

Oh, Those Unitarians
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I often wonder if we Unitarian Universalists of the 21st century have anything in common with our forbearers of the 1800s. Unitarian Universalism today is something that the great names of Unitarianism would not recognize. Theologically we are worlds apart. William Ellery Channing and Theodore Parker would not recognize what we call worship in most of our churches today.

William Ellery Channing, who is considered one of the great voices of Unitarianism in the United States, was horrified when his detractors used the term "Unitarian" to describe him and his followers. He believed that, although he and his followers were not Trinitarians, they were also not separate from their Trinitarian brothers and sisters, and he saw no reason for division within the Boston protestant movement.

Channing was a Christian. A Christian who was responding to the conservative Calvinist theology of his time. Channing's argument with the Calvinists hinged on the bible and its interpretation. He was a very rational man, who believed that the mind and reason were the ultimate tools to understand religion and the bible. Channing argued that the bible should be read and interpreted like any other book, using reason and remembering that it, too was written by ordinary men like the men of his day. He further argued that while doing the work of biblical interpretation it was important to put the bible in its historic context and to remember that it was written at a specific time for a particular circumstance. All of this discussion about interpreting the bible was radical talk in the early 1800's. But Channing

didn't leave it at that. He taught that most of the language in the Bible is figurative and, for example, when Jesus instructed his followers to drink his blood and eat his flesh, he was speaking metaphorically. This is something that most of my Protestant colleagues believe today.

Today as we look at most of Channing's teachings, we find them to be quaint, and not very radical. For, in addition to speaking forcefully about what he described as the errors of traditional Christianity, Channing had some very traditional beliefs.

He believed that Unitarians should use the New Testament as a guide to their lives. Although Channing did not believe that Jesus was one manifestation of the three, he did believe that Jesus was a special son of God, a divine son of God, and so, whatever Jesus or the apostles taught was to be taken as divine authority. In his work, "Unitarian Christianity", he said that Unitarians should make those teachings the rules for life.

In his time, Channing was a radical. For example, he claimed that God does not contradict in one part of scripture what he teaches in another part. It was a simple step for Channing, using reason, to claim that any part of the Bible that contradicts another part, is simply to be seen as invalid. Imagine the excitement this caused in conservative, Calvinist Boston in the early 1800's.

In his famous Baltimore Address at the ordination of Jared Sparkes, he said "We object strongly to the contemptuous manner in which human reason is often spoken of by our adversaries....we indeed grant, that the use of reason in religion is accompanied with danger. But we ask any honest man to look upon the history of the church and say whether the

renunciation of it is not still more dangerous." In talking about the relationship we have with God, he said: "We cannot bow before a being....who governs tyrannically. We respect nothing but excellence whether on earth or in heaven...." Ministers had come from as far away as Boston for this sermon, and it caused quite a stir. It is still seen today as one of the most controversial sermons ever written in America, and there was an immediate and powerful response.

When I read Channing's Baltimore Address I see in it something that I see in our Unitarian Universalism today. We are people of reason. We steadfastly hold to the precept that reason pretty much trumps all when we examine our faith and how we work in the world.

Although Channing passionately spoke throughout New England about this new and radical understanding of Christianity this was not his only passion. He was a passionate and committed abolitionist. At first Channing was put off by the abolitionists because of what he described as their "piercing tones of passion." Remember this was a man whose whole life was ruled by reason. But his reason and his moral and ethical religious beliefs led him into the anti-slavery movement. In his usual style, he wrote a reasoned book, which summed up the ethical argument against slavery. But more importantly, he advocated that the government assume the cost of compensating slave owners for their "property", and for educating the freed slaves. Channing was ferociously denounced both by southerners and those in his own Boston community, including many in his congregation. James T. Austin, the attorney general of Massachusetts and one of Channing's parishioners accused his minister of inciting a race war. His church refused

to allow a memorial service for Karl Follen, one of his friends because Mr. Follen was an abolitionist. It didn't matter. Channing calmly and with reason continued to be a passionate voice against slavery in religious and secular arenas.

Channing was not alone in his fight against slavery in Boston. Theodore Parker, was the minister in the Unitarian church in West Roxbury, right across town from Channing.

Parker's theology was radical, and is still radical today. For Parker believed that there were no exemptions from the demands of moral law. For Parker, the spiritual life was one that took you from Sunday (the observance of religion) to Monday (the practice of religion). He believed that religion was personal and experiential and that those areas of religion that were permanent were those things that we can confirm through practice and experience. He once said that "if it could be proved that the gospels were a fabrication and that Jesus....never lived, Christianity would still stand firm and fear no evil. Gravity does not operate because Newton said so...The same is true of the truths of religion. Confirm them by experience.

Sharing these beliefs in 1800 Boston was radical enough. But Parker went on to say that the church should be the means of reforming the world, and he certainly tried to make this so. He was a militant abolitionist. Parker helped fugitive slaves to freedom, and conspired with John Brown on his raid. He committed acts of civil disobedience and he openly boasted of harboring fugitive slaves. Parker defied the fugitive slave law, and along with Thomas Wentworth Higginson participated in an unsuccessful attempt to rescue a slave. He was and prosecuted for that act, although the

prosecution lost its case.

Were there consequences for this behavior? You bet there were? He had to arm himself in the civilized city of Boston. The Boston Unitarian ministers blackballed him for both his radical religious views and his vocal and very radical anti-slavery position.

In good Unitarian fashion, similar to what we might see today, the local ministers were uncomfortable throwing Parker out of the ministry, so they asked him to resign. But Parker refused. So the other ministers refused to do pulpit exchanges with him in an effort to silence his voice. It didn't work. He was invited to preach every Sunday afternoon at Boston's Music Hall, where, every week, over 3,000 people came to hear him.

There are other great stories of early Unitarians who changed their worlds. There is Ralph Waldo Emerson, who in his Divinity School address, stated that organized religion was nothing more than the caretaker of a dead faith and he encouraged the young, newly ordained ministers to communicate directly with God through the miracles of nature, and to share that living faith with their congregations. He called the religion taught in the churches "second hand", and he claimed that the miracles written about in the bible were "monstrous" because they were acts against nature.

There was William Henry Channing, nephew of William Elliot, who was in the forefront of social reform ministry to the urban poor.

There was Joseph Tuckerman who pioneered the role of ministry-at-large in Boston, a specialized ministry that addressed the needs of the urban poor. He was the first full-time minister at large and his most difficult job was educating the difficult Unitarian clergy and laity about the nature of

urban poverty. In his ministry he worked to sensitize the Boston liberal upper class to the problems of poverty and he pioneered a form of urban social work grounded in home visitations..

There was Charles Chauncey in the mid-1700's who took on the fundamentalists of his day -- Jonathan Edwards and the Great Awakening crowd. He was also an outspoken and ardent supporter for national independence.

Sharing Theodore Parker's passion for abolition of slavery was Octavius Brooks Frothingham who preached about the church's complicity in slavery, especially in it's support of returning escaped slaves to their owners. He was also a transcendentalist and founder of the Free Religious Association.

Another compatriot of Parker's was Julia Ward Howe. Now we all know her as the person who wrote the words to "The Battle Hymn of the Republic". But she was also very active in the Underground Railroad in Boston, and she preached often at the Church of the Disciples. She worked for women's suffrage and was active in Boston's Radical Club, a group of reformers and intellectuals.

This is but one story of Unitarianism in its early days in the United States. This is only a glimpse at some of the people who gave a voice to liberal religious values in a time of status-quo conservatism. There were hundreds of Unitarians who span a time frame from before Channing to last year, and whose stories you haven't heard.

Passion, courage, reason, love of others, a sense of fairness and justice, hope. These are what we Unitarian Universalists share with our

forbearers. We may understand the concept of God differently than Channing or Parker. We may find argument with how they interpret the Bible, we may disagree with their beliefs about the afterlife, prayer, and Jesus. We may not share their theology, but Channing, Parker and others have left us a legacy. They would recognize us 21st century Unitarian Universalists who are passionate about the rights of others, who fight for fair treatment of all, who use reason and experience to try to understand the un-understandable. This is their legacy to us.

Be proud of this heritage. Use it to go forth into the world to make a difference. It is stories like these that fill my heart with pride and hope. I am proud to stand with Theodore Parker, William Ellery Channing, and all the others named today and call myself a Unitarian. And I am hopeful that sometime, maybe even in my lifetime, we Unitarian Universalists will again pick up the banner of righteousness and be the voice in the wilderness that demands justice in the name of all that is holy.