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# MAC Arrow

Unitarian Universalist

Multiracial Unity Action Council  
(UUMUAC)

“For the Unity of the  
light and dark skinned  
people of the world.”

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## **Preamble**

Racism and related forms of prejudice are revealed when someone treats another person differently due to their perceived race or ethnicity. These prejudices affect people around the world. Such disrespectful conduct is especially harmful in religious communities because of their commitment to strong ethical and moral standards.

## **Vision Statement**

We envision our congregations, associations, and communities as being not color blind but color appreciative; as judging and treating people by the content of their character, not the color of their skin, their cultural heritage, or other identity; and as treasuring all forms of diversity in the context of Martin Luther King’s Jr’s “Beloved Community.” We call this vision Multiracial Unity.

## **Mission Statement**

It is the mission of the Unitarian Universalist Multiracial Unity Action Council to foster activities for multiracial unity and to counter racism and neo-racism through worship, education, bearing witness, and other actions, and to find and engage like-minded individuals and groups.

We affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and strive to defend freedom, reason, and tolerance as articulated in the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism adopted in 1985. This includes promoting their use in individual congregations, through congregational autonomy, and in

**Note: Articles reflect their author's views. They do not necessarily reflect a position taken by the UUMUAC Board of Directors**

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**UUMUAC Podcasts  
By Barbara Jean Walsh**

I hope everyone reading this has taken the time to participate in one of our monthly Vespers services, or has at least watched a recording on YouTube. Honestly, I tend to avoid evening gatherings, and I didn't know what I was missing out on until I starting looking for content for a UUMUAC podcast. And to back up a little, I was a long time skeptic about audible books or anything else read to me by a computer. Curiously, though, in my work life, I regularly made podcasts, which were at that time pretty much recorded phone calls. I had plenty of people in my industry who were willing to share their triumphs or dreams, and my partner and I always enjoyed talking to those people, too. We recorded our conversations, I edited out pauses and repetitions, and I uploaded the file. It was a very enjoyable part of my job, even when the editing took a lot more time than expected.

In short, I liked the medium, and recording my own writing or thoughts was never that much fun. A lot of time has passed since those days, and I've gotten to appreciate the value of text-to-talk technology. I find I am now listening to books I probably would never take the time to read, especially the classics that I read in college but am now listening to as an audible book. The quality of narration covers the gamut. My Kindle's "voice," for a while, seemed to be an 11-year-old girl who was doing her best. But I appreciated her willingness to sit in the kitchen with me and tell me a story or bring me up to date on a topic of interest while I cooked or cleaned up. Then I listened to Emily Wilson's translation of the Odyssey, and I couldn't wait to hear more.

For me, part of this transition also had to do with my ever diminishing eyesight, as well as my need to be active. And I think my hearing has changed, too. I like to turn up the volume, but not too much. If I can't sleep, I can still listen with my headset.

Another component of my journey is that I am fascinated with adaptive technology. Computers are getting better all the time at switching from text to voice to text again. Of course, your actual results may vary. And I've yet to find a program that will consistently

translate from dictation to text with 100 percent accuracy. Or to find a computer-generated program that will correctly read every word in a document, in what I might call a “normal” voice.

About a year ago, I experimented with some AI voices to see if I could get one to read meditation instructions to me. I was surprised by how much the AI voices could be manipulated to mimic gender, age, nationality, regional accents, and so on. The software I’m using now as I re-learn podcast editing includes an option to sample my voice – or your voice – and then have that voice read the script, rather than telling me to re-record it. That’s a little creepy. I can see where it’s useful for me, but I promise, I will never use YOUR voice to create either hate mail or love letters. That’s just wrong.

And you need to know that the consequences of having AI in our lives and in our ears is still a big unknown. We do know that the electronic machines that make AI possible are massive consumers of energy and natural resources. So, that’s all something to take into consideration when we talk about podcasting for UUMUAC. It is a product of available technology, and podcasting is a way to make more people aware of our organization, its vision, and its mission.

That said, we are just beginning to put podcasts together, and your feedback is vital. Personally, I think the Vespers services are a great starting point. I have converted six of them into voice-only recordings. I’ve removed the readings, the music, and the Q & A for most of these first efforts. I’ve edited out references to visual items that speakers shared with the congregation, and I’ve deleted long pauses and a lot of “ums” and other words that you can ignore if you’re watching and listening but become annoying if you are just listening – especially long pauses.

I occasionally make slight changes in the script but only if I feel that my edits in no way change the voice or intent of the original speaker. In brief, I edit the audio file much like I would edit a text file, and probably much less. (Note: I did earn my living by editing technical papers and journal articles for many years. I am not a hobbyist at this type of work.)

What I end up with, ideally, is an audio file that is 20 to 40 minutes. It includes my voice or the moderator’s voice, introducing the topic and the speaker. Then it’s all about the speaker and his or her Vespers sermon. When that ends, I come back on and either wrap it up or explain that I have added some additional information from the Q & A. At the every end, I remind people to visit [UUMUAC.org](http://UUMUAC.org) to learn more about us, or go to YouTube and watch the full service.

My goal is to make these podcasts widely available. I am using a service RSS.Com, and the UUMUAC page there is <https://rss.com/podcasts/uumuac-you-me-act/>. There, you will find descriptions of each podcast and information about UUMUAC. But, for me, the best part is that RSS immediately sends our podcast to Amazon, Spotify, Audible, and many other podcast distributors. Also, any of us can share these podcasts on social media or on our websites or in email to friends.

You'll notice that we currently have two offerings in which the voice you'll hear is Finley Campbell. His wife and comrade Bobbi had given me access to a number of recordings that he made. I don't know yet how much editing these will require – and in this case I am expanding my definition of editing to include pulling his voice out of a group discussion while I am also erasing sounds of coffee cups clattering or folks passing the treats around the table.

I have completed one sermon from 2006, though, and I personally think it's a joy to hear the Rev. Dr. Finley Campbell's preaching voice, especially when the congregation can't get enough of it.

I've also included his sermon from a Vespers sermon about Thanksgiving. Again, a treat. My plan is to continue to insert a variety of recordings made by Finley, alternating them with Vespers sermons.

I think it is a reasonable and righteous activity for UUMUAC to take an active role in preserving and archiving Finley's voice. The cassettes will go to join his written and printed archives at Wabash College this spring, but I intend to create unedited digital copies before then.

If you have experience or interest in helping with this project, please let me know. And do contact me if there are specific Vespers services that you think should be given priority. I am re-learning how to do audio editing well, and I appreciate your feedback and advice.

To help us all proceed here, I have created a list of the Vespers services now on Youtube. You can find that at <https://bit.ly/UUMUACvespers>. And I will be marking conversions to the podcast format as DONE as we proceed. If an item is podcast-only, you'll notice that the link follows a different format.

You can also go to the RSS feed webpage and leave comments, positive ones. For us to improve our social media presence we have to do more than upload files. We need to leave comments, stars, thumbs up, thumbs down, and SHARE.

In the near future, I hope a few of us will be willing to podcast informal discussions. Maybe we should also include our convocation speeches. I believe we can make contact with a lot of people who are – so far – unaware of UUMUAC but maybe we are just what they are looking for?

**White Privilege meets White Poverty:  
The Mosaic Curriculum vs. Rev. William Barber  
By Ken Christiansen**

The UUA Mosaic Lifespan Curriculum has an empathy wall in relation to white poverty that is absent in the writings of Rev. William Barber. A possible resolution between the two viewpoints is to talk about Wealth Supremacy Culture rather than White Supremacy Culture.

The Mosaic Curriculum is advertised as an antiracist curriculum. Teaching all UUs about the reality and implications of White Supremacy Culture is a key objective. I did a search in [the online version of the Mosaic Lifespan Curriculum](#)\* for the term “White Supremacy” and got 49 hits. What exactly is the message?

The Middle School section begins with Tema Okun’s [Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture](#); a video about [Whiteness, White Supremacy, and Privilege](#); and another video about [Understanding White Supremacy \(And How to Defeat It\)](#). The message is clear. White people rule the world. They have “White Privilege.” They have power over all the important systems. White people who care about black people need to work hard to eradicate the White Supremacy Culture that infuses their communities and churches.

Rev. William Barber’s most recent book, [White Poverty](#), paints a contrasting picture. For Barber, all poor people are in trouble, and there are nearly three times as many poor white people than poor black people in the USA (66 million vs. 24 million). To Rev. Barber, the problem is poverty, not skin color. Barber asserts that making white poverty as invisible as possible has been a key strategy in the dismantling of the social safety net in this country. And that positive change has happened only when black and white people understand their common problems and work together to solve them.

Barber traveled all over the country visiting communities where both white people and black people were living in extreme poverty. He held meetings in churches where both black people and white people attended and shared their stories. In many cases, particularly for white people caught in poverty, they had never told their stories before because they were too ashamed. Barber points out that Black people coping with poverty get support from their churches and communities that doesn’t say the poverty they are experiencing is their own fault. By contrast, white people coping with poverty are regularly told their poverty is a personal failure for which they are alone responsible.

So, what are the key differences between the Mosaic Lifespan Curriculum message and Rev. Barber's message? Barber never once talks about White Supremacy Culture or White Privilege. Rather, his message is to form "fusion coalitions" where white and black people work together to identify the problems we need to address and define the goals we need to accomplish today. This was Dr. King's approach.

Barber is hard on "black elites" who claim to represent all black people but refuse to fully participate in "fusion coalitions" because they see them as a threat to their power. He is equally hard on white liberals who ignore the needs of poor white people.

The author of the White Supremacy Culture paradigm, Tema Okun, has recently reflected with some apparent trepidation on how that paradigm has been used. [She says](#), "These characteristics are not meant to describe all white people. They are meant to describe the norms of white middle-class and owning class culture, a culture we are all required to navigate regardless of our multiple identities." In my own words, a more realistic and objectively identifiable descriptor would be "Wealth Supremacy Culture."

Talking about Wealth Supremacy Culture would have the advantage that empathy can flow toward all poor people, not just historically marginalized poor people. Overcoming the invisibility of white poor people is absolutely necessary if we wish to change the politics of this country and truly accomplish what we believe in.

To put it the way my favorite Church Based Community Organization puts it, WHEN WE ALL WORK TOGETHER, GREAT THINGS HAPPEN.

The [Mosaic Lifespan Curriculum introductory page](#) explains, "This curriculum series will be updated with newer resources as needed." The edition discussed above was downloaded on September 19, 2025.

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## IS SYSTEMIC RACISM A THING OF THE PAST?

*Culture, not bias, drives disparities today*

by Kevin Briggins

My great-grandfather's name was W. E. Shortridge. Most people won't recognize the name, but he was a prominent figure in the Civil Rights Movement and the fight against systemic racism. I discovered this when my father told me his grandfather's picture was in the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute. I was shocked because he'd never mentioned his grandfather before, so I asked for his name and began to research who he was and his involvement in the movement.



### Obituary for the author's great grandfather

W. E. Shortridge was a very successful businessman and provided a lot of the funding for the Civil Rights Movement in Birmingham, Alabama. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. referred to him as “The Connector” because of his ties and his ability to raise money for the movement. As the president of the National Funeral Homes Directors Association, he would travel the country speaking to other funeral home directors about the movement and how they could support it. He was a Christian man. He served as a trustee and treasurer at Bethel AME Church, he served on the executive board of Dr. King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and he was the founding president of the Birmingham chapter of the NAACP. Beyond that, he even survived a drive-by assassination attempt while outside of his home! He died unexpectedly of a heart attack in May of 1964—two months before the passing of the historic Civil Rights Act.

The arguments for systemic racism today largely paint a narrative of continuous black oppression: from slavery to Jim Crow to redlining to inequities today. However, are the challenges today the same as those fought against by my great grandfather and others in the

Civil Rights Movement? Can racial inequities today automatically be viewed as evidence of systemic racism? In what follows I will argue that the systemic racism that my grandfather opposed is not prevalent today, and that much of what people call systemic racism today is in fact a product of different cultures as opposed to different skin colors. As Christians, it is important that we seek truth and don't believe narratives that aren't true—even if they are repeated again and again.

### *Systemic Racism Yesterday*

The Cambridge Dictionary defines systemic racism as “policies and practices that exist throughout a whole society or organization, and that result in and support a continued unfair advantage to some people and unfair or harmful treatment of others based on race.” The time in which my great-grandfather lived was a time when systemic racism was prevalent throughout society, especially in the South. During this period, the South was controlled by what were known as Jim Crow laws. These laws, imposed by whites, created a caste system where blacks were treated as lower-class citizens. It forbade racial mixing in public places such as public transportation, restaurants, and movie theaters. Black and white children even had to attend separate schools. These laws were often used to discriminate against blacks in housing and employment opportunities as well. When we look back on the Civil Rights Movement, these impartial and unjust laws were what needed to be removed.

After World War II, many of these laws were changing throughout the South and race relations were gradually improving, but it wasn't until the Civil Rights Movement and the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that these laws were completely done away with and legalized racial discrimination was ended. This legal change being the case, the question remained: What impact would these laws have on the system and equal opportunities for blacks?

In the 1960s, blacks still faced potential discrimination and prejudice in areas of housing, employment, and education. This is why President Lyndon B. Johnson issued an executive order requiring all government contractors and subcontractors to take “affirmative action” in ensuring job opportunities for minorities. He also established the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), which required the private sector to submit an annual report that would detail how many minorities they employed. These efforts became known as Affirmative Action and would quickly spread to higher education to ensure minorities were given opportunities to succeed.

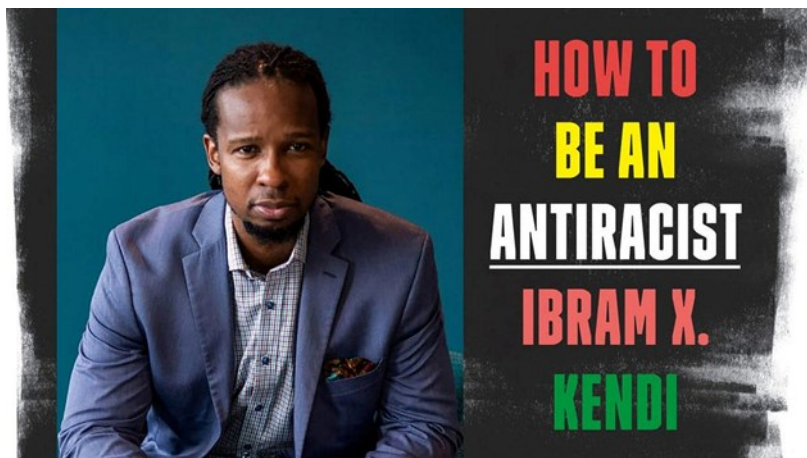
## *Systemic Racism Today*

Nearly six decades later the question is, “Does systemic racism exist today and if so, to what degree?”

Recently, the Supreme Court ruled that Affirmative Action in higher education was unconstitutional and that universities could no longer use race as a determiner for college admissions. Not in all cases, but in many, black students, on the basis of affirmative action, were admitted into universities with lower GPAs and SAT scores than their white and Asian counterparts. Ironically, for all the troubles associated between blacks and whites in America, it was Asians who brought the case to the Supreme Court. They were the ones most negatively impacted by this legal and systematic discrimination, while blacks were the ones who benefitted most, based solely on their race. I guess you could call it a version of “black privilege.”

Proponents of affirmative action do not see it that way, however. They believe blacks are still at a disadvantage due to the disparate impact of the historical injustices of slavery and Jim Crow. They argue disparities between blacks and whites today are a direct result of past injustices and that blacks aren’t on equal footing and therefore still require special privileges and considerations to ensure equal opportunities.

For instance, Ibram X. Kendi, an author and professor at Howard University, believes all statistical disparities between blacks and whites can only be attributed to discrimination and injustices. He defines these disparities as racism; therefore, we must make policies and laws to reduce those statistical disparities and ensure more equal outcomes. He calls this “antiracist.” As he has stated, “The only remedy to racist discrimination is antiracist discrimination. The only remedy to past discrimination is present discrimination.”<sup>1</sup> (Kendi has since changed this language in the book’s most recent kindle edition.)



The problem with Kendi's premise is that he never proves that disparities between blacks and whites are only the result of past discrimination. It's simply assumed. In his mind, the only other explanation would be to say black people are inferior, and to him, that's racist. However, we aren't limited to those binary choices of discrimination or inferiority. There are many other factors that should be considered, and one of the most important factors overlooked is differences in culture.

### ***Culture—Not Color—Makes the Difference***

Culture is what determines what we value and prioritize. While cultural studies have become a cottage industry today, with many technical definitions muddying the waters, the simple fact remains that what a community celebrates (or condemns) will shape the people who grow up in that culture.

For example, if one culture values basketball and makes it a priority over education, and an individual in that culture spends 1000 hours a year practicing basketball, it should not surprise us that such a culture would produce a large number of college athletes. Meanwhile, if another culture values math and science, and individuals within that community spend 1000 hours a year studying, it should not surprise us to find an oversized number of aspiring doctors, engineers, and scientists applying for entrance into various STEM programs. Why would we expect those divergent cultures to produce equal results? One culture is going to be more represented in basketball and the other will be more represented in the fields of math and science.

On comparison, if we simply looked at the statistical inequalities in those areas and used Kendi's logic, we would have to assume the disparities in the areas are only due to one group being discriminated against or inferior in basketball and the other being discriminated or inferior in the fields of math and science. Is the lack of Asian representation in the NBA the result of discrimination, or are Asians incapable of dribbling and shooting a basketball? I don't believe anyone would make those claims. We would inquire and theorize other reasons for the lack of representation.

Unfortunately, that type of critical thinking isn't allowed when it comes to blacks being underrepresented in areas such as math and science. Predominately, scholars like Kendi automatically conclude the lack of representation is due to systemic racism. This type of logic is often used to make the argument for systemic racism in areas such as policing,

income inequality, and healthcare. The fact that there are inequalities between blacks and whites in these areas is automatically deemed evidence of systemic racism, but the premise falls apart when you add other racial groups to the equation.

To take another example, Asians have a lower incarceration rate than whites, Indians are the number one income earners in the country, and Hispanics have a lower infant mortality rate than whites. Are the disparities between these groups and whites evidence of systemic racism? Are whites now the victims of systemic racism? Once again, I don't believe anyone would argue that. So what can we conclude? Perhaps, the bug is in the system of inquiry, not in systemic prejudice. On balance, statistical disparities between groups can't automatically be credited to systemic racism. More evidence is needed.

### *Systemic Racism Revisited*

Claims of systemic racism must be proven and not assumed. For instance, when these claims were made in the United Kingdom in 2021, they commissioned an independent council called the "Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities" to conduct a study into whether systemic racism existed within the country. This council, composed of mostly minorities, determined there was no evidence of systemic racism in the country. What they determined was that race was not the determining factor for outcomes. They gave examples that Indians in the country were doing extremely well but Pakistanis were not. Also, African immigrants like Nigerians were thriving, while blacks from the Caribbean were struggling. They also found some of the biggest struggles were coming from white districts.

Based on this empirical study, therefore, the council admitted there were racial disparities, but they determined "geography, family influence, socio-economic background, and culture and religion" played an outsized role in determining results. This study was done in the United Kingdom and not the United States. But based on how various minority groups are succeeding in the country (as I showed previously), the more likely explanation is that these racial disparities are likewise a result of factors beyond skin color. When incorporating all racial groups, the statistical evidence does not show race as the determiner of outcomes today. It is likely the same factors the British Commission report mentioned which for decades have been pointed out by men like Thomas Sowell and Shelby Steele.



Thomas Sowell (L) and Shelby Steele (R)

In the end, therefore, when we look at the black community and we see the influence and imitation of rap and street culture and we see that over 70% of children are born out of wedlock and many of those children are growing up without a consistent, present, and active father in their life, we can't simply ignore these factors when evaluating why blacks may be overrepresented in the judicial system or why they may be underrepresented in areas of achievement. When dealing with these important issues we must be diligent and wise and open to considering all possibilities, and not merely blame everything on systemic racism.

If my great-grandfather were alive today, he would likely marvel at the real racial progress that has been made. Certainly, disparities still exist, but it is overly simplistic to allege "systemic racism" as the unproven boogeyman lurking behind every disparity. We would do better to heed the words of Dr. Lionel Newsom, another prominent man from my great-grandfather's generation. In the same year the Civil Rights Act was passed (1964), he wisely noted that the freedom that comes with equal opportunity (unsegregated facilities, no formal discrimination in hiring, etc.) does not necessarily lead to equality (the same outcomes as other ethnicities). Rather, equality can come only through individual efforts. In order to achieve equality people must be able to communicate, to understand and appreciate each other, and to give and take. One must strive for excellence in every undertaking in order to build self-esteem and respect from others. These are the things that finally lead to equality. Freedom may be granted but equality must be achieved

The lack of equality today doesn't automatically mean blacks lack the freedom to achieve it.



**Kevin Briggins** is a former military intelligence analyst, Managing Director of the Center for Biblical Unity, and co-host of the Informed Takes Podcast and Off Code Podcast. He writes the Informed Takes Substack and can be followed in Instagram here and on X here. A previous version of this essay was published here.

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## **Afghanistan Update**

**By Fahima Gaheez, Director of the Afghan Women’s Fund**

Ever since Trump announced his candidacy for the 2024 Presidential election, he has talked about the U.S's failure in Afghanistan and the loss of Bagram airport.

While he has frequently criticized the loss of the Bagram facility, citing its strategic proximity to Iran, China, and Russia, there appears to be a significant lack of acknowledgment regarding the broader human and economic costs of the conflict. His focus on reacquiring the base overlooks the loss of lives—both Afghans and Americans—as well as the immense suffering and economic hardship endured by the Afghan people. Furthermore, it fails to address the trillions of dollars in U.S. taxpayer funds lost during the war. Prioritizing strategic assets without considering the historical context and the profound human cost of continued conflict is a concerning perspective that deserves closer examination.

President Trump made false claims about Bagram. It is important to note that Bagram (one of the biggest military airfields in the world) was originally constructed in the 1950s by the USSR and was later occupied and partially renovated by U.S. forces. Furthermore, during the 2021 withdrawal, U.S. forces deliberately damaged the airfield's infrastructure and military equipment.

The current rhetoric surrounding the takeover of the airfield often ignores Afghanistan's sovereignty and overlooks the potential for significant regional or global escalation involving neighboring powers.

On September 20, 2025, Donald Trump stated his intention to take over Bagram, warning that "bad things will happen to the Taliban" if his demands are not met. Following this, the frequent visits to Washington by Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Chief of Army Staff Asim Munir—including the proposal to nominate Trump for the Nobel Peace Prize (which fed Trump's ego)—appear to have aligned Pakistan's interests with these demands.

It seems that Pakistan is now actively seeking excuses to pressure the Taliban into concessions. Following the Taliban's repeated refusals, Pakistan has moved to strain its relationship with Afghanistan and make good on their promises that "bad things do happen to the Taliban". This escalation is a matter of significant concern for Afghans and the stability of the region.

Pakistan has initiated attacks and bombardments on Afghan territory, accusing the Taliban of supporting Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). However, the Taliban maintains that these accusations are baseless, noting that the TTP was originally formed and supported by the Pakistani government and the ISI for operations in Kashmir and against previous forces in Afghanistan.

The Taliban's position includes several key points:

- The TTP is a Pakistani group of Pakistani citizens operating within Pakistan, specifically in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Islamabad, and Balochistan.
- Given that the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan has been closed for over five months, the Taliban questions how armed groups could be transitioning from Afghan soil.
- Following negotiations in Qatar and Turkey in late 2025, the Taliban continues to insist that they do not allow any group to use Afghan soil to launch attacks against other countries.

Despite these arguments and the Taliban's denial of involvement, Pakistan continues its military operations against Afghanistan. The role of Pakistan as a facilitator in this tension is deeply troubling. The accusations against the Taliban regarding Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) appear to be a pretext for military aggression aimed at forcing compliance with demands for Bagram. History shows that for decades the facilitation of proxy wars and the radicalization of youth through thousands of Pakistani religious madrassas in the region (supported by the Gulf countries) have only led to global instability and the deaths of tens of thousands of civilians especially women and children.

Many of these organizations (in Africa, Asia, and Europe) represent the remnants or the second generation of the insurgencies formed during the Afghan wars. Those conflicts were notably funded by the United States and Gulf nations, with significant facilitation provided by Pakistan. Furthermore, the dynamics of the Cold War allowed Pakistan to emerge as a nuclear power. Because Pakistan assisted the U.S. in countering the USSR's presence in Afghanistan, the U.S. and its allies largely overlooked Pakistan's nuclear ambitions at the time.

During the twenty-year U.S. presence in Afghanistan, Pakistan maintained a dual role: supporting the U.S. invasion while simultaneously providing sanctuary to the Taliban and other insurgent groups. This involvement contributed significantly to the deaths of thousands of civilians, as well as U.S. and Afghan forces.

Furthermore, Pakistan's recent actions against Afghan villages appear to align with past threats to force the surrender of Bagram. Had the U.S. succeeded in maintaining control of Bagram for use against Iran, it is highly likely that Iran would have retaliated against Afghanistan, expanding the conflict. Given that China shares a border with Afghanistan, any such escalation or the takeover of Bagram—which is contrary to Chinese interests—could draw China into the conflict, significantly increasing the risk of a wider global war.

I believe these factors illustrate the volatile nature of the region and the potential for local conflicts to escalate into a much larger crisis. Now, 5 years after U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, U.S. desire to reestablish its presence at Bagram and threaten the region, is a very unwise decision. Trump's bullying feels like a kicked out tenant, threatening the landlord if he is not rented to again.

There was a bombing of an addiction rehab center in Kabul on March 16. This attack resulted in over 500 deaths and more than 250 injuries, which constitutes a war crime. Since the start of the Iran war, there has been a clear escalation of attacks on Afghanistan. This recent strike appears to align with previous threats regarding "bad things" happening to the country and suggests a broader geopolitical motive concerning control of Bagram.

After decades of being a theater for proxy conflicts, the Afghan people are exhausted by war, poverty, and bloodshed. Seeking to reestablish a U.S. military presence at Bagram is a decision that threatens to ignite a new and even more disastrous conflict.

The Afghan people are exhausted. While they already struggle under the harsh rule of the Taliban, further geopolitical maneuvers only increase the suffering of ordinary citizens. It is disheartening to see regional players like Pakistan seemingly facilitating U.S. interests for financial gain, mirroring a cycle of intervention that has historically led to instability.

I urge policymakers to reconsider these escalations and instead prioritize stability and respect for the lives of those who have lived through generations of war. After decades of smelling smoke and bombs, the people of Afghanistan deserve a path toward peace rather than becoming a theater for renewed conflict.

Let Afghanistan and the region breath peace.  
Let the women and children of Afghanistan have a dignified future.

**God/not God**  
**by Rev. Dr. Matthew Shear**

**Based on a service delivered for UUMUAC, March 18, 2026**  
**Expanded and Revised edition for print, March 26, 2026**

Rev. Dr. Matthew Shear is an Interfaith Minister, Behavioral Optometrist, and Spiritual Spe-lunker. His particular interest is in the effects of misperception on our understanding of our-selves and the world, and how that affects our behaviors. He recently founded the Church of the Free Spirit to provide a non-creedal home for the process of coming together to lift our-selves up in body, mind, and spirit, and help others to do the same. He preaches from a per-spective that combines elements of both liberal and conservative view of the world. Selected writings can be found on Rev. Shear's Substack @PreacherMatt, and most of his services are done on Zoom, which are open to all. He can be reached at [PreacherMatt@iCloud.com](mailto:PreacherMatt@iCloud.com)

**Opening Words:**

*The children in a UU church school class were drawing pictures. The teacher asked one, "What are you drawing a picture of?" "I'm drawing a picture of God," was the reply. "But nobody knows what God looks like," objected the teacher. "They will," said the UU child, "when I get my picture done."*

That joke came to mind as I was thinking about how to flesh out this topic for a service I re-cently led. As advertised, my response to being asked if I believed in God was "Tell me what you mean by God." I asked my friend this because over the years I've gotten quite a variety of answers, almost none along the lines of the God of Genesis Michelangelo depicted on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Most talk of a spirit or a presence, something outside of and greater than themselves. Over the years I've been asking my question I've heard many varia-tions on this in response.

But whatever the variation, those people will tell me that they feel a measure of disrespect when someone answers simply, "No. I'm an atheist." And this is what I'd like to explore with you all, for this question is one that's not only a matter of religion, but increasingly a political matter as well, one in which the battle lines are hardening.

**God/not God in a Song: "From a Distance"**

Video of Nanci Griffith's recording of "From a Distance" with lyrics and photographic images: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KCzORgC1NpM> 4:12

I first heard Nanci Griffith's version of "From a Distance" about 30 years ago, well before I left the practice of optometry and becoming a minister. Perhaps you might react to it as I at first did: While I liked the song, at the time I felt it the "God is watching us" chorus sounded a bit too much like Michelangelo's God. But as I've studied more of the history of our living tradition I've come to another view of that song, one I feel the verses speak to. They bring to my mind the view of perhaps the most renowned Transcendentalist minister of his

day, Theodore Parker. As for what he meant by “God,” he used a particular term: “Infinite God.” And so, I have come to love “From a Distance,” because of its imagery of looking back at us and our world from infinite perspective. As the song says, from a distance our differences fade to insignificance.

### **God/not God in a Short Story**

And as I’ve continued to think about this topic I’ve come to see another dimension of one of my favorite short stories, “The Last Question,” by Isaac Asimov. Published in 1956, he saw it as a musing on the concept of entropy, which may be defined as a measure of disorder. I had been seeing it merely as a brilliant thought experiment in resolving the God/not God question, as I hope you’ll here in this summation of it:

Asimov set it 100 years ahead of his time, in 2061, a time in which all computing power has fused into one megacomputer called Multivac, which gets all the power it needs from solar energy, and whose AI “learned enough to answer deeper questions more fundamentally.”

Two technicians are chatting about how abundant the new solar power is, but they start to think about it actually won’t last forever. Even if it takes a trillion years, “everything will eventually go dark” because “entropy has to increase to maximum.” But one asks, “Maybe we can build things up again someday” and the other says “Never.” They make a bet on it, and will ask Multivac to tell them who’s right.

The story makes several jumps forward in time, in each part the question of reversing entropy remains unsolved. Multivac evolves into a universe spanning virtual computer, and humanity evolves into one shared, commingled mind freed from the body. Throughout it all, the Cosmic computer still cannot answer the entropy question due to “insufficient data.” And finally, humanity’s awareness fuses with the Cosmic AI, existing in hyperspace. A trillion years go by and entropy has reached maximum; all the stars, everything has gone dark.

Asimov writes: “Matter and energy had ended and with it space and time. All other questions had been answered, and until this last question was answered also, the [virtual cyborg entity] would not release its consciousness.” All data had been collected, but only after a “timeless interval” did it finally come up with the answer of how to reverse entropy, and decided on how to execute a demonstration.

And it said, "LET THERE BE LIGHT!" And there was light.

And so, you see, we can also think of Infinite God not just in terms of distance but also time. What’s to be gained by saying otherwise?

### **God/not God as a Societal Fault Line**

At this point I have to say that I have never liked the God/not God divide. Can the Deist prove that God exists? Can the atheist disprove it? Yet this “ultimate question” has proven to be a societal fault line from Parker’s time right up to the present day. In that same sermon,

Parker declared:

*Thus the Bible was made not a single channel, but the only certain rule of religious faith and practice. To disbelieve any of its statements [...] was held to be infidelity, if not atheism.*

And recently, on Sunday, March 15, in an opinion column in the *NY Times*, David French declared “We have reached end-stage polarization.” What prompted this was his receiving hate mail for a previous column in which he had expressed admiration for James Talarico, an evangelical Christian and seminarian who’s the Democratic nominee for US Senate in Texas, for “his condemnation of the politics of hatred and vitriol, and his appeal to the better angels of our nature.” French disagrees with Talarico’s liberal stance on key social issues but praises Talarico for his stance on Christianity, quoting from him a recent interview:

“My faith teaches me to love my neighbor as myself. Not just my neighbor who looks like me, or prays like me, or votes like me.” “I’m tired of being pitted against my neighbor,” he continued. “I’m tired of being told to hate my neighbor. And I think in Texas across the political spectrum, there is a deep hunger for a different kind of politics.” One that’s “rooted in love.”

### **God/not God in Unitarian History**

That sounds quite resonant with Parker, who wrote: “It must be confessed, though with sorrow, that transient things form a great part of what is commonly taught as Religion. An undue place has often been assigned to forms and doctrines, while too little stress has been laid on the divine life of the soul, love to God, and love to man.”

This view is resonant with the words of William Ellery Channing, who in an 1828 ordination sermon called “Likeness to God,” wrote:

*The idea of God, sublime and [full of awe] as it is, is the idea of our own spiritual nature, purified and enlarged to infinity. In ourselves are the elements of the Divinity.*

Advancing understanding of science, from the Enlightenment through the Industrial Age, led to a seeming conflict with religious faith. Science overcame superstition, casting aside awe and wonder for a very academic and seemingly rational view, to the point when, in 1968, *Time* magazine asked on its cover: “Is God Dead?” During this time Humanism swept through Unitarianism, eventually causing it to no longer identify itself as the most liberal flank of Christianity.

### **God/not God in Our Time**

In its wake the denomination has made it all too easy to become the religion of those disaffected from the orthodoxy of their upbringing - a religion of what we’re not - rather than carrying on the Living Tradition of distilling the teachings of Jesus to be fuel for continuous transcendence toward the Infinite God. As such I could have also called this sermon Christian/not Christian, and ask “What do you mean by Christian?”

Words matter. And two authors of more recent vintage have been a source of inspiration to me lately:

## 1) Krista Tippett

Krista Tippett began to explore a new spirituality for the 21st century at the dawn of this new millennium, and in 2003 created a show for Minnesota Public Radio called “Speaking of Faith.” Four years later she published a book by that name, *Speaking of Faith; Why Religion Matters—and How to Talk About It*, to share more widely the collected wisdom of her weekly conversations with thought leaders and activists who were using a modern understanding of faith to both bring people together in the face of societal polarization and accomplish some very concrete things in our shared world.

Five years later she published *Einstein’s God: Conversations About Science & the Human Spirit*, in which she offered the perspective of scientists who are also people of faith and see how each bolsters rather than negates the other. To me these conversations offer a roadmap to what German philosopher Hegel called *dialectic*: rather than compete for validity, thesis and antithesis combine to a transcendent synthesis.

It was also during this period, in 2010, that she changed the name of her program to *On Being*, as it had expanded beyond its original scope of reintroducing faith and spirituality to a largely secular Public Radio - and heavily UU - listenership. Three years later she would leave public radio and create the On Being foundation and podcast, which can still be found at <https://onbeing.org/>.

In 2016 she published her book, *Becoming Wise: An Inquiry into the Mystery and Art of Living*, and “Mystery and the Art of Living” was the title of the Ware Lecture she gave at the 2016 UUA General Assembly. It’s a wonderful presentation, and it tracks well with the book. All I can do here is present a brief summary but I highly recommend you all watch it, as I think she does a wonderful job in steering us away from polarization, in both the spiritual and secular world. See: <https://www.uua.org/ga/past/2016/workshops/ware>

She said: “[...] while we are riveted by the most polarized and politicized spaces in our midst, they don't define us. They are not the whole truth of who we are collectively or what we can be living towards. This is especially confusing and demoralizing when the places we have traditionally turned to for modeling and leadership are some of the most chaotic and dysfunctional among us.”

And she asked us “to pull back to a long and wide lens on the challenge of this moment in history, its possibilities for growth and for change.” And she spoke of what she called three “encouragements.”

The first was “Words Matter,” saying: “we are starved for fresh language to approach each other. That we crave words that shimmer, individual words with power, words to convey real truth, which is different, more nuanced and challenging, it turns

out than stating positions, or making arguments, or even conveying facts. I think we've come to the limits of our belief in facts to tell us the whole story or even necessarily to tell us the truth.

The second encouragement was “Listening and Questions.” She said: “Listening is not primarily about being quiet. It is primarily about being present. It is powered by curiosity, and that is a virtue that we can invite and nurture in ourselves and render it more instinctive. It involves a kind of chosen self-imposed vulnerability, a willingness to be surprised, to let go of assumptions and take in ambiguity. The listener wants to understand the humanity behind the words of the other and patiently summons one's own best self and one's own best words and questions.”

Tippett ended with Love as her third encouragement, saying Love can be a public good. Virtues are “spiritual technologies,” tools for the art of living, pieces of intelligence about human behavior that neuroscience is now exploring with new words and images, and “its audacity is in its potential to cross tribal lines.”

She said: “What we practice, we become. What's true of playing the piano or throwing a ball also holds for our capacity to move through the world mindlessly and destructively or generously and gracefully.”

## 2) Amanda Montell

In the past five years Amanda Montell has written two best selling books in which she explores very similar questions. She is a popular thirty something author and podcaster who takes a particular interest in the use of language and its effect on how we understand ourselves and the world. According to her publisher, in *The Age of Magical Overthinking: Notes on Modern Irrationality* (2024) she “argues that in the modern information age, our brain’s coping mechanisms have been overloaded, and our irrationality turned up to an eleven.” Those coping mechanisms fall into a category called cognitive biases, which she calls “mental magic tricks [...] aimed at reconciling our finite time, limited memory storage, and distinct craving for events to feel meaningful” in an age of “information overload.”

Cognitive biases may be intended as “shortcuts that allowed us to make sense of our environment enough to survive it” but at the same time they become “self-deceptive thought patterns” and “we’re almost never aware of them.” Montell’s book aims to make us more aware by using stories to elucidate what research has learned about cognitive bias. And that’s a good thing, because such knowledge can help us navigate our way toward achieving Krista Tippett’s vision of “Becoming Wise.”

But our world isn’t fractured just because of self-deception. Montell says that she was moved to go deep on cognitive biases after writing *Cultish: The Language of Fanaticism* (2021), in which she concludes the key to manufacturing cult-like loyalty and devotion to a group is to use the power of language to create a strong sense of belonging and discourage independent thought. Their leaders create name brand recognition for an intense ideology defined by proprietary terms used by their followers, who develop an

intense loyalty to these closed groups of insiders, because in them they find love, meaning and purpose to their lives.

As laid out in the Table of Contents, after introducing her topic, Montell takes a look first at sects commonly thought of as cults, then in successive chapters shows how “cultish” language is used to create a similar loyalty to a closed community of dedicated followers in Scientology and Evangelical churches; in many businesses; in Boutique Fitness businesses, a recent trend popularly called “Cult Fitness,” and among Social Media Influencers.

Montell presents evidence that, like true niche cults, today’s popular Evangelical Christian churches create closed full-time communities of “us versus them” attitudes. Not that such churches are all bad. If an all-in for Jesus faith gets you off of drugs, that’s a good thing, isn’t it? But I do see two problems in this: first, the belief that theirs is the only way, and second, that their belief in loyalty to Jesus as a messianic Savior must break the wall separating church and state that is at the heart of a healthy democratic republic like ours.

(This is what the liberal faith tradition in Christianity left more than 200 years ago, saying we should be a religion not of Jesus but rather of what Jesus taught and called us to do, and those are the very teachings that have been so influential in creating the modern democratic republic. Separation of Church and State was intended to foster freedom *of* religion rather than freedom *from* religion.)

She also found similar closed full-time communities and “us versus them” attitudes in businesses ranging from Multi-Level Marketing operations to Amazon, and among celebrities and social media stars who have parlayed their popularity to become “influencers,” creating cult-like loyalty in their on-line communities of followers.

But in the section on Boutique Fitness, Montell notes that the difference between cult fitness and an actual cult or those cultish businesses is that cult fitness participants know that it is a special time that they carve out of their otherwise regular lives rather than being the whole of their lives. She calls it “ritual time,” and I found this distinction to be important, as that language used sounds to my ear what we should be using in our churches and fellowships. The difference is that they peddle transcendence for profit. We offer it for its own sake, and for the sake of a better society. And perhaps more importantly, I believe that these concepts have the potential to show us the way to solving the conundrum of bringing younger people into our aging congregations.

Montell explains:

Toward the end of the twentieth century, yoga planted the seed that fitness studios could be more than just places to change your body; they could also be intimate temples of emotional well-being, even spiritual enlightenment. But the rituals needed to create that sense of mysticism—rituals like affirmations, mantras, and chanting, whose roots are in religion—weren’t yet overlapping with intense exercise. The idea to mix the physical with the metaphysical was still about as far away from people’s minds as crossing a doughnut with a croissant. [...]

“SoulCycle talks about how people ‘come for the body but stay for the breakthrough,’ said Casper ter Kuile, a researcher at Harvard Divinity School and author of *The Power of Ritual*. It’s a good workout but that’s only the beginning.” In these classes, fitness devotees find a sense of release, insight on what’s important to them, and a sanctuary away from the pressures of their everyday existence. “It is more safe and more powerful than even church,” a deep-eyed SoulCycler who rides in San Francisco’s Castro neighborhood told Harvard Divinity School. At SoulCycle, he said, “I feel like I’m home.” [...]

Like traditional religion, fitness brands became both a social identity and a code by which to lead your life. The fitness “movement” encompasses customs and rituals, social expectations, and consequences for failing to show up. People meet their closest friends and spouses in the studio; true diehards quit their jobs to become instructors themselves. [...] “such a supportive community,” effused one devout Peloton user in a 2019 *New York* magazine interview. “It goes so beyond the bike.”

Workout studios wound up feeling, to some degree, holy. After all, they became some of the only physical spaces where the young and religiously ambivalent could put down their devices and find in-the-flesh community and connection.

When I read the references in the end notes, I discovered that Montell’s source for much of the above was Krista Tippett’s *On Being* program.

Here are some representative cult fitness mantras from this chapter:

*We aspire to inspire. We inhale intention and exhale expectation. ... The rhythm pushes us harder than we ever thought possible. Our own strength surprises us every time.*

*I can do hard things. i am better than before. I am born to drive. I’m glad I’m alive!*

*My body is my temple. I am the keeper of my health. I am love in action. All is well!*

*Divine inspiration. Divine inspiration. I want you to be enthusiastic and excited ... about this opportunity to close the gap between where you are in your life and where you were called, created, and intended to be.*

I think that we, too, can develop a no holds barred intense blending of thought and emotion, for body, and spirit (“the physical and the metaphysical,” as Montell puts it), to produce feelings of transcendence and belonging in a close-knit community where one goes to experience the power of “ritual time” to help us recover, refresh, and recharge from all that is routinely asked of us our daily lives.

### **Why God/not God Is Important**

Awareness of a problem is only half the solution. The challenge is how to develop a more effective response to it. Krista Tippett is also the co-creator and convener of the Civil Conversations Project, which she has described as "an emergent approach to healing our

fractured civic spaces". In her books and in her Ware Lecture, she asserts that religion and spirituality have a role to play in that work.

God/not God is but one example in which our cognitively biased minds are drawn to oversimplify a deeply complex question. This is quite understandable. As Montell wrote, it's impossible to pay attention to everything, but reducing complex questions to a yes/no choice is a driver of the polarization that David French bemoans. Krista Tippett offered us three very good things to keep in mind if we are to avoid this fate, developed through her years of having conversations rather than arguments on such topics. We should do no less.

When we fail to step into these challenges ourselves we leave room for those driven by what psychologists call "motivated thinking" (what I call "an axe to grind") and whipped to a frenzy by cultish influencers to move into and occupy these spaces: reactionary and anti-democratic forces on the MAGA Right and illiberal, neo-orthodox activists on the Progressive Left, resulting in David French's end-stage polarization.

Except it's not literally the end. We have not yet reached total entropy, so we do not have to wait trillions of years to do a total reboot. Right here and now we can make the choice to practice Speaking of a Faith dedicated to Becoming Wise. We can use an awareness of Amanda Montell's Cultish language to turn away from fanaticism and instead draw people into "ritual time" in our churches and fellowships. As our closing hymn says, as long as we are still here, we should pursue transcendent thought and cultivate spiritual practice to lift us all out of conflict and division.

From a distance Infinite God is watching. Let us gather in faith that we can cultivate likeness to that God, in science and in spirit, for ourselves and for the world. May it be so. Amen.

**A Hymn That Speaks to This:** Just As Long As I Have Breath

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eFGQAIw4HQ> 1:58

**Benediction:**

*Anyone who does not enter into that struggle with the affirmation of love and beauty misses the mark and thwarts creation as well as self creation. Thus, with all the realism and toughmindedness that can be mustered, the genuine liberal finally can hear and join the Hallelujah Chorus—intellectual integrity, social relevance, amplitude of perspective, and the spirit of true liberation offer no less.*

— James Luther Adams, "The Five Smooth Stones of Liberalism" (1976)

**In Closing, A Popular Song that Asks Us to Do This:** "Get Together"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RI7eP6POKQQ> 4:37

Written in 1963 by Chet Powers (AKA Dino Valenti of the band Quicksilver), "Get Together" was recorded by artists as varied as The Kingston Trio, Jefferson Airplane, and Joni Mitchell but didn't become a top 40 hit until 1969, when the 1967 version recorded by The Youngbloods was used in a broadcast Public Service Announcement sponsored by the National Conference of Christians and Jews in their "Smile On Your Brother" campaign.