain for a promise of the Holy Spirit. I waited in vain also for an admonition to wait patiently and faithfully for the Lord’s return. I waited in vain for a call to repentance and amendment of life in accord with the pattern of Christ’s life.

This was quite different from what his ten years in Uganda would have led him to expect, and it was no aberration:

I have heard the same sermon preached from pulpit after pulpit by experienced priests. The Episcopal sermon, at its most fulsome, begins with a statement to the effect that the incarnation is to be understood as merely a manifestation of divine love. From this starting point, several conclusions are drawn. The first is that God is love pure and simple. Thus, one is to see in Christ’s death no judgment upon the human condition. Rather, one is to see an affirmation of creation and the persons we are. The life and death of Jesus reveal the fact that God accepts and affirms us.

From this revelation, we can draw a further conclusion: God wants us to love one another, and such love requires of us both acceptance and affirmation of the other.



In other words, God is love and makes no demands on us. The church simply follows this model. This is what I am calling the mother church.

The mother church abandons its connection to its own doctrine, as it has come from the past and as it has been reinterpreted through learned and authoritative theological discussion. The word of God comes to be brought forward through spontaneity, within the overall frame of God's inclusiveness, unconstrained by the necessity of linkage to tradition. In other words, the church speaks with the voice of God and what it does is an expression of divinity:

... changes in belief and practice within the church are not made after prolonged investigation and theological debate. Rather, they are made by "prophetic actions" that give expression to the doctrine of radical inclusion.

Johnson continues:

Such actions have become common partly because they carry no cost. Since the struggle over the ordination of women, the Episcopal Church's House of Bishops has given up any attempt to act as a unified body or to discipline its membership.

Certain justifications are commonly named for such failure of discipline. The first is the claim of the prophet's mantle by the innovators—often quickly followed by an assertion that the Holy Spirit Itself is doing this new thing, which need have no perceivable link to the past practice of the church.

The church as mother accepts us exactly as we are, makes no demands and imposes no standards, apart from the embrace of inclusiveness itself. For Johnson, this represents the loss of what makes Christianity Christianity; the Christian church, he says elsewhere (2003) is transformed into a simulacrum – an image of a church. Our perspective leads us to see within it the rejection of the Church as father, as he is represented in the demands made by the Church:

In a theology dominated by radical inclusion, terms such as "faith," "justification," "repentance," and "holiness of life" seem to belong to an antique vocabulary that must be outgrown or reinterpreted. So also does the notion that the Church is a community elected by God for the particular purpose of bearing witness to the saving event of Christ's life, death, and resurrection.

It is this witness that defines the great tradition of the Church, but a theology of radical inclusion must trim such robust belief. To be true to itself it can find room for only one sort of witness: inclusion of the previously excluded. God has already included everybody, and now we ought to do the same. Salvation cannot be the issue. The theology of radical inclusion, as preached and practiced within the Episcopal Church, must define the central issue as moral rather than religious, since exclusion is in the end a moral issue even for God.

We must say this clearly: The Episcopal Church's current working theology depends upon the obliteration of God's difficult, redemptive love in the name of a new revelation. The message, even when it comes from the

mouths of its more sophisticated exponents, amounts to inclusion *without qualification*.

#### VICISSITUDES OF THE MOTHER CHURCH

These dynamics are represented in the most striking form that the mother church has taken: the worship of the mother, and by extension the female, who therefore becomes elevated to the status of a goddess. When this happens, a more explicit expression of the maternal emotions involved comes to be on display, in a form which defines them in opposition to the demands made by traditional religion.

A classic example of this was a conference held in Minneapolis November 4-7, 1993. The conference was called "to re-imagine what belief in God and life together in community means from a Christian-feminist perspective" It was conceived by the Women's Ministry Unit of the Presbyterian Church (PCUSA), which contributed \$66,000 and had 24 of their national staff there. Some 2,200 delegates attended, almost all of them lay-women and clergy from various Christian denominations, including 405 Presbyterians (PCUSA), 391 United Methodists, 313 Lutherans (ELCA), 234 Roman Catholics, and 144 from the United Church of Christ. (Branch, 1994).

The following are from an article in *Christian Century* (1994)

A defining point of the conference, according to some of its critics, was the use of the name Sophia, or "Divine Wisdom" personified in the Book of Proverbs, as a feminine name for God. Organizers developed elaborate worship rituals using feminine imagery, including that of Sophia. Among other conference happenings that have provoked controversy:

- An unscheduled gathering of about 100 lesbians on the dais, followed by a standing ovation from the audience.
- A panel on Jesus, in which Union Theological Seminary professor Delores Williams was quoted as saying, "I don't think we need folks hanging on crosses and blood dripping and weird stuff ... we just need to listen to the God within."
- A prayer offered to "earth maker Mauna, our creator," led by Melanie Morrison, cofounder of Christian Lesbians Out Together.
- A closing worship service featuring a ritual of milk and honey rather than the traditional bread and wine and including the words: "Our Sweet Sophia, we are women in your image. With the nectar between our thighs, we invite a lover; we birth a child; with our warm body fluids we remind the world of its pleasures and sensations..."

Not surprisingly, the conference came in for criticism from more traditional Christians. For example:

The whole Conference applauded heresy and celebrated blasphemy. Some of the statements were in extremely poor taste. For example, speaker Delores Williams referred to the biblical account of the conception of Jesus

by saying that “the Holy Spirit mounted Mary.” But even more appalling than the poor-taste-statement was the applause and laughter which followed.

Many basic doctrines essential to the Christian faith were repudiated at Minneapolis, often in an atmosphere of disrespect. These include the doctrine of God, the deity of Christ, His atoning death, the sinfulness of humanity, the Genesis account of creation, the authority of Scriptures, and the biblical understanding of human sexuality.

The entire Conference was an assault on the Gospel and a trampling under foot of key tenets of the Christian faith. The new religion promoted at the Re-imagining Conference soundly rejected the incarnation of Jesus, as well as His atonement on the Cross. The reporter in the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*, said that the conference leaders were “re-shaping the Christian understanding of [the] foundations of theology.” Participants and speakers alike angrily denounced the Christian church, charging that its teachings about Jesus Christ constitute the chief source of women’s oppression, human violence, racism, sexism, classism, and the abuse of the earth. (Editorial, BRF Witness, 1994)

Interestingly, but also not surprisingly, from our standpoint, the response to this criticism, saw it as coming from men’s need to control women:

Some conference participants, like Patricia Rumer, general director of Church Women United, believe the growing controversy can be turned to their advantage. “We should lift up the controversy as a gift,” said Rumer, contending that much of the criticism is coming from men who fear that women are gaining too much power: “Men need to silence this kind of thing in order to be in control.”

And:

At an informal gathering held recently at the Interchurch Center in New York—where a number of denominations have offices—a small group of conference supporters initiated a discussion they hoped would shed light on its benefits. Kathleen Clark, a laywoman with the UMC’s Board of Global Ministries, said ... “I was enthralled with the opportunity to meet women from all over the world and to be a part of Re-Imagining, of expanding the concept of who we are as Christian people,” said Clark. She expressed outrage at the backlash from more traditionally minded Christians. “What [critics] are saying is that women can’t get together and talk and tell stories without their approval,” said Clark.

But this criticism was based on nothing but traditional Christianity and its Gospel; so the implication is that traditional Christianity and the Gospel are attempts by men, the father, to control women. Without that, under the aegis of liberated women, the world would become a place represented and created by the free flow of imagination and desire, immune to the imposition of constraint. For traditional Christians, this dissolves Christianity altogether, leaving nothing but paganism:

Under the guise of Christian freedom, sin and spirituality are ritually wedded. At the *Re-Imagining Conference*, one of the speakers held up an apple, bit into it, and then with cheers from the audience asked, “What taboo have you broken today?” The taboo was the warning against apostasy found over again in the Scriptures. Their sacramental sacrilegious bite ingested the forbidden fruit of paganism, the worship of the creature rather than the Creator. (CEP Equip, 1997)

In Johnson’s terms, the mother church here is engaged in the project of obliterating Christianity. This project of obliteration is what we see in the commercials of the UCC.

Of interest to our analysis, though, is that the UCC project was unconscious. The conscious intention was rather different. In order to see this, we need to get a sense of the environment in which the church found itself, since consciously the church conceived of the commercials as a marketing strategy for coping with reality as it understood it.

#### THE MARKETING STRATEGY

The ads were part of a program called The Stillspeaking Initiative (TSI). Its meaning is that God is still speaking, so we should pay attention to what He is saying now, rather than restrict ourselves to what He said in the past. The brainchild of a former marketing executive named Ron Buford, the project’s conscious purpose was laid out in a series of annual reports put out by the UCC and available on their website.

We will turn to the specific rationale for the ads in a moment, but first of all we must give the matter a bit of context.

As I said above, UCC membership, is by no means minute; however, it is shrinking. Having begun with 2.4 members, it lost over 40 percent during the following 50 years. This was in keeping with the other mainline Protestant churches<sup>3</sup> of the United States. In 1960 mainline church membership stood at over 29 million. By 2000 this number had fallen to 22 million—a 21 percent drop. Some

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<sup>3</sup> By “mainline” I mean the following churches:

- The American Baptist Churches USA
- The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
- The Episcopal Church
- The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
- The Presbyterian Church (USA)
- The United Church of Christ
- The United Methodist Church

mainline denominations have suffered even greater membership losses: the Disciples of Christ, 55 percent, the Episcopal Church, 33 percent, in addition to the 39 percent drop of the UCC during this period.

This drop in membership needs to be contrasted with an overall increase in church membership within the US during the same period. We will discuss the causes of this later on. For the present, note that during the same 1960 to 2000 period, the following changes took place in other, non-mainline Protestant denominations:

	1960	2000
Assemblies of God:	508,602	2,577,560
Southern Baptist Convention	8,731,591	15,960,308
Roman Catholic Church:	42,104,900	63,383,030

Perhaps even worse from an organizational point of view was that donations from member congregations to the national church had declined even more substantially. The reasons for these declines are complex and we shall return to them shortly. For the present, our interest is not in the real reasons, but in the UCC perception of the reasons. Insofar as that perception has been publicly avowed, it provides the conscious rationale for the program as a marketing innovation. To get a handle on it, we turn to the UCC annual reports, which are available on the UCC website at <http://www.ucc.org/ocwm/>.

The line of thought and action that culminates in the ads begins in the annual report for 2003, which notes the situation regarding membership and finances and then announces what it plans to do about it:

This annual report reflects our denomination's accomplishments and highlights and, if we are honest, our setbacks and shortcomings. It also announces the initiation of the Still Speaking Initiative — a bold plan for church-wide renewal. In the days ahead, our churches will hear more about the "God is still speaking," national identity campaign, which portrays the story, image and ministry of the United Church of Christ, inviting the unchurched into our congregations. The Still Speaking Initiative also seeks to inspire greater generosity in our members and to increase giving to the local church and its wider settings — in the knowledge that healthy, vital congregations are the foundation and the future of the United Church of Christ.

The ads, then, will be part of a strategy to invite the unchurched into the UCC, as well as to increase contributions to support activities at the national level, (referred to as the OCWM).

It is anticipated that this program will place them "at odds with society... requiring resistance, daring and decisive action" as it did for their forebears.

We often have been referred to as the “early” church, because we’ve been early in addressing the important issues facing our society and taking uncomfortable positions that sometimes go against cultural acceptability. Why? Because we love Jesus more than the lure of respectability.

Among these positions:

- Forebears of the UCC were the first mainline church to take a public stand against slavery, in the year 1700.
- We were the first predominantly Euro-American church to ordain an African American as a minister — Lemuel Haynes in 1785...
- We were the church that initiated the defense of the Amistad captives in 1839, and supported their case to the Supreme Court, which eventually led to their freedom.
- We ordained the first woman to ministry, Antoinette Brown, in 1853...
- As a denomination, we were on the front lines of racial desegregation and, in 1959, we challenged the Federal Communications Commission to allow people of color to have access to and be seen on the televised airwaves.
- We ordained the first openly gay person, William Johnson, in 1972.

Thus, they are placing the action they are going to take in the same vein as social action initiatives they have undertaken in the past, and which they say have cost them some respectability.

They go on to quote one of their laypersons:

Give up the comfortable. Allow someone else to learn and lead, and with my eyes look around — there’s so much more God wants me to do. And with risk comes blessing.

And they say to themselves:

CONSIDER ... OUR FUTURE ... *in support of a church embodying resistance and daring in our generation?*

They lay out the program this way:

These are tough times for the Church. Giving is down in mainline churches and, on Sunday mornings, most pews are filled with graying worshippers. A recent survey revealed that 87 percent of Americans feel that religion is important to their lives. Yet only 42 percent of Christians attend worship services on a regular basis. Even more startling — 85 percent of mainline churches are in a state of membership decline.

If so many people feel that religion is important, why do so few attend church? There are several reasons: a large segment of our society has little or no church background; others feel that worship is boring and uninspiring;

some maintain the church has lost its vision in society; others have had a negative personal experience in the church and feel unwelcome.

The religious community faces a choice: either we do things the way we've always done them and continue to face declining membership, or we learn from our culture and embrace new ways to tell our story of faithful devotion to the gospel of Jesus Christ....

The Still Speaking Initiative, in collaboration with Covenanted Ministries and Conferences, is in the initial stages of addressing the many challenges before us — spiritual, financial, and demographic. New television commercials will air in 2004 to let the unchurched know about the UCC's unique witness and welcome. ...

The 2004 annual report follows in this vein, and the program becomes evident:

2004 began with a mad scramble. The decision had been made — full speed ahead with a strategic, five-year marketing plan to proclaim to the world that anyone could find a home in the United Church of Christ. The Stillspeaking Initiative was formally established as an independent, inter-covenantal department reporting to the Executive Council, and an advisory task group was created....

From this it appears that the decision to launch the program, with its ads, had been made. It was only after this that the advertising agency was sent out to find evidence. Not surprisingly, they did:

One of the first items of business was to hold focus groups in three test market areas to gain objective input into what unchurched people thought about the church.... Here are some excerpts from the findings of the report issued by the advertising agency working with TSI: \_ Almost no one in any of the focus groups was aware of the UCC. \_ Disaffection from the church was very apparent. Everyone had a story stemming from personal rejection, disappointment, and the failure of the church to be there for them. \_ Several themes ran through the meetings. One, in particular, was emphasized repeatedly: the need for openness and acceptance of all God's children by the church. \_ Participants were unanimous — the church needs to be a welcoming place that uplifts one's self-image and encourages individuals to be a vital member of the community

The focus group leaders concluded that alienation was at the heart of these individuals' disaffection with the church. "Alienation is about real personal experiences and deep hurts that have caused people to turn away from the church. It is not about the rejection of God or spirituality. "However, even with deep levels of distrust — even anger — projected at the church, the focus group participants gave positive feedback. Facilitators observed, "There appears to be a genuine opportunity to bring these people back because they are open to a welcoming church community and extended support system." The final report provided clear direction: "A positive, welcoming, come as you are message will reach the desired audience."

They describe the meaning of the commercial this way:

The 30-second TV commercial, “The Bouncer,” has been hailed as a masterful piece of storytelling in the tradition of Jesus’ parables. The burley bouncers are a metaphor for that which alienates people from the church. While no church actually has bouncers outside its doors, it’s obvious to many (often through the painful experience of rejection) that they are held at arm’s length. For whatever reason — age, ethnicity, disability, socio-economic status, sexual identity, whatever — these children of God, in search of a spiritual home, feel left out in the cold.

Along with the ad, UCC redesigned its website to focus on the ad and the TSI, which has its own website <http://www.stillspeaking.com/default.htm> and its own logo.

The logo of the UCC is fairly conventional :



The symbol of the TSI is a comma, from a quote attributed to Gracie Allen: “Never place a period where God has placed a comma.”

The home page of the UCC website was rebuilt around that comma, which had a flash display with pictures of diverse, smiling people running through it. The text that goes with the comma is “God is still speaking,”

In fact, the TSI crowded out the older image of the UCC. The logo of the UCC was small and below the main display. On many computers it would not show up in the initial screen, One would have to scroll down to find it, and there was no reason in the initial screen to suppose that one would find anything by scrolling down. Many of the links took one to the TSI website, from which it was not easy to get back. Though it did not say so, the search engine to find churches in one’s area brought back only the minority of churches that had endorsed TSI. One needed to go elsewhere in the site to find a search engine that listed all UCC churches. On a professionally developed website, such a pattern does not occur through inadvertence.

At any rate, to hear UCC tell the story, they were on the verge of something big:

With the roll-out of the commercial on independent and cable stations, and the resulting denial by CBS, NBC and ABC to air the commercial, we received more publicity than we could have hoped for. During December, we posted 787,056 web visits (compared to 80,000 per month earlier in the year) and 137,103 visits to the “Find a UCC Church” option (there were 4,000 hits in November).

Testimonies from people alienated by the church filled e-mail boxes at the national setting, and many stories of hope were shared on the special



edition Yule Blog at ucc.org. Stories from pastors also flooded in, many about visitors checking out their churches...

Under the headline “Stillspeaking’s ‘bouncer’ receives ‘biggie’ advertising award, the Church announced that

The UCC’s “bouncer” television commercial, which aired nationally in December 2004 and March 2005, has received one of the advertising industry’s most significant honors.

The Association of National Advertisers awarded the United Church of Christ with its 2005 Multicultural Excellence Award for its 30-second commercial that touted the denomination’s insistence that “Jesus didn’t turn people away. Neither do we.”

But whatever awards and publicity were garnered by the ad, as far as its recruitment purpose was concerned, it was a flop. According to the 2006 yearbook of the NCC, membership dropped during 2004 by 2.38 percent, the largest decline of any church surveyed by the NCC. To be sure, there was only one month in 2004 in which the effect of the commercial could have been felt, but a landslide had been expected, and it did not happen. Worse, the NCC yearbook for 2006 revealed that membership in 2005 fell to 1,229,953, a drop of 3.3 percent from the previous year.

Though they were surely aware of these trends as they were developing, UCC was undeterred and pushed ahead with the second commercial, which was to be part of a campaign budgeted at 1.5 million dollars. “To change would be to back down. And the U.C.C. is not an institution that traditionally backs down” said Michael Jordan of Gotham, the UCC ad agency.

Yet reality still refused to shape up, and in the end it had its way. On June 7, 2006, the UCC announced that Ron Buford had resigned as head of TSI, effective June 30, and that he would take up a new role as “consultant with the Congregational Vitality Initiative (CVI) of the UCC’s Local Church Ministries to assist trainers who will incorporate the best of The Stillspeaking Initiative into CVI.” (Administrator, 2006)

At this time,, the TSI website, though removed from its dominant position, is still available from the UCC site. It still celebrates the joyfulness of the campaign and tells us that

‘Ejector’ now ranks as ‘most popular commercial’ on ‘ifilm’ website  
The UCC’s new “ejector” TV ad is now ranked as the most-popular commercial at <ifilm.com>, a well-known online hosting site for videos.

However, without fanfare, they added another commercial to their site. This one, which was intended as a follow-on to the Bouncer commercial, but almost never aired, is called “Steeple.” It begins with a little girl reciting the nursery rhyme “Here is the church, here is the steeple, open the doors and see all the people.” Then representatives of the groups that were rejected in the Bouncer commercial, including blacks, lesbians, Hispanics, and disabled people, appear sequentially to say “all the people.” Finally, the same diverse group as in the Bouncer commercial, repeats “all the people” and there is the voice over that says “God accepts all the

people, so do we. The United Church of Christ. No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you're welcome here."

### THE UNCONSCIOUS MEANING OF THE COMMERCIALS

Consciously, the campaign was surely intended to reverse the decline in membership. But the failure of the program suggests that there were shortcomings in the reasoning behind it, which raises the possibility that there were serious irrational elements that helped to determine the way it developed. Irrationality is not difficult to find here.

For one thing, as I have noted above, the focus groups, which were presumably intended to objectively determine whether there was a desire that the UCC could fulfill, were formed only after the decision was made about the nature of those needs. They were formed, that is to say, not for exploration, but for confirmation.

For another thing, the church's celebration of the positive response the commercials were receiving was focused largely on enthusiasms they had no reason to relate to any interest in taking up what the church had to offer. For example, it is difficult to see how the marketing professionals who were impressed by the ad would have any affinity with the alienated and wounded people that the ads were presumably intended to reach. Similarly, taking the popularity of the UCC website as an index of success ignored the much more likely possibility that it had been due to curiosity about the motivation behind the unusual commercials, rather than an interest in what it had to offer as a church.

Finally, the church's continuance of this expensive campaign, in the face of its clear failure to meet its ostensible objectives, strongly suggests that its conscious objectives did not represent the totality of its meaning for the UCC. All of this gives us leave to look at anomalies in the commercials, with an eye toward discerning the difference between their conscious and unconscious meaning.

"A letter," says Jacques Lacan (1988), "always arrives at its destination." The failure of the advertising campaign makes it legitimate to question the motivation behind it, and to ask whether, at some level, it was intended for another purpose, and one which it actually achieved.

As we saw, the commercials were introduced with the prediction that they would garner social disapproval. With regard to motivation, this raises the question as to what there could be about "inviting the unchurched," that could be seen as the kind of groundbreaking progressive move that would do that? What have they got in mind that would be "risky," and would "embody resistance and daring?"

In fact, they did lose respectability. But the negative response of the networks was not about the inclusiveness, *but about the offensiveness of the ads themselves*. The disapproval they rightly anticipated was not to the content of the offering, but to their manner. This suggests that the meaning of the ads was not the offer of welcome.

The message of welcome, as such, was represented in the ads by the final images of happy, diverse groups of people. In fact this was the full content of the "Steeple" ad, which was almost never aired and was actually accepted by the

networks. The offer of welcome was obviously not what made the ads stand out. What gave the ads their characteristic identity was the accusation of a refusal of welcome on the part of “organized religion.” What the ads offered is not so much a welcoming church, as an aggressive church: a church that resists and attacks the oppression represented by other churches. This is the only element of the ads that they could possibly have had in mind when they prepared the ground for social disapproval. It was, of course, the antagonistic side that created the controversy and that was clearly responsible for the “edge” of which the UCC was so proud.

It was “organized religion” that was rejecting people, causing them to be alienated from religion, and doing this in sufficient numbers that these rejects could be energized by the ad into joining the UCC and rejuvenating it. It was this idea, combined with their placement of themselves in contrast to “organized religion” by offering what they called “extravagant welcome” that gave the ads their particular flavor and their edginess. This suggests that the ostensible recruitment objective was only one of the objectives. The other was the attack upon “organized religion.”

As we saw at the beginning, though, the charge that organized religion was rejecting people, especially on the basis of disabilities, is absurd. UCC could not have gotten the idea from observation of organized religion in the world. What exactly was it that they saw themselves as attacking, and how did they get that idea?

#### REJECTION IN THE MIND OF UCC

We can get insight into the mind of the UCC from a website they set up to garner stories in response to the ads: [www.rejectionhurts.com](http://www.rejectionhurts.com) This website, which has since been taken down, offered itself as “An online community where people can share their personal stories of how they felt unwanted or alienated by organized religion.” The stories were prefaced with this:

Have you or someone you know ever felt rejected by religion? Tell us your story here. Please refrain from mentioning specific denominations or churches in your story.

We will regularly post some of the stories that have been submitted. We encourage you to visit this site often and pass it on to your family and friends

I would like to note, at the outset, the evident conflation between feeling “unwanted or alienated by organized religion,” and feeling “rejected by organized religion.” Rejection, one would suppose, implies a positive, directed antagonism; not being wanted, however, is consistent with passive indifference. The conflation is an important one, and will tell us much about the mind of UCC.

Turning to the stories themselves, it must first be said that many describe events that it is hard to believe have been objectively reported, or that the full story has been told. Some examples are below. When direct quotes are used, they are unedited:

A 68 year old man is ejected from his church because he can only afford a \$3,000 per year contribution, while they demand “\$7,000+.”

A woman attends the church her grandmother belongs to, but her husband does not attend. When she gets pregnant, she is accused of lying about her marriage and buying a wedding ring for herself to cover up being pregnant out of wedlock.

“Having deligent [sic] tried to follow the endless series of rules related to my “church”, being constantly reprimanded for endless infractions and advised I needed to contribute more I had the horrible expirence [sic] of finding out my spouse was engaged in fornication with several members of the congregation. I was chastised for failing to provide enough attention to her and working to much.”

Of course, a degree of distortion and selective narration is what one would expect. There is no control for the veracity of these stories. One would have no way of knowing whether they presented a biased view, or for that matter whether they were pure fantasy. An individual who wanted to rehearse a grievance would know that he could present his story in the most favorable light, and get it published in a world-wide forum. The tendency to do that would have been very great and it is impossible to imagine that nobody yielded to it.

Our interest, though, is not in whether the stories were true; we cannot know that. What we can know, and what interests us, is the fact that UCC chose these stories to represent the kind of responses they thought validated their commercials. They tell us what the meaning of the commercials was to UCC, and therefore offer insight into the way the church saw itself.

That a selection process was in place was clear. For one thing, the UCC acknowledged in their introduction to the website that they would only post only “some of the stories.” I tested the selectivity by submitting a story in which I claimed to be a woman who had recently moved to a more affluent neighborhood and found herself shunned by a church congregation for saying that she and her husband had voted for George Bush and supported the war in Iraq. The story was not posted to the site.

Second, in an internal email to UCC pastors, which I received as a private communication from an individual involved, and in an FAQ posted on the site, the officials said that they would not post messages of complaint from UCC members. This is from the pastor email:

We expect there to be “rejection” stories from UCC people who want turn [sic] the site to their own purposes. These stories will not be posted. People writing about internal UCC experiences may challenge us for not posting their story in notes to you. Please feel free to frame your own reply or use something like this:

Rejectionhurts.com is a witness to the world, not a showcase for internal theological or political debates and disagreements. The clear focus of the Stillspeaking Initiative is to help people overcome their alienation from God. It is to them that rejectionhurts.com is directed.

The following themes emerge from the stories.

First, there was no recognition on the part of any of these story tellers that anything that they did was in any way responsible for the outcomes they experienced. These were all stories of egregious victimization at the hands of the rejecting church.

My favorite in this regard was the story called: *Mohawks Not Welcomed*:

I am gothic and a Christian [sic]. I happily attended a [non-UCC] church until I went on their youth camp. I was put into the communal sleeping area with the 13-17 year olds (I am 21), and the entire weekend I had people coming up to me asking if I wanted them to pray with me, just because I had a mohawk and wore thick black eyeliner. Their “meetings” were compulsory [sic] and they kept on encouraging people to come up to the front and get prayed over, to the point where they were threatening to point out individuals in the congregation. When I tried to leave the meeting, they said that I had to stay or they would send me home in a taxi (which would have cost about \$150). After the camp was over, I never went back to that church again.

Consider here the way the writer takes the response to his Mohawk and eyeliner, which can have no function except to elicit a response, as illegitimate on the part of the church. There is no acceptance of responsibility for causing that response.

A second point is the failure to distinguish between indifference and rejection. For instance:

#### When a Church’s “Helping” Only Hurts

I was raised in a literalist church. In my mid-teens I was doubting, and discouraged by treatment from the other teens. After all the youth programs, adult classes, and every Sunday worship, a woman with whom I had long worshipped shook my hand during one service and asked if I was new because she’d never seen me. It shook my core that “godly people” would consider me so invisible. It was a signpost of that church’s lacking. It was also the chisel-tap for years of suicidal depression... I am glad for the message and hospitality (and the seeking and partnering attitude) of the UCC, and the fair treatment I’ve received. If other churches feel a sting from its message, then they should do some soul-searching. (I already did — now it’s their turn.)

Third, similarly, there is a failure to acknowledge the viability of any rules or demands. In some cases this concerns specific moral principles, such as rejection of homosexual behavior, divorce, or sex outside of marriage

#### When a Different Lifestyle Doesn’t “Fit In”

In the early 80’s, after an extremely difficult time in my life, I reconfirmed my commitment to God and began attending a fairly fundamentalist church. Although I was treated well and helped out (I was a single parent at the time, one of only about 5 or 6 in a congregation of about 500), I began to feel that I was more of a “project” of the women’s ministry than an accepted member. I tried a few other Churches over the following years but I finally gave up altogether because I couldn’t deal with the

intolerance towards others in different lifestyles. I actually began to see the mainstream Christian church as a hostile place for many.

. In some cases, it runs to a rejection of rules altogether:

“I Will Now Find You.”

Wow! I’ve just recently seen the very wonderfully conceived “ejector pew” commercial. I do not physically identify with any of the ejectees, nor do I lead what some call an “alternate” lifestyle. But, I have been so appalled and disgusted by the petty human squabbling over following some set of perceived rules....that I just have had to stay away. And yet I need to be with people who are cognizant of the simple, powerful, perfect message of Love that Jesus continually gives. So, to whomever wrote, directed, produced the ad: Thanks for seeking me out...and the 1,000’s of others just like me. I will now find you! I look forward to learning again.... smiles

And:

Stipulations Not Required

I recently saw your commercial and I was shocked, I’ve been searching for many years to find some thing worth believeing in but every major reigion has every kind of stipulation imaginable (even though the bible says not to judge). Seeing that commercial gave hope to a very discouraged girl. And I pray that you truly stand for every thing you advertised. I’ll be checking out you site.

Often, general moral rules are seen as personal affronts:

Twice Rejected

After 24 years in my church, I married a man of a different denomination, in his church. My church didn’t seem to care about that, I was welcome. Three years later, we’d divorced due to his mistreatment of me and his abandonment of the marriage. Not long after, I was told that I could attend church, but I couldn’t participate in communion because I’d married outside the faith and then divorced. I still attended, but sporadically. One Sunday, my mother convinced me to go to church with her. Everything was fine until the sermon. It was about the ‘signs of death in the church’. According to the sermon, the worst was divorce and that those that divorce are going to hell. I was furious. I had done nothing wrong, and I was being told I was going to hell. I turned to my mother, told her I was leaving and would never again set foot in that church.

Fourth, there is in many stories a failure of the sense of proportion. Personal offenses are generalized to the church:

The (Negative) Power of One

We had a very interesting situation happen in our church..the woman who was the Sun. school teacher for our son during his confirmation year,

did something we felt as parents was extremely UnChristian [sic] like...the very FIRST( & only time) time we served as greeters at our new Sanctuary [sic], she met us (all 3 of us) and in a very demeaning tone point her finger and told our son how he hadn't done his church work and she was definitely [sic] going to tell on him.( the look on her face was nasty)... After that she made him feel terrible [sic] in church school as well ( she obviously didn't like him), and made it a point to call me when and if he hadn't done whatever [sic] she felt in a timely manner. We haven't signed up for anything since then and a year after that she was given a new title of a "new Stephen Ministry [sic] person." If we had gone to the church they couldn't of done anything because she was and still is sneaky about such stuff. Alot [sic] of the parents have known this. We're not as involved and could care less anymore and this incident has changed our like for this chuch [sic] totally, because of her.

Or small events are elevated to massive assaults, as was visible in the passage from "When a Church's 'Helping' Only Hurts," above, and which was followed later by:

In college, I was accosted by a teen girl whose church had sent her youth group to collar concert-goers and follow them to their cars arguing salvation, as if that would convince someone to instantly fall to the sidewalk and "become a new creature through Christ." I was appalled and insulted by their naively unquestioning insinuations — the only 'new creature' I'd become was ignored and suicidal. I was so angry at her hubris I wanted to punch her.

Finally, while demands made upon the individual are denied and seen as affronts, demands made upon the church, even when unreasonable, are seen as entitlements. For instance, in the first story above, Mr. Mohawk takes it as one of the church's affronts that "When I tried to leave the meeting, they said that I had to stay or they would send me home in a taxi (which would have cost about \$150)." Now, the only way this makes sense is if we assume that Mr. Mohawk wanted to be driven home, either in an individual's car or in the church bus, and that this must have been, given the taxi fare, quite a far distance. He is taking their perfectly reasonable refusal as a personal abuse.

What stands out about these accounts in the first place, as I said above, is the denial of responsibility. No student of psychoanalysis will be surprised at such denial of responsibility, but we need to understand that we are looking at a Christian church here, and that one of the defining tenets of Christianity is the belief that we are all sinners. The acceptance of oneself as a sinner is acceptance of responsibility. By standing behind the moral validity of these stories, the UCC was accepting the denial of responsibility as a valid ground for membership in a Christian church and, in fact, validating the deflection of that responsibility onto the rejecting church itself.

Second, of equal importance, is that they are all expressions of resentment. They all represent personal grievances, typically petty, which are elevated to the point of high principle. The premise appears to be that the world is supposed to conform itself to our wishes and validate us just as we are. When it does not, that is

taken as a moral failure on the part of the world. The magnitude of this moral failure is equal to the value we place upon ourselves, which is essentially infinite.

Third, the indifference of reality is denied. The cause of their unhappiness is personalized and seen as the expression of a malevolent will, which in most cases is specifically directed against them.

From what we have said before, we can see that a demand is being made upon the world to act as if it were the primitive mother. When it does not, the individuals feel violated and attacked. For a church to define itself as a place that will fulfill these individuals' wishes, providing a feeling of validation to all these individuals who feel as if they have been rejected, means the church is offering itself in just that maternal way.

But here we see the aggression that, for humans, goes along with that maternal identification. The UCC is accepting these individuals as they are; but they are filled with resentment. The problems they have are entirely the fault of others. To accept them as they are is to identify with and validate their denial of responsibility and resentment. The UCC is not simply offering inclusion; it is taking their side in their hatred and rejection of the indifference of reality, accepting their interpretation that it is a malevolent force that is persecuting them. The church is joining them in blaming the world for their distress, specifically represented as "organized religion." From what we have said before, we can see this specter as a manifestation of the father.

## DENIAL OF AGGRESSION

What goes along with this is a denial of aggression on the part of UCC. The ads are clearly accusations, aggressive acts, as the networks made plain in their rejections. For example:

NBC did accept one of the church's ads, according to NBC spokeswoman Shannon Jacobs, but the church has not asked it to run that ad. According to Jacobs, the church proposed two ads, NBC accepted one but rejected the other because it "violated our longstanding policy against accepting ads dealing with issues of public controversy." The controversy, said NBC, stemmed from the ad's suggestion that "other religions are not open to all people."

Specifically, NBC said it rejected the ad not because it featured a homosexual couple, but "based solely on the fact that it suggests that gay couples, African Americans, Hispanics and people with disabilities are not welcome in some churches, which constitutes a controversial issue." (Edgerton 2004)

However, the UCC denies any aggression, saying that they are just messages of inclusion. In their view, the ads were rejected because the "message of openness and welcome stated in the new UCC ad is 'too controversial'". This is from an email sent out by the Justice and Witness Ministries (JWM) of the UCC:



Once again, a new UCC commercial, which invites all people into the church, has been rejected by the networks, their affiliate cable stations, and Viacom. Every day, the networks air advertising laced with sexual innuendo, violence, materialism, and the politics of personal destruction, yet the message of openness and welcome stated in the new UCC ad is “too controversial” to be shown. While some stations are still airing our ad, many communities, particularly those without access to cable, will never see this ad.

If a spokesperson for CBS is to be believed, it appears that TSI director Buford went so far as to make up a conversation.

Buford said CBS executives had told him the subject would be considered advocacy advertising until the inclusion of gays and lesbians is common at churches in the United States. But [CBS spokeswoman Shannon] Jacobs<sup>4</sup> challenged that statement. “That supposed exchange is simply fictitious,” she said. (UCC Truths, 2006)

We have no reason to doubt Buford’s sincerity in his contrary recollection of the conversation. He is probably just remembering what went on in the only way that he could make sense of it, and then just filling in details that fit. The primitive mother, after all, is made out of love. There is no aggression in her, so therefore UCC always acts with love and nothing but love. The aggression is externalized onto those who refuse to accept and amplify the message of her love, and then seen as directed against her and her clientele.

This is the equivalent of what we said above about the validation of resentment. Others see aggression, because it is clearly there. The UCC misses the aggression because the aggression is part of what it means by love. That is why it sees only love and welcome on its part. But it loves and includes the resentment and transmits it in the form of the aggression in the ads.

Inevitably, the resentment has come to cover the networks’ rejection of the ads on the basis of their aggression. UCC has been treated unjustly, they believe; their heart, in their mind, is pure. Still, the fit between them and the resentful individuals they welcome is manifest.

## MARKETING THE MOTHER CHURCH

Interestingly, it appears that, despite what UCC thought it found in its focus groups, it is the paternal church that appeals to parishioners, not the maternal. This is suggested by the rise in membership of more traditional denominations during the period of mainline decline, which we noted earlier and which is borne out by some specifically directed research.

Methodologically, research attempting to assess the reasons for church membership is a difficult business, largely due to difficulties in defining what a

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<sup>4</sup> Web search reveals that both CBS and NBC employ a Shannon Jacobs in corporate communications. Whether this is the same Shannon Jacobs, I cannot say.

church member is. One of the better studies of recent times was done by Johnson, Hoge, and Luidens (1993).. In this study, they interviewed people who had been confirmed in the Presbyterian Church during the sixties to determine what had become of their religious life. Their study, of course, confirmed that many had left the mainline church and that, for the most part, this was due to the fact that

religion itself had become low on their list of personal priorities.”They pray occasionally, they hold Jesus in high esteem, and they have some interest in such questions as the purpose of existence and the fate of the soul after death, but they do not consider it necessary to attend church in order to nourish what faith they have.

So what was true of those who remained church members:

In our study, the single best predictor of church participation turned out to be *belief*-orthodox Christian belief, and especially the teaching that a person can be saved only through Jesus Christ. Virtually all our baby boomers who believe this are active members of a church. Among those who do not believe it, some are active in varying degrees; a great many are not. Ninety-five percent of the drop-outs who describe themselves as religious do not believe it.

Of those that were church members, the hypothesis that had the best support was one offered

by Dean M. Kelley in his controversial book, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*, published in 1972. Kelly argued that the mainline denominations have lost members because they have become weak as religious bodies. Strong religions provide clear-cut, compelling answers to questions concerning the meaning of life, mobilize their members’ energies for shared purposes, require a distinctive code of conduct, and discipline their members for failure to live up to it. Weak religions allow a diversity of theological viewpoints, do not and can not command much of their members’ time or effort, promote few if any distinctive rules of conduct, and discipline no one for violating them. In short, strong religions foster a level of commitment that binds members to the group; weak religions have low levels of commitment and are unable to resist influences that lower it even further.

Similarly, within the mainline dominations themselves:

In *Acts of Faith* (University of California Press, 2000) Stark and Finke showed that United Methodist congregations with evangelical pastors had rapidly rising attendance and expenditures. Although some congregations with evangelical pastors did decline, the rate was half that of congregations without evangelical pastors. The Methodist conferences with the largest proportion of evangelical pastors and churches—those in the South and Southeast—have actually started growing. (Hamilton and McKinney, 2003)

In a word, the biparental church, with its paternal aspect strongly represented, grows stronger while the mother church declines.

We may add, on the basis of what we have said before, that in many cases weak maternal churches had become, to use Johnson's term, simulacra; images of churches whose anti-oedipal ideology was essentially political, not religious. It appears that those were the institutions that went into decline.

#### THE STORY OF THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST?

How could it be otherwise? For Christians, Christ offers salvation and the meaning of Christianity is to attain salvation. It is contained within the very idea of salvation that it is a matter of transcendental importance. Anyone who believes in salvation will, as a matter of logic, think of it that way. But it is inconsistent with the idea of its importance that it should come cheaply and without effort. If it were the sort of thing that could come easily, it would not have been necessary for Christ to die on the cross to bring it to us. Hence, for Christians, the only church that can be a valid Christian church is one that requires us to take a difficult path to our salvation. That difficult path is what is offered by traditional Christianity, the Christianity of the paternal element in the biparental church.

It is hard to see how a Christian could take seriously a "come as you are" church like that offered by the elite of the UCC. To be sure, it could be taken seriously as something else: as a political action group, for example. But here is where the logic of religious organization poses a terrible question for such churches: Who needs them? Why would an individual committed to political action need to come to a church to do it? Why not cut out the middle-man and go directly to a political action organization?

One possible reason is that the church could be seen to provide a resource that could be mobilized for political purposes. The church, in other words, could be seen as ripe for cooptation into a political program by those to whom political action is most important. One can easily see, though, that, over time, the church used in this way would lose its appeal to those who came for other reasons. It would lose membership, and those who remained would resist the politics which they would see as an intrusion.

More than that, an elite that came to dominance in that church, for the purpose of using it as a political instrument, would have contempt and resentment for its more traditional membership. This contempt and resentment could easily express itself as moral repudiation, as we saw in the television commercials, as well as actions that would have the unconscious purpose of ejecting the church's own religiously oriented members, under the aspect of "organized religion." This antagonistic attitude helps to explain one further aspect that we have yet to fully engage, which is the UCC's stance on homosexuality

#### HOMOSEXUALITY

The issue of homosexuality clearly has a special significance in the current situation of the UCC, as it has within the whole Christian movement. It seems clear that, when the Church adopted the theme of welcoming the rejected, homosexuals were high on the list of those who were being welcomed. In fact, the UCC

encourages its churches to declare themselves Open and Affirming, in accordance with a resolution passed at the 1985 Synod

Calling on United Church of Christ Congregations to Declare Themselves Open and Affirming. This General Synod action "...encourages a policy of non-discrimination in employment, volunteer service and membership policies with regard to sexual orientation; encourages associations, Conferences and all related organizations to adopt a similar policy; and encourages the congregations of the United Church of Christ to adopt a non-discrimination policy and a Covenant of Openness and Affirmation of persons of lesbian, gay and bisexual orientation within the community of faith." (<http://www.ucc.org/lgbt/ona.html>)

The resistance on the part of the membership was evident in the fact that only about 400 congregations, out of about 6,000, adopted this designation.

Another resolution, passed at the 2005 Synod, which affirmed UCC support for Equal Marriage Rights was clearly the occasion for a large increase in the number of people and congregations leaving the Church.

Obviously, the issue of homosexuality encapsulates the conflict between the maternal and paternal aspects of the church. This is not only in the sense that it is an assault against received religious doctrine, but because it redefines the basis of the relationship between the parents, turning the relationship of men and women from a bedrock of morality into a matter of taste, disconnected from anything else, and hence radically undermining the meaning of being a father.

We can see the politics in the way the two sides define the conflict. The key is in the meaning of the affirmation, which may be discerned in a UCC statement that widens the ONA designation to "transgendered" persons. They say, in part:

It encourages all settings which are engaged in an ONA process to include information about transgender experience and to include "transgender" persons or persons of all "gender identities" in their statements. Further, the misinformation, stereotypes, and prejudices which fuel heterosexism, racism, ageism, sexism etc. are evident and interrelated in our society. ONA statements recognizing this and expressing commitment to continually work against such oppressions is encouraged.

What we can see from this is that the issue of homosexuality is part of a general anti-oedipal political stance; part of its program of political correctness. The religiously oriented churches objected to political correctness, but, arguably, up until the matter of homosexuality, they tolerated political pronouncements made by the national organization, since they had no real impact on the practices of the local churches. There was, in a sense, a division into spheres of influence. The issue of homosexuality blew that boundary apart by imposing the politics of the national elite on the practices of the local churches<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The case of the UCC is arguably a bit different than other mainline churches in this regard. It has a "congregational" polity which recognizes the autonomy of local churches. In the

The problem was that traditional Christianity rests on the Bible, whose condemnation of homosexual behavior is clear. For instance:

*“Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is abomination.”* Leviticus 18:22

And:

*“For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature: And likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompence of their error which was meet.”*  
Romans 1:26-27

And

*“Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God.”* Corinthians 6:9-10

To be sure, some commentators have reinterpreted such passages in ways that attempt to attenuate the conflict between Christianity and homosexuality (e.g. Boswell 1981; see [http://www.religioustolerance.org/hom\\_bibx.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/hom_bibx.htm) for a good overview.) There cannot be a doubt, however, that traditional Christianity has seen a serious conflict here, and that is what is at issue for us.

The view I am taking must be contrasted with another view, which is that the Church found the issue of the exclusion of homosexuals so morally compelling that it adopted its positions, including the various resolutions and the Stillspeaking Initiative as a way of satisfying this moral imperative, despite the negative responses it knew it would generate. On this view, the other categories of exclusion were added as a kind of camouflage, to generate additional moral authority in the face of the expected attack. This view would be consistent with the emotional heat that their program generated, and it would certainly be consistent with the view they held of themselves as courageous.

But the politics of this matter lead me to reject this view. The point here is that the issue did not arise over homosexuals being members of the UCC; rather the issue arose over *making the issue an issue*. By making public pronouncements, the UCC elite put the membership in the position of having to respond publicly on a matter

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form of its resolutions, the national body is said to *speak to* the local churches, rather than to *speak for* them. But this is a formal distinction only. In fact, the national resolutions present the public face of the church, which the public applies to its members, whether they are legally bound or not, and to which they are naturally sensitive.

that, in individual cases, could have been quietly and privately finessed, on the basis of their own dispositions and interpretations of religion. By making it into a public matter of principle, the Church elite cast many of its own members on a side where they would be subject to open moral derogation by their own church, and they certainly knew this would happen. In a word, the issue was not one of universal inclusion, but rather of forcing the exclusion of some, the traditional element, by forcing a choice over the inclusion of the others. Thus, rather than accepting a fight because of a stand on an issue they thought was important, they made the issue important as a way of creating a fight.

This dynamic was clearly in evidence in the case of the ordination of a gay bishop by the U.S. Episcopal Church. In this case, V. Eugene Robinson was consecrated in November 2003 as bishop for the State of New Hampshire, despite considerable opposition among Episcopalians in the US and against the clear opposition of the worldwide Anglican movement, of which the Episcopal Church is part. A report by an Anglican Church commission said the Episcopal Bishops

acted in the full knowledge that very many people in the Anglican Communion could neither recognize nor receive the ministry as a bishop in the church of God of a person in an openly acknowledged same-gender union.

The Episcopal decision began a process that seems to be leading to the fracture of the worldwide Anglican Church, as the Episcopal bishops knew it would. But notice that the issue was not the inclusion of homosexuals; it was the promotion of a homosexual into the highest rank. There was no grievous moral wrong that cried out to be righted; the number of those consecrated as bishops is necessarily small and there will always be multiple factors that need to be taken into consideration. It would not have been out of place if the bishops had considered that his elevation would alienate many from the Church. This was an issue that did not need to be made. In the case of Robinson, who left his wife for another man, one would have easily thought that the sin of fornication, or sex outside of marriage, would certainly have been grounds to avoid confrontation, whatever other virtues he possessed, if there had been a will to do so. That the decision to promote him was made suggests that it was taken because of its promise to create alienation, not despite it.

#### CONCLUSION: THE INSUPPORTABILITY OF BEING MERELY HUMAN

In the commercials, the actual rejection is done by the church's elite. But the commercials have been created by the church's elite. This apparent self-reference suggests that there may be a deeper level of analysis, and one on which it would be suitable to end.

In the commercials, it appears that those being rejected are the ones who make church members uncomfortable. I suggest that, at a deeper level, something else is going on. It is not only those who cause the discomfort that are being rejected, but the discomfort is also being rejected. The rejectees are functioning as classic scapegoats; they are taking the sins of the group along with them. That is their

function: their rejection has the purpose of maintaining the image of the group as the ego ideal by representing its shameful elements, which are then rejected.

But whose discomfort is it that is being rejected? I suggest that it is the discomfort of the church's elite. They are, after all, the elite of a Christian church, a religion whose foundational premise is that we are all sinners. But as we have seen, this Church elite has identified itself with God, who of course has no sin. This poses a real problem for them.

Ordinary Christians may be able to maintain an image of themselves as sinners; this means that they can acknowledge and own their own discomfort. Therefore, their discomfort does not pose a problem for the church, and cannot be the psychological ground of the rejection. We can see this most clearly in the element of the commercials that appears to be most odd, which is the rejection of the disabled. As we saw, there cannot be a serious claim that a Christian church would turn somebody away because the person cannot walk. But there is certainly a basis for saying that people, probably most people, feel discomfort in the presence of a person who has lost the use of his legs. They remind us of the short distance between our own health and our own potential disability; indeed our own death. We do not want to know about this, and therefore are uncomfortable in the presence of someone who brings it to our mind.

But this is as likely to be true of the church elite as of anyone else, and indeed more so, precisely since they cannot acknowledge their discomfort. Hence, there is no ground for saying that the rejection is less about the elite than it is about anybody else. But their discomfort is absolutely intolerable to them. Something must be done with it.

We began this analysis with the question who is the rejecting church, and what are they rejecting? The answer is that the rejecting church is the elite of the UCC, and they are rejecting themselves. They are both rejecter and rejected.

This is what I call religion against itself.

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