

***From Puritans to Transcendentalists:
The Early Evolution of a Liberal Christian Movement***

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Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship
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To criticize is not to reject. This point must be emphasized, for it is the dividing line between the free mind and fanaticism. It is the doorway to a universal religion that rigorously seeks the truth, and yet is also inclusive and welcoming to all. To criticize is not to reject.

Rev. Kenneth Patton (1911-1994)

WELCOME

It's not yet Halloween but this week we had a flurry of Christmas planning discussions at BUF. This seems a little odd, since some within our congregation and many outside it say we are not a Christian church and we therefore have no business celebrating Christmas. It's a question that will always be with us: whether Unitarian Universalism remains rooted in the Christian tradition or whether we have split off altogether. Today we'll look at some significant steps that were taken in the early years of our movement—to see how we got here from there... and to help us each decide for ourselves on the nature of our relationship with various forms of christianity.

Let's begin with an adaptation of a covenant first adopted by the Church of All Souls in Evanston, Illinois in 1894, a time of some significant division in our movement when Unitarians in the West (pretty much anything west of Boston) were itching to understand christianity in a more humanistic way. The covenant was written by James Vila Blake, whose original version appears in our hymnal (#473). I've visited many congregations who either use the original or have changed the words a little bit. It's all part of the long history of Unitarians changing the words—in this case even changing the words of one of our own pieces... in order to make an older tradition relevant to the contemporary ear, heart, and soul.

LIGHTING THE CHALICE / COVENANT

Love is the spirit of this fellowship and service gives it life. Celebrating our diversity, and joined by a quest for truth, we work for peace, and honor all creation. This is our covenant.

GATHERING SONG from a text by Ralph Waldo Emerson: *We Sing of Golden Mornings* #44

ANNOUNCEMENTS & GREETINGS

MILESTONES

RESPONSIVE READING The Oversoul #531

MUSICAL MEDITATION Aaron Copland, *Zion's Walls*

SILENCE (3:00)

MESSAGE

He was born and named “Jesus.” Or “Jeshua” or something like that. Beyond this, things get a little murky. Over the next 325 years he came to be known by many names to many people. To some he is known for ethical teachings or good deeds; some focus on his devotion to a heavenly father; some remember his charismatic personality or challenging parables. Some have knowingly made things up about him; others continue to shape and reshape his story by interpreting with the best of intentions. He’s been seen as a heroic revolutionary, a messenger, even a God. So some have created rituals to preserve his memory and to re-enact his last days, until he should come again.

From the acquaintance people have had with Jesus or his legends, countless accounts have emerged of his life and words, written for different groups responding to different pressures in the ancient world and our own—diverse communities seeking to know the meaning of his existence.

325 years or so into the story, the diverse groups became one, in a sense. That is, one set of beliefs and practices and authorities were backed by the military and economic power of the Roman empire; while those with other perspectives fled into the shadows (which was relatively easy to do at the time—after all, it was the dark ages).

Think about that number—325—the year that the Nicene Creed was established as the Unchanging Truth, and an assortment of books were canonized...judged for all time to be the complete and exclusive Word of God.

Think of that number. Imagine going forward 325 years from today; it will be the year 2340. What will they say about us then?

Imagine going back 325 years—that would be 1690. How much of *what we imagine* to be true about that time *really was true*?

Archeologists digging back through layers and layers of the remnants of civilizations find evolving stories. We find the same as we dig through the layers of Christian interpretation, including centuries of Unitarian and Universalist thought and practice.

Next Sunday you’ll be hearing from Rev Tessie Mandeville, who is, among other things, a Unitarian Universalist minister and a Christian. As a matter of introducing herself she’ll be talking about some ways of looking at Christianity including the ways of the Transylvanian Unitarians whose movement began in the reformation era (1600s) and continues to this day.

Today I’d like to focus on the period that links Puritans to Unitarians, a period which includes significant turning points toward what we have become today. From this point forward I’m going to be speaking about Unitarians rather than Universalists. Though essentially these groups grew up side by side in colonial New England, asking many of the same questions.

(Philosophically they grew up side by side. Socio-economically they would have been on opposite sides of the tracks, if there had been tracks, and in style, the Unitarians were distinctly heady while the Universalists were more enthusiastic and evangelical.)

Today, about 50 years after the merger of the Unitarians and Universalists, theological speculation takes a pretty low profile in our movement. We tend to focus on the here and now. Still, the history is fascinating because the steps taken long ago, slowly, over the course of generations, parallel in many cases the steps that I have taken, and I know many of you have taken, in our personal journeys that began within various Christian traditions. And our institutional quandaries in many ways parallel the ongoing pushes and pulls around these personal origins and paths.

Notice a couple of things about the title today: I say “Puritans to Transcendentalists,” not “Puritan to Transcendentalist.” At no point in our history would it be accurate to say that there was one way of being within any of these made-up categories.

The subtitle refers to: “...A liberal Christian movement” not *the* liberal Christian movement, as there are many of these as well.

Finally, in the title is the word “Christian.” Unitarians and Universalists have always questioned themselves and have always been questioned by others as to whether we are “Christian.” For the most part, up to the mid 1800s, Unitarians would have called themselves “Christian” [and for the Universalists, perhaps another century more]. Our predecessors were often at odds with their contemporaries over the specifics, but they understood their own views as natural progression from their Christian roots. Early Unitarians had no desire to escape the confines of their heritage, they simply intended to understand Christianity in modern terms.

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So then—The Puritans. The Puritans had intended to live a pure Christianity, but found that to be difficult in Europe—battling oppressive religious authorities or caught in the crossfire of the battles of others. So as a new community in the new world, their covenant would be with God and with each other. In their new parishes they established congregational polity, that is: local control over their own concerns. This form of congregational self-governance is perhaps the most concrete aspect of the Puritan tradition that has been preserved and cherished through generations of change—up to ourselves.

The *stereotype* of Puritan New England is one of intolerance, conformity, and fear of the unknown. But as thousands of European settlers poured into the colonies, maintenance of strict religious and social norms became difficult. The bond among the first generation was strong. They had taken great risks together and readily recognized their mutual dependence. The next generation seemed to take the covenant less seriously. So their elders, fearing that they would lose their children from the church, offered an alternative called the “Halfway Covenant.” That is, full membership into a congregation and its covenant required each person to testify to their sinfulness and their personal experience of conversion, but when it appeared the next generation was disinclined to go that far, the rules changed so that children of full members could be admitted to partial membership until they were ready to make such a public confession. The half-

way covenant was adopted in 1662. And it was all downhill from there, with generation after generation lured further into the material world and into the wilderness.

Before long it became apparent that Puritan ideals of social conformity would not take hold, and could not be enforced in the vastness of the new continent. Supernatural religion was also under pressure in this period of emerging scientific and rationalistic thinking. It was the Age of Reason, epitomized by the publication of Isaac Newton's *Principia Mathematica* in 1687. It was beginning to look as though human beings might have the capacity to understand some of the mysteries of the universe. Perhaps humans even had the capacity to *control* their world. Perhaps even the *right* to control their own lives.

In reaction came a wave of revivalism in which hearts were won for God through intensely emotional preaching. And, not surprisingly, there was a counter-reaction to this religious emotionalism. The Puritan ethic of sobriety was still strong enough to critique this flightiness trying to pass for godliness, this false prophecy of overheated imaginations.

The revivalists in what came to be known as the Great Awakening were concerned with being reborn and becoming infused with the spirit. Those who were more invested in the status quo insisted upon restraint and on the work of the mind. But those focused on the mind were also split. Some devoted themselves to correct beliefs. Others began to re-think the process of *how we might arrive upon* our beliefs.

Then for a while these groups quit their squabbling over theological variations and found common purpose in the American Revolution. But once they had gained political independence, the theological divide became more apparent than ever.

By 1800, 6 to 8 generations had come and gone. Over the course of 150 years or more, hundreds of congregations had been established, and even as they continued to evolve as independent entities, they recognized strong ties of family and friendship. They called upon one another for assistance and pulpit exchanges. But gradually, the more traditional churches began inserting statements of belief, or creeds, into their covenants, and divisions grew. Congregations began to associate more with those who resembled them theologically instead of with their closest neighbors.

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So when someone asks you how a highly intolerant colonial religious sect became today's Unitarian Universalist Association, you can just say that it happened so gradually that no one even noticed. But that would be incorrect. Three specific turning points can help us get a handle on this early evolution. The turning points are most easily represented by public addresses made by William Ellery Channing, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Theodore Parker.

Channing forced the more liberal congregations to recognize that they had become a distinct body in their insistence upon humanity's capacity to choose between sin and holiness.

Emerson pointed out that Christianity was not unique but was one expression of a basic human impulse to connect with something beyond themselves. Emerson then promptly left the Unitarian movement.

But Parker confirmed that even those who held radical transcendentalist views could remain within the Christian tradition. In the following decades the tradition was stretched further and further to include non-theistic thinking, and the insights of non-Christian traditions. But that's a couple other sermons. For now I want to go over these first three steps in a little more detail.

The Puritans began as strict Calvinists. Over the generations, some held close to orthodox Calvinist doctrines. Other rejected or modified them. There was no particular unifying trait among those who strayed from orthodoxy. Or at least those with liberal tendencies didn't recognize a common trait—or they didn't want to admit it, and cause a rift. And it's confusing for us still today, because the traditionalists began to use the word "Unitarian" as a term of disapproval toward the liberals. But the name didn't stick at first. Because though some rejected the specifics of the notion that God was Three-in-One, for most liberals, Trinitarianism was a minor issue. Opposing it certainly wasn't what they cared to take on as the center of their identity.

The issue that finally drove the orthodox and the liberals apart was the matter of *free will*. John Calvin had taught that humans are innately depraved, and bound to sin on this earth, and destined to suffer eternally for their ungodliness. Except—by God's grace, a limited number would be saved from damnation. There was *nothing* anyone could do about this, but to live in fear and in hope that they might be among the elect.

The liberals, whatever other variations they may have preached about, believed that human beings are born with free will. We have the capacity to choose. We have impulses toward holiness *and* temptations toward evil. Our choices have consequences. And the responsibility for those choices lies squarely in our hands. At times that responsibility, that freedom, might seem overwhelming, but one need not fear. For with thoughtful careful choices, learning, self-discipline, and being shaped within a community in which people hold one another accountable, we can get into habits of righteousness. Over time this makes it easier for us to avoid temptation and to keep up the good work. And with God's assistance, which is freely given if we will only receive it, we can become a manifestation of God's will. We can become a manifestation of God's will both as individuals and as a society.

This kind of thinking was abhorrent to the orthodox. By 1808, the orthodox found that Harvard Divinity School had become hopelessly liberal, and they built themselves a separate seminary. They stopped exchanging pulpits with those who could not be trusted to preach the Truth, and they continued to try to smoke out the infidel "Unitarians." At first Channing's response was that such exclusion and separation was a dishonor to Christianity... and if people *lived* according to scripture that was more valuable than following doctrine. It wasn't until 1819 that he finally rallied his peers to accept, and to define for themselves what "Unitarian" would mean.

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In Channing's defining sermon, given at a public event with lots of advance publicity, what did he say?

- Reason is important in religion, but alone reason is insufficient
- Reason can un-cover SOME universal truths
- Christianity is a biblical faith requiring special revelation
- That which is clear in scripture is true
- And as to the doctrine of the Trinity, it is wrong not because it's unreasonable but because it is unscriptural.

Relying upon Scripture to find God's purpose for humankind, Channing asked what principles should be used for the interpretation of scripture.

He suggested that the use of scripture in which isolated passages were taken out of context is unacceptable.

He recommended the emerging scholarly model of biblical criticism which involved taking all related passages and comparing them within their full biblical context. Thereby obscure passages will be clarified by those which are clear... and a consistent core would be found beneath scripture's superficial contradictions. (So Channing acknowledged the Bible's internal contradictions, but he had confidence in its core message.)

He also noted that scripture must be interpreted within the context of original language, culture, and unique historical circumstances. And it must be interpreted with knowledge of the personality and purposes of each original author.

So in summary he affirmed that the Bible is truth refracted through human language and circumstances and that a faithful reader would take all of this into account. That is, we know that the bible is true not because the bible tells us so...but because taken in a wider context it retains its integrity and becomes applicable to our lives today.

Channing was not primarily a scholar but an advocate for what other scholars were doing, primarily in Germany. He advocated an interpretive process that has now become the norm in biblical scholarship. So what did he say were the consequences of this type of thinking?

- God's infinite goodness must imply His intention of our discovery of His goodness.
- Therefore the notion of the innate depravity and hopelessness of humanity is unfounded in scripture. Such a view would be a slap in the face to a God of goodness and love.
- The death of Jesus was not about placating an angry god.
- Holiness means love of God and Christ and benevolence toward those He loves (humans).

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In 1819 when Channing gave that sermon, Emerson was a student, and one of Channing's parishioners. Emerson's journals show a deep appreciation for Channing, even Channing's belief in Miracles. That is, Channing believed that the Author of Nature, whose goal is to guide humankind toward goodness, can certainly suspend the laws of nature as needed to meet this

goal. Channing was a supernaturalist—not claiming that God would intervene for trivial purposes, but yes for extraordinary purposes in extraordinary circumstances. And one extraordinary circumstance was Jesus coming to the world. This was a miracle—Jesus’ teachings about God were the basis of morality on earth and eternal life beyond. And miracles confirmed his authority.

Emerson’s early journals show that he approved of Channing’s views. He liked how Channing’s expositions were poetic—not mechanically rational; they left room for the imagination. But over the next decades Emerson took Channing’s own methods to move beyond Channing’s positions.

Emerson’s father had been a Unitarian minister, and Emerson followed this path himself, thru Harvard divinity school and ordination. But parish life rankled him. He felt that accommodation to an existing institution led to a loss of integrity. He drifted from ministry to the lecture circuit, and just as he was deciding to resign his pulpit for good, thinking that theology and the institutional church had become hidebound to tradition and therefore irrelevant, he was invited by the graduating class at Harvard Divinity School to speak at their graduation.

What would he say to those about to enter into a profession that he’d found to be stifling and irrelevant?

- The responsibility of the minister to “acquaint men at first hand with Deity.”
- But to know the Divine at the highest level one must move beyond the knowledge we can gain from the senses.
- Christian truths are valid only to the degree that they corresponded to the higher truths one could know thru direct intuition of the Divine.
- Religion must be created anew in the souls of each generation.
- The present church is failing because it’s too formal, abstract, and impersonal.

The school, of course, tried to distance itself from Emerson’s address, and questioned whether students should be allowed to invite speakers. His critics said that Emerson’s depersonalization of God refutes worship, which is a response to divine personhood...which in turn leads us to respect for human personhood. They argued: God is not an inanimate abstraction, or a set of laws. We must save the impulse to please the creator.

Of course by now it was Channing’s generation who had become the establishment, and the established ground they wanted to defend was the importance of Miracles.

Miracles? asked Emerson. Yes, life is a miracle, beauty is a miracle. Christianity is relevant to the extent that it reveals life’s beauty, not as it upholds doctrines or traditions.

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Theodore Parker was in attendance at Emerson’s address to the Harvard Divinity School graduates. He began to take Emerson’s position a bit further. He began to ask, if we do not know God thru miracles, or through the revelation of Scripture, then how do we know God?

His answer: Immediate intuition of the divine is not something we do, but an essential part of who we are, in our very consciousness the being and nature of God is inescapable.

Our highest knowledge comes through our conscience. Intermediaries not needed. We don't need sensory experience. We don't need reason. We don't need scripture. We don't need miracles. We don't need authorities.

The Christianity of Jesus was the most pure manifestation of God's truth ever. Christianity interpreted thru others has been less true, less clear. Whether thru Calvin or Luther or Unitarian views, all are skewed.

Both Parker and Emerson were in the Transcendentalist stream of thought. But there was not a unified body of Transcendentalist philosophy. Parker was much more devoted to the Christian tradition and staying within the church than was Emerson. Even after he was ostracized he would not leave.

Parker's great opus was called: "The Transient and Permanent in Christianity." And again, this was given at a public event, an ordination. Parker asked: What's permanent/essential? *Love of god and humanity*. What, then, is transient? *Forms and doctrines created by Humans and skewed by history*. Love of god is permanent and essential, everything else is just a temporary form for getting to God's love.

So doctrines are always subject to criticism. Because, for example, no two people have ever agreed on the nature of Christ. And we can't beg Christ as the authority of Truth any more than we can say that gravity is true because Newton said so.

Parker's great sermon was not designed to raise controversy, but reaction from outside the community caused great fuss. Once again the opportunity was seen to smoke out the infidels. Other Unitarians were put under pressure to disown Parker's ideas.

Which put them in a quandary: most would not go as far as he went theologically, but they had a mutual agreement not to quibble over theology, but to focus instead on matters of character. So the Boston Ministers Association asked Parker to resign, but when he said "no," They had no means to exclude him without throwing away their commitment to free inquiry. It was a dynamic that set a strong precedent for us today.

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So what lasting impact did these three moments of history leave upon our movement? Channing insisted that freedom is an essential element to the individual spiritual quest. Without real freedom (and consequences to our choices) piety is meaningless.

In the generations which have come and gone, the pendulum has swung, and will again, thru Emerson's (and Parker's) romantic views about our innate knowledge of God through intuition... back to Channing's position that the soul must be educated. It's another version of the nature/nurture question, and it's not likely to be resolved any time soon.

And Parker, did he pave the way for Humanism? Parker did not say that Christianity is just another religion. He believed that the religion of Jesus was the highest manifestation of the

Divine. However, even by opening up the question as he did, about forms versus essence, he led the way for others to question Christianity's primacy. In the early 20th century the Unitarian and Universalist Humanist movement went beyond transcendentalism, to say that truths are true (or not) and principles are relevant (or not) on their own terms, regardless of their origin. The existence of a Creator or overseer is beside the point.

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Biological evolution occurs in part because within DNA lie the potential for variation. In religious evolution, many of the variations that show themselves today were already in existence 2000 years ago, and even before the birth of Jesus. And there is greater potential, and unique manifestations of our universal humanity that still lie within:

- Within our movement
- Within each of us

That potential, that diversity was suppressed during the dark ages. But in the shadows, monks copied down ideas, even the radical ideas, even the thoughts of the pre-Christian Greeks. If by chance you see these times—our times as dark ages, then it is not time for despair. Your role may be to quietly carry forward the particular seeds of your religious understanding.

On the other hand, you may see your own times as a new renaissance, a new age of reason and enlightenment. So it may be your role to expose your seeds to the light of day. Take your pick.

Me? I'm still tussling over the question of whether I'm a Christian. It depends, I suppose, on who gets to say. I will say I am, many others will say that I'm not.

I'm pretty comfortable without supernaturalism or the notion of cosmic goodwill. But I still struggle *to describe* my views on the Big Abstract Questions. I go back and forth between uses of art, ritual, intuition, and science to describe my views. Still, I'm confident that what matters most is my behavior, and to recognize the gap between my behavior and my ideals. Which is why I recognize my need for a covenantal community.

And just as I know that *I am the responsible party* in my relationship with all that is, I know too that *I can turn to* all that is for comfort and assistance. I can turn to forests and friends, to water and to all creatures great and small, I can turn to ideas and inventions, and I can turn to you: you who love and you who doubt, to keep me going.

SENDING SONG *'Tis a Gift to be Simple* #16

BENEDICTION by Theodore Parker #683

Be ours a religion which, like sunshine, goes everywhere; its temple all space; its shrine the good heart; its creed all truth; its ritual works of love; its profession of faith divine living.