

“Onward and Upward”

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23 September 2007

Did you know that about two hundred years ago the term Unitarian was an insult? That it was used in a derogatory way to accuse someone of not being Christian? It was spoken with a disapproving tone, a scathing cast of the eyes and a sneer of the mouth, “You must be *Unitarian*” or maybe with a tone tending toward an indictment, “You Unitarian!” What many of us now claim proudly as our personal theology was once a dirty word that one would throw at another to humiliate them or invalidate the ideas and beliefs of the other. It would take nearly a century and several generations of clergy and theological discourse for the word “Unitarian” to not only be accepted by those who were victims of its accusation, but also to be seen as a valid theological perspective challenging the orthodoxy of the early 19th century.

The history of Unitarian Universalism, like any other religious tradition, is complicated and tumultuous. There are great arguments and sincere agreements, ties that once forged changed history and ideas that have opened faith to those who felt isolated because they believed differently. On both sides of our theological family tree there have been men and women who, because of their religious beliefs and personal convictions, influenced by their faith, brought to human existence a small taste of heaven. Unitarians and Universalists have been part of such works as abolition, women’s suffrage, the civil rights movement. They’ve been on both sides of military conflicts and on the issue of women’s reproductive rights.

Throughout our complicated and complex history several prominent names of women and men stand out. Over the course of the church year I will be sharing with you some of their stories. But most of all I will be examining their contributions to our religious heritage and how their brave exploration of theology, ethics, and community influenced their time and how the legacies they’ve left continue to influence modern Unitarian Universalists.

In the mid to late 18th century, as the United States of America was in our infancy, a theological debate that had been lingering just below the surface of Protestantism began heating up. One in which the influence of Calvin's doctrine of predestination was growing stronger, where there was a sincere push to maintain the strictest of adherence to the Calvinist principles. There was a push within protestant sects of Christianity toward a more orthodox and constrained interpretation of Scripture and theological thought. What would later be dubbed Unitarianism was beginning to emerge in response to this particular take on theology and faith. Though we look back and see clear evidence of American Unitarianism as early as 1740 it would not be until 1805 that the theological controversy of Unitarianism would finally come to a head –when Harvard College would elect a liberal as Professor of Divinity in the face of strong objection and opposition by orthodox Protestants. And so the open debate began.

Though there are many whom we now call ancestors of our faith who engaged in the battle for a liberal interpretation of Biblical teachings and limits to church doctrine, few stand out more in these early years than William Ellery Channing. “If a reluctant controversialist,” writes David Robinson in *The Unitarians and the Universalists*, “Channing was nevertheless a powerful one. His distaste for sectarianism in general, and theological dispute in particular, forced him to enter debate sparingly and only on grounds that seemed to him both essential and indisputable. Such a situation arose in 1815, when Channing became the central spokesman in the Unitarian controversy.” The most important, influential and well known of his writings of this time is his sermon from which I read this morning, “Unitarian Christianity.”

William Ellery Channing was born 1780 in Newport Rhode Island. He was raised attending the Second Congregational Church, and through his early life he struggled with the Calvinist theology preached at the church of his childhood, teaching that everyone's fate was

determined by God before their birth, and that the quality of one's current life reflected God's will. While attending Harvard College he discovered more liberal and engaging philosophical ideas that awakened in him a strong belief in the essential dignity of human nature. It was not long after his graduation from Harvard that his thoughts began to turn themselves more directly to that of theological study, and just around the turn of the century he wrote to his uncle, "I have now solemnly given myself up to God."

He served as minister of the Federal Street Church in Boston, Massachusetts, 1803-42. During his ministry at Federal Street, Channing moved, as reported in the UUA historical archives, into his role as spokesman during the "Unitarian controversy for those liberal—or Unitarian—churches within Massachusetts' Standing Order of churches. His published sermons, lighting a path between orthodoxy and infidelity, were widely influential abroad as well as throughout the United States. His Christian humanism inspired both religious and literary features of the Transcendentalist movement. An exemplar of Christian piety and a champion of human rights and dignity, he effectively fostered social reform in areas of free speech, education, peace, relief for the poor, and anti-slavery. His pulpit orations made him, according to Ralph Waldo Emerson, "a kind of public Conscience." (Source: UUA historical archives)

Though his body of work did much to shape social reform and change, Channing's immediate influence on the Unitarian movement of his day was two-fold. He passionately argued the power, authority and singularity of God while also ardently holding onto the identity of Unitarians as Christian; an idea which many of his critics were enthusiastically objecting to. They simply could not understand or believe that one who espoused the unity of God could also call himself Christian. Even today there are many who look at the label 'Unitarian Christian' or 'Christian Unitarian' as more of a oxymoron than a legitimate theological stance; and certainly,

if valid, not a belief to be included in the whole of Unitarian Universalism. I will admit, even I had difficulty reconciling the two ideas growing up in my Humanist congregation. It was not until I attended seminary that Unitarian Christianity had any meaning to me. And it was largely due to Channing's writings.

“It is due to truth, and a just deference to our fellow-Christians, to take notice of objections which are currently made to our particular views of religion...” wrote Channing in his tract ‘Objections to Unitarian Christianity Considered’ of 1819. “1. It is objected to us, that we deny the divinity of Jesus Christ... We believe firmly in the divinity of Christ’s mission and office, that he spoke with divine authority, and was a bright image of the divine perfections. We believe that God dwelt in him, manifested himself through him, and communicated to him his spirit without measure. We believe that Jesus Christ was the most glorious display, expression, and representation of God to [human]kind, so that in seeing and knowing him, we see and know the invisible Father; so that when Christ came, God visited the world and dwelt with [humanity] more conspicuously than at any former period. In Christ’s words we hear God speaking; in his miracles we behold God acting; in his character and life we see an unsullied image of God’s purity and love.”

Channing’s legacy here is the claim of religious liberals to the truth, wisdom and power of Jesus’ teachings and life. For though Jesus was not God, Channing viewed him as the exemplar of human nature – pointing to humanity’s innate potential. Jesus was to Channing both other than God and other than humanity. It is through his (and other early Christian Unitarians’) view of Jesus as central to understanding and knowing God that we today can assert our own spiritual authority over Biblical text and tradition. It is through a reexamination of Channing’s writings that we may face our modern theological critics and claim a religious understanding and

truth encompassing Christianity; which gives us the power and authority to argue against the re-emerging orthodoxy of today. We can, in fact, declare that the Bible is meant to be read with a reasoned mind and a critical eye so that its' spiritual truth can be revealed.

“We believe,” writes Channing in *Unitarian Christianity*, “that [Jesus] was sent by the Father to effect a moral or spiritual deliverance of [human]kind; that is to rescue [people] from sin and its consequences, and to bring them to a state of ever-lasting purity and happiness...he accomplishes this...by his instructions respecting God’s unity,... by his promises of pardon to the penitent, and of divine assistance to those who labor for progress in moral excellence, by the light which he has thrown on the path of duty; by his own spotless example,...by his suffering and death...by the resurrection, which powerfully bore witness to his divine mission, and brought down to [humanity’s] senses a future life...”

Christianity was not only about the future life for the early Unitarians. It was as much about the current and very human life that they believed Christianity helped to inform and that was of equal import to Channing and his colleagues. Morality was a central concern of the early to mid 18th century in general and specifically for Unitarians. In response to Calvin’s doctrine that all humanity was divided into either ‘saved’ or ‘unsaved’, they developed a sense of morality, offered by God through the life of Jesus. They believed the essence of humanity to be good, sinful by will yes, but not by nature.

“Among the many and inestimable blessing of Christianity, I regard as not the least the new sentiment with which it teaches [humanity] to look upon [our] fellow beings; the new interest which it awakens in [us] toward every thing human; the new importance which it gives to the soul; the new relation which it establishes between [person] and [person]. In this respect it began a mighty revolution...Under its influences a new order of society is advancing, surely

though slowly; and this beneficent change it is to accomplish in no small measure by revealing to [humanity] their own nature, and teaching them to ‘honor all’ who partake it.”

It was Channing’s estimation, in opposition to his orthodox counterparts, that human nature was a magnificent part of the divine creation. That no matter how deeply we may have sinned, if with repentance we come to God then in his words, “the most lost are recoverable, that the most fallen may rise, and that there is no height of purity, power, felicity in the universe, to which the guiltiest mind may not, through penitence, attain.” This onward and upward view of humanity and human society was a stark departure from the popular belief that God had already laid out the path and destination of every person’s life and there was no action or word or thought an individual could offer that would alter God’s plan. Channing believed that “all the doctrines, precepts, threatenings, and promises of the gospel are revealed for no other end than to make [humanity] moral...”

It was this foundation of morality that led Channing to speak against slavery, to promote education and the care of children, and to support relief for the poor. He believed passionately that because each person was gifted with a nature worthy of God’s grace they were worthy also of dignity and care.

Again from the UUA historical archives - “Channing fervently believed God had made human nature, with its capacity for moral choice and ever increasing understanding, akin to the divine. He confidently preached the possibility of unending moral and spiritual progress for all who would shape their lives in accordance with its demands.”

Over the course of the last two nearly two hundred years since Channing’s ministry, Unitarians and then Unitarian Universalists have had to wrestle with some of Channing’s more hopeful and positive declarations. He was a man of his time and though many among Unitarian

Universalism today still claim the identity of Christian, we have moved past that label being the only one our members wear. We are no longer an exclusively Christian denomination but one that explicitly welcomes the exploration of many other faith traditions and sacred rituals. In fact, many among us struggle with how to reconcile what of Jesus they find meaningful with their rejection of another faith's doctrines for whom Jesus was central. This, I think, is where exploring our liberal religious heritage can help heal some of that rift. Jesus may not be the person to whom we all turn for wisdom and guidance, but the role of Jesus the early Unitarian Christians defined is certainly worth our consideration.

The other sticking point in Channing's beliefs is the idea that humanity is always, though slowly, moving onward and upward toward an ideal divine state of existence. Though I admire and agree with him in his estimation of humanity as essentially good, I find it difficult to believe we are always moving forward. I think as individuals we can often feel as though the journey toward inner happiness and contentment is one filled with missteps, mistakes and detours; and as a wider society that we stumble and sometimes simply stop moving altogether on the road to justice and equality and reform. In fact, I believe that sometimes it is an act of grace that we advance at all. I do not know that the driving force of our human nature is to move boldly into the future, but I am thankful that Channing believed it so completely because then I can have hope that I am wrong.

There was a time, not unlike today, when the term Unitarian was an insult; when being a religious liberal a heresy, when believing in the unity and singularity of the Holy sacrilege, and when studying Scripture with a reasoned eye and critical thought a sin and irreligious. There was a time wise men and women stood in opposition to those views; when they proudly wore the title heretic and Unitarian, when they with intelligence and scholarship declared the oneness of

the Holy, revealed through humanity and nature; when they stated without apology the spiritual duty to work toward the perfection of the soul and society, when they owned the personage of Jesus as teacher and exemplar. This is our history, our religious heritage. This is the legacy Channing and others like him left us. They laid the foundation of our current identity and our Principles. They did so with rational thought, religious freedom and tolerance, and the moral obligation to better humanity's soul and the world. Their legacy is one of truth, love and faith.