

28 Waldo Road
Milton, MA 02186
508-951-3178, fax 650-617-3789

www.danhotchkiss.com

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Flaming Chalice Scavenger Hunt

by Dan Hotchkiss – September 9, 1999

I am going to depart this once from my usual topics of ministry and congregational leadership to ask for your help. With Andy Backus, I am working on a book about the flaming chalice. This symbol has grown, since its Unitarian beginnings in 1941, from a Service Committee logo to a universal “symbol of liberal religion.” Like the proverbial “discussion about heaven,” it was originally not a flaming chalice at all, only a picture of a flaming chalice. The picture became jewelry, the jewelry became 3-D pewter with a real flame, lit at the beginning of worship in a large proportion of UU churches worldwide. It is an interesting story, and my part of Andy’s and my project is to tell the tale more fully than it has been told before.

I need your help to flesh out several pieces of the story. I am going to identify briefly each topic where I would welcome more information. Stories, second-hand recollections, and UU folklore will be cordially received – but what I am most interested in is pointers to people who recall events first-hand, or better yet to documents or other evidence. Here, in no particular order, are the topics:

Charles Rhind Joy. Joy was the Unitarian minister who served as European Commissioner for the Unitarian Service Committee in Lisbon in 1940-41. Joy conceived the idea of a USC symbol and hired Hans Deutsch, a refugee artist, to create one. The result was “a chalice with a flame.” Joy is dead. If you know any of his family and can put me in touch with them, I might find papers missing from the UUSC archives.

Hans Deutsch. Deutsch is a shadowy figure. Almost everything we know about him comes from Joy’s letters, which say little. Most of what we *think* we know about him comes from secondary sources, e.g., mimeographed sheets prepared by the Service Committee or the UUA, apparently to answer questions about. While I have no reason to doubt the accuracy of this information (e.g., that Deutsch came from Austria, where he drew satirical cartoons against Hitler, and that he lived in the U.S. as John H. Derrick after emigrating) it would be wonderful to track Deutsch down and get some verifiable facts.

The Hus connection. For many years I heard and repeated a story that connected Jan Hus with the flaming chalice. Hus, a Czech reformer whose platform of opposition to clerical wealth and privilege paralleled the work of John Wycliffe in England and prefigured the Reformation, was imprisoned and eventually burned at the stake. While he was in prison, Hus’s followers began to distribute communion “in both kinds” – bread and wine – to the laity. Previously the laity got bread while only priests got wine. After his martyrdom, some of Hus’s followers adopted the communion chalice as their special symbol. All this is true. The

popular UU story goes on, though, to assert that the Hussites used a *flaming* chalice, which remains to this day a potent symbol of Czech national pride.

So far as I have been able to determine, this last piece of the story is not true. However, it would embarrass me a great deal to go to press denying this story, only to have someone come forth with a smoking gun – er, chalice – that would prove me wrong. So I appeal to you my friends and colleagues to produce either of the following:

- A picture of a flaming chalice dated before January, 1941. I am not interested in torches, Aladdin's lamps, eternal flames, or martinis flambés. Nor need non-flaming chalices apply. What I need is “a chalice with a flame.”
- A Hussite or Czech, alive or dead, who says the flaming chalice is a Czech or Hussite symbol. Note particularly that the chalice must be *flaming*.

Flaming chalice jewelry. Somewhere around 1960, Fred Weideman of Grosse Pointe, Michigan, came up with the idea of selling flaming chalice necklaces, tie tacks, and lapel pins as a fund-raiser. So far as I know he was the first; certainly he dominated the chalice industry until he turned it over to the UUSC around 1970. I suspect that this was a major engine of the gradual transformation of the flaming chalice from a symbol of the Service Committee to (as Fred's ads put it) a “Symbol of Liberal Religion.” I would be interested in anything you know about the uses to which Fred's jewelry was put. Where were they first given out as confirmation presents?

Adoption of the flaming chalice as a UU symbol. Gradually local churches started using flaming chalices as part of their own logos. I would like to pin down the date when this began to happen. If you have examples of stationery, orders of worship, stained glass windows, or whatnot that present the flaming chalice outside of a UUSC connection, I would love a copy. Please include a date and anything you can about the context. I would be most interested in evidence from before about 1975.

3-D chalices with flames. By the late 1970s, some congregations had begun to light actual chalices with real flames in them. I have a hunch that in many places it started as a thing to do with children, and spread later on to the “adult” service. But you tell me. Who would like to claim to be the first to light a chalice in a worship service? Was the Congregation of Abraxas somehow involved? The Commission on Common Worship? I am tracking down the documents, but would like to know more about this aspect of the story. Whoever sends me the oldest Sunday bulletin with the words “Chalice Lighting” on it will go down in history!

Whatever else. The flaming chalice symbol rose out of our century's most perilous hour. Charles Joy and Hans Deutsch created it without seeking permission in advance, and local congregations and their members gradually adopted it as a religious symbol. Only after the fact did the UUA follow along. Consequently it is far from easy to know just what questions to ask in order to reconstruct the story. If you have answers to the questions I ought to have asked, by all means send them!

Thanks in advance for all the documents I will receive. Please date and annotate each item. In the book I will acknowledge anything I use.