

UU HERITAGE

Taking Time to Celebrate our rich Heritage!

We are more cafeteria or smorgasbord or pot-luck than single entree! We thrive on diversity and complications, not on simplicity or creed or united voice. We actually agree on many things, but we each bring our own nuance and caveats to that agreement. This is as much current reality within Unitarian Universalism as it has been our heritage throughout the formative phases and disparate histories that we claim among our sources. UU Heritage is not a straight line through history from a single revelation or a single founder or religious exemplar, prophet, savior or deity. Our heritage is more like a meandering river fed by multiple tributaries large and small, perhaps more like the Missouri than the mostly tamed Mississippi which it feeds. And like both of those rivers, our UU heritage has mostly played out within North America and specifically within the United States, with whom we also have shared a significant group of Founders. We have a rich and interesting heritage, or better, two rich and interesting heritages, for the 1961 consolidation of the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church combined two wandering rivers without yet creating a single unified torrent! These two liberal Christian fringes, neither comfortable with the Trinitarian Mainstream, and both exploring Eastern religions and opening to cosmic ideas, created a western religious anomaly only somewhat matched by the larger and faster growing Baha'i tradition of the East.

The perfect question to ask about our UU Heritage is found in that great song (#1003 in the Teal book), "Where do we come from?" combining Paul Gauguin's ideas with Brian Tate's music:

Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?

Where do we come from? Mystery, mystery, life is a riddle and a mystery!

This morning I will suggest a few answers to those questions, but there are far more answers and influences that I will not get to in this brief sermon today.

The other question which is sometimes asked but not often enough attended to, is, Why does it matter that we have a significant heritage, since we are what we are now? I could suggest that great line about those not knowing their own history being doomed to repeat it, but even more I think we actually can learn about our own time by reviewing the history of our religious and spiritual forebears, and perhaps we can even find a little bit of wisdom to help humanity survive our current troubled time!

Although we could draw connections to even earlier times through Eastern and Earth-Centered Traditions which have been embraced more recently, I would suggest that both streams of our heritage began in the early days of Christianity, before the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. voted the Unitarian understanding of Jesus as less than God heretical in the first triumph for the Trinitarians. Another council in the 6th Century voted Universal Salvation heretical, leaving key ideas of our faith as unwanted choices. Both ideas appeared periodically throughout history. We claim Michael Servetus as the first modern Unitarian, though he was burned at the stake with his books in 1553. Servetus's ideas, and those of other anti-Trinitarians continued to influence the more inclusive segments of Christianity over the following decades and centuries until Unitarianism began to develop in Transylvania, Poland, England, and the United States. The same intellectual discomfort with the static universe centered on the flat earth that was then tied up with Roman Catholicism likely favored both Reformation and Enlightenment. The discoveries of Galileo, Copernicus, and other early scientists also added to the influences that helped encourage development of the more rational Unitarianism and the more loving God of Universalism.

In the United States, Anti-Trinitarianism, labeled Unitarian by Conservative Christians, was growing amidst the more liberal congregational churches in Boston in the mid to late 18th Century. The intellectual integrity of early Unitarians helped shape a movement which highly valued learning and the toleration of individual's religious thought. During the 1800's Unitarians grappled with matters of slavery, war, and various moral and ethical issues. The movement also began to establish itself as a religious institution.

Theologically, William Ellery Channing, Theodore Parker, and Ralph Waldo Emerson each left significant marks on the growing movement.

In “Unitarian Christianity,” his famous Ordination sermon for Jared Sparks in Baltimore in May 1819, Channing addressed the differences already existing between Unitarians and other Christians.

We are particularly accused of making an unwarranted use of reason in the interpretation of Scripture. We are said to exalt reason above revelation, to prefer our own wisdom to God's....Our leading principle in interpreting Scripture is this, that the Bible is a book written for men, in the language of men, and that its meaning is to be sought in the same manner as that of other books. (Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism, Conrad Wright...p.49)

Channing and other 19th Century Unitarians were much in sympathy with the attempts of German academic theologians to bring scientific approaches into the study of the scriptures. Since the time of Servetus, in fact, Unitarians had resisted accepting doctrines, dogmas, or religious theories standing without both scriptural and rational support.

Channing clearly considered himself a Unitarian Christian, yet his commitment to rationality and his comment about universal skepticism foreshadow the further development of Unitarianism later in his century as well as the next. In another area, Channing calls for tolerance of the beliefs of others, again in the language of his time and his Christian Unitarianism.

We can hardly conceive of a plainer obligation on beings of our frail and fallible nature, who are instructed in the duty of candid judgment, than to abstain from condemning men of apparent conscientiousness and sincerity, who are chargeable with no crime but that of differing from us in the interpretation of the Scriptures, and differing, too, on topics of great and acknowledged obscurity. We are astonished at the hardihood of those, who, with Christ's warnings sounding in their ears, take on them the responsibility of making creeds for his church, and cast out professors of virtuous lives for imagined errors, for the guilt of thinking for themselves. (Three Prophets...p. 84)

Ralph Waldo Emerson, also an ordained Unitarian minister, who served the parish briefly before devoting his time and energy completely to the Lyceum lecture circuit is probably the most famous of the Transcendentalists, who found truths of religion and morality in immediate intuitions of the divine (*Three Prophets...p. 23*) Emerson's address to the graduating class at Harvard Divinity School in 1838 illustrated well the break he was making with the formalism of churches, including Unitarian ones of his day. A few excerpts of that address:

The intuition of the moral sentiment is an insight of the perfection of the laws of the soul. These laws execute themselves. They are out of time, out of space, and not subject to circumstance. Thus; in the soul of man there is a justice whose retributions are instant and entire. He who does a good deed, is instantly ennobled. He who does a mean deed, is by the action itself contracted. He who puts off impurity, thereby puts on purity. If a man is at heart just, then in so far is he God; the safety of God, the immortality of God, the majesty of God do enter into that man with justice. (Three Prophets...p. 92)

This sentiment lies at the foundation of society, and successively creates all forms of worship. The principles of veneration never die out. Man fallen into superstition, into sensuality, is never quite without the visions of the moral sentiment. In like manner, all the expressions of this sentiment are sacred and permanent in proportion to their purity....This thought dwelled always deepest in the minds of men in the devout and contemplative East; not alone in Palestine, where it reached its purest expression, but in Egypt, in Persia, in India, in China. Europe has always owed to oriental genius, its divine impulses. What these holy bards said, all sane men found agreeable and true. And the unique impression of Jesus upon mankind, whose name is not so much written as ploughed into the history of this world, is proof of the subtle virtue of this infusion. (Three Prophets....p. 95)

That Emerson mentioned Persia, India, and China is an indication of the breadth of his own studies as well as the world-mindedness that was beginning to be expressed within Unitarianism during the 19th Century. That Emerson's religion was based more in every individual than in the revelatory aspect of scripture was perhaps also related to the opening of religious awareness beyond the Judeo-Christian experience. Whereas Channing remained a Unitarian Christian, Emerson grew more interested in morals, ethics, and natural religion.

Theodore Parker, also influenced strongly by Transcendentalism, remained an active Unitarian minister, if often an outcast among his colleagues. Parker, like Channing, considered himself clearly a Christian Unitarian, though his ideas, too, helped expand the worldview of the movement. In his classic sermon, *The Transient and Permanent in Christianity*, at the Ordination of Charles C. Shackford in South Boston in May 1841, Parker laid out his views.

Christianity is a simple thing; very simple. It is absolute, pure Morality; absolute, pure, Religion; the love of man; the love of God acting without let or hindrance. The only creed it lays down is the great truth which springs up spontaneous in the holy heart—there is a God. Its watchword is, be perfect as your Father in Heaven. The only form it demands is a divine life; doing the best thing, in the best way, from the highest motives; perfect obedience to the great law of God. (Three Prophets...p. 140)

...while one generation of opinions passes away, and another rises up; Christianity itself, that pure Religion, which exists eternal in the constitution of the soul and the mind of God, is always the same. The Word that was before Abraham, in the very beginning, will not change, for that word is Truth. From this Jesus subtracted nothing; to this he added nothing. But he came to reveal it as the secret of God, that cunning men could not understand, but which filled the souls of men meek and lowly of heart. This truth we owe to God; the revelation thereof to Jesus, our elder brother, God's chosen son. (Three Prophets... p. 139)

Try it by Reason, Conscience, and Faith—things highest in man's nature—we see no redundance, we feel no deficiency. Examine the particular duties it enjoins; humility, reverence, sobriety, gentleness, charity, forgiveness, fortitude, resignation, faith, and active love; try the whole extent of Christianity so well summed up in the command, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind—thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself;" and is there anything therein that can perish? No, the very opponents of Christianity have rarely found fault with the teachings of Jesus. (Three Prophets...p. 140)

Parker believed that the core message of Christianity, which we might expand to include all true religion, is too often obscured by its particular transient manifestations. Parker wrote of the call to forgiveness, humility, reverence, and charity coming from the core of the tradition.

Though few of us today claim Christianity, would we expect less from a true expression of Unitarian Universalist principles?

Offer them hope, not hell! Perhaps the most important thing offered to Unitarians and Universalists by their preachers was a sense of hope for their lives in this world. Beyond the threats of hell and damnation, Christianity offered some hope for reward in heaven to the saved, but creed and doctrine did not always offer enough hope to survive in this world.

Universalist Christians did not believe in hell, but did believe in the return of all souls to a loving God. Universalism likely lost its advantage when Methodists and some Baptists began talking more about a loving God than threatening Hell and Damnation.

A loving Universal deity in a rational Unitarian world made far more sense and offered more hope than the threats of hellfire in a world already torn by the Civil War and disunity between the states. The devastating wars and revolutionary scientific discoveries of the 20th Century continued to erode support for Christian Churches and simple solutions to human problems around the globe. In the 21st Century, politicians still hearken back to supposedly simpler and better times with slogans to Make America Great Again, only in denial of rising seas, a warming globe, and continuing pollution of our home planet by unfettered corporations and unimaginably wealthy individuals.

In response to the challenges of today, there is still a call to morality and justice in the message of every Unitarian and Universalist luminary, and a living memory of the call from Jesus that we love our neighbors as ourselves.

The shapers of American Unitarianism and Universalism were advocates of morality, tolerance, justice, and compassion. Neither dogma nor doctrine confine our movement. The Principles and Purposes, ever subject to further development stand as a challenge to us to practice the best that humans may offer, to seek justice and community, to seek to understand ourselves within the entire cosmos, to value each person and the good in every belief system, in short to do the best that we can do in this and every moment.

We stand on the shoulders of great women and men who have built this movement. Now it is our turn to stand up and make a difference in the world, to love and accept, to challenge injustice, to create opportunities for hope to triumph even in this troubled time. It is our turn to seek the best, the highest, the most true expressions of religion in this instant and in the future.

In our every gathering, we have the opportunity to continue shaping a religion which will aid the building of a better and more just world. From our roots in primitive Christianity and the religious dialogues of Boston, we stand uniquely poised to call for justice and compassion in the continuing journey toward religious truth. May our individual journeys and our shared community be a light to the world which is never hidden but always available to inspire a brighter future!

Shalom, Salaam, Blessed Be, Namaste, and Amen!