

## ***Unitarian and Universalist Theological History***

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In 1740 George Whitefield left England and sailed for America. There he spent several years as an itinerant preacher. He was joined in his endeavors by Jonathan Edwards. Together, they became the leaders of what we remember today as the Great Awakening, the great eighteenth century revivalist movement in North America. Whitefield, Edwards, and other preachers of this movement were greeted with great enthusiasm. Large crowds turned out wherever they went to hear a powerful message of hell fire and damnation. The leaders of the Great Awakening wanted to awaken colonial America to the dangers of sin and the need for Christian salvation.

But some people were not enthused with what they heard. Charles Chauncy -- a Boston preacher, a theological descendent of Calvin, and pastor to one of the churches of the New England Standing Order -- did not like what he heard. To Chauncy and others such as Jonathan Mayhew, the preachers of the Great Awakening were arrogant interlopers who had intruded into the parishes of established ministers without permission, "passed judgment on the state of clergymen's souls, and whipped audiences into frenzied enthusiasm."<sup>1</sup> It was the itinerant minister James Davenport who finally exceeded Chauncy's tolerance. A quiet, scholarly man, Chauncy was not given to controversy, but he felt compelled to speak publicly when Davenport was arrested in 1742 for disrupting the peace in nearby Connecticut. Chauncy published a sermon entitled, *Enthusiasm Described and Caution'd Against*, in which he attacked the emotional excesses of the revivalists. When Jonathan Edwards responded by publishing a book offering a five-fold defense of the excesses of the Great Awakening, Chauncy rebutted with a five-fold refutation entitled *Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion in New England*.

When the Great Awakening subsided Chauncy, who had found his voice, considered another book. The mild mannered Chauncy had discovered that he was not just opposed to excessive emotionalism in religion; he had also come to object to the Calvinist doctrine of limited salvation. If God is infinitely benevolent, reasoned Chauncy, it must necessarily follow that all of God's creatures will ultimately be saved. Chauncy envisioned a period of punishment following death; but ultimately all would be reconciled to God. Chauncy, a graduate of Harvard, was hesitant to publish, recognizing the controversy that would arise if his ideas were known publicly.

John Murray, however, was not a graduate of Harvard and had not learned to be as cautious as Chauncy. Murray, in fact, did not have a college degree. Born in 1741 in the village of Alton, some fifty miles southwest of London, Murray spent part of his

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<sup>1</sup> Warch, Richard. "New Introduction to the Reprint Edition." Printed in Chauncy, Charles. *Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion in New England*. Hicksville, New York: The Regina Press, 1975. Page 52.

childhood in Ireland. Murray's religious upbringing exposed him to the Anglican and Methodist churches and the Calvinistic Methodist, George Whitefield. When he moved to London as an adult he joined a Methodist congregation, but visited Whitefield's "Tabernacle" where he tried to reconcile his Methodist leanings with Calvinistic predestination. Sent by his Methodist society to persuade a recalcitrant woman of the errors of universal salvation, Murray found himself unable to overcome her arguments. Shortly thereafter Murray heard John Rely preach and was persuaded of Universalism. Rely asked Murray to publicly support Universalism, but Murray refused. Religion was central to his life, but he remained unpersuaded that he was called to ministry. It was against this backdrop that Murray's personal life collapsed. His wife and son died; he served a term in debtor's prison; and the Methodist society to which he belonged excommunicated him for his universalist views. The untrained lay preacher resolved to seek a new life in America; he told his friends that he would never again preach.

Life takes strange twists, however, and when Murray made landfall at Good Luck Point in New Jersey in 1770, he found Thomas Potter waiting with a church that lacked a minister. Potter disliked the Calvinist message of damnation and had been looking for a minister who had a message not of hell, but of hope. In John Murray, who had walked from the shore and knocked on Potter's door seeking provisions for his grounded sloop, Potter found his man; and Murray found what he took for a calling from God to preach the gospel of Universalism -- which he did until his death in 1815. Murray's encounter with Thomas Potter at Good Luck Point is remembered as the only "miracle" in American Universalist history.

Murray provoked animosity from the orthodox clergy for his Universalism. During the Revolutionary War several clergy objected to Murray's assignment as Chaplain to a Rhode Island unit. They took their theological objections to the Commander-in-Chief of the colonial forces, but George Washington responded to their objections by personally confirming Murray's appointment. It was, after all, a war fought for freedom. On January 1, 1779, a group led by Murray organized the Independent Church of Christ in Gloucester, Massachusetts, the first avowedly Universalist church in North America. Murray spread his Relyan theology (Murray was never original in his theology) for the remainder of his life, growing increasingly set in his ways and resentful of different forms of Universalist theology.

Chauncy, the cautious Harvard educated Universalist was not happy with Murray. While he agreed with his ultimate conclusions, Chauncy believed Murray was wrong in his line of reasoning and in the particulars. Chauncy published *Salvation For All Men* in 1782, a book which drew immediate attacks from the orthodox. One example is Samuel Mather's, *All Men Will Not Be Saved Forever*. In 1784 Chauncy followed up with *The Mystery Hid From Ages and Generations Made Manifest by the Gospel-Revelations: or, The Salvation of All Men*. Chauncy was also a Trinitarian, but believed in a thoroughly Arminian theology. Murray believed salvation was complete at the moment of the atoning sacrifice of Jesus. Chauncy believed there would be a necessary period of punishment after death; only then would humanity be fully restored to God. Chauncy -- Harvard trained and speaking from a pulpit of the Standing Order -- did not make common cause with the uneducated Murray who would preside as

moderator on September 4, 1793 at the first "General Convention" of what would later be known as the Universalist Church of America. Chauncy, however, along with Jonathan Mayhew, had prepared the soil for another, albeit closely related, religious movement.

The cautious Chauncy reflected the rationalism of the Enlightenment. The rationalism and optimism of the Enlightenment; the Arminianism of Chauncy (which expressed itself in his Universalism) and others like him; the congregational polity of the churches of the Standing Order; and Supernatural Rationalism, a less radical form of Deism, which did not reject supernatural revelation, but insisted on the human ability (and responsibility) to interpret and understand it -- all of these came together and produced Unitarianism.

Many New England clergy of the Standing Order had migrated to an Arian Unitarianism by the beginning of the Revolutionary War, but they were circumspect in their preaching. It was a young man raised in such a church who finally led a New England congregation officially and openly to Unitarianism; but the first such church was not a congregational church. Because of a shortage of Episcopalian clergy, James Freeman was appointed in 1782 to be a reader at King's Chapel in Boston, the first Anglican Church founded in America. Freeman, whose background was in the churches of the Standing Order, brought with him Unitarian ideas which King's Chapel formally adopted by amending its liturgy in 1785. When the Episcopal Church would not ordain Freeman because of his rejection of the Trinity, King's Chapel ordained him. The result is a curious blend of theology. King's Chapel continues to be a Unitarian Christian church to this day, using a modified form of the Anglican book of order. The curious mixture was advertised by the sign that stood in front of Kings Chapel for many years, "Unitarian in Theology, Anglican in Liturgy, and Congregational in Polity." Where King's Chapel led, many churches of the Standing Order were soon to follow.

Although Chauncy and Mayhew were not Unitarians, they had laid the theological ground work by proclaiming:

[a] commitment to logic and reason in theology, a biblicism that was strict but that demanded critical and historical analysis, and an overriding concern for moral aspiration as the focal point of the Christian religion.<sup>2</sup>

Mayhew had pursued these ideas with an insistence on the potential goodness of humankind. These "pre-Unitarian" developments of the 18th century found fruition in a realized American Unitarianism that was Arminian, i.e., believing in the moral potential of human beings and the human ability to move towards the likeness of God; theological ideas that eventually found full voice in William Ellery Channing's 19th century Unitarian sermon, Likeness to God<sup>3</sup>, which left no doubt as to humanity's ability and obligation to

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<sup>2</sup> Wright, Page 9.

<sup>3</sup> Rpt. in - William Ellery Channing - Selected Writings, David Robinson, Ed. New York: Paulist Press, 1985. Pages 145-165.

move towards the infinite perfection of God.<sup>4</sup> Channing also pursued the commitment of Chauncy and Mayhew to the use of reason in religion. In his sermon entitled Unitarian Christianity, Channing said,

Say what we may, God has given us a rational nature, and will call us to account for it. We may let it sleep, but we do so at our peril. Revelation is addressed to us as rational beings.

Channing exemplified mature Unitarianism in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Unitarianism became institutionally established in 1805 when Henry Ware was elected to the Hollis Professorship of Divinity at the Harvard Divinity School. The incident became known as the "Unitarian Controversy." Although officially non-sectarian, Harvard Divinity School became a de facto Unitarian school for much of the nineteenth century. One divinity professor upon leaving the Unitarian faith felt compelled to resign his professorship. As a result of Henry Ware's election in 1805 the Calvinist faction of the New England Congregational churches led by Jedidiah Moore founded Andover Theological Seminary in 1808.

The Arminianism of Chauncy and Mayhew took its name from Jacobus Arminius, the Dutch theologian whose teachings led to the Remonstrant Brotherhood in Holland following his death.<sup>5</sup> American Arminianism was strongly Pelagian and emphasized, as Arminius had, the importance of freedom and the illegitimacy of force in matters of religion.<sup>6</sup> One can trace connections between Arminius and the Arminianism of American Unitarianism, but it is probably best to regard the Arminianism of American Unitarianism<sup>7</sup> as an independent development.

Unitarianism rejected any creedal statement. This was in part an artifact of the Standing Order churches. Belief was so uniform that there had not been a need for a creed. As the Unitarian controversy spread some churches began to talk of creeds. Emerging Unitarianism, mindful of the importance of freedom of conscience to their movement, emphatically rejected any effort to impose a creed. Universalism also emphasized individual conscience, but came closer to having a creed. In 1802 the Universalists adopted the Winchester Profession. Although not formally a creed, the Winchester Profession held the Universalists closer together on doctrinal issues in the years to come than the Unitarians.

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<sup>4</sup> Channing did not suggest that such perfection was humanely possible, only that human beings could, in a religion that stressed the ethical nature of religion, move towards the infinite.

<sup>5</sup> McCulloh, Gerald O., ed. *Man's Faith and Freedom - The Theological Influence of Jacobus Arminius*. New York: Abingdon Press, 1962. Page 6

<sup>6</sup> Hoenderdaal, Gerrit Jan. "The Life and Struggle of Arminius in the Dutch Republic." McCulloh, Page 15.

<sup>7</sup> Adams, James Luther. "Arminius and the Structure of Society." McCulloh, Page 89.

American Universalism under Murray began as a Trinitarian movement. Initially it could be said that "Universalism in America was only Calvinism with a new conclusion -- the old orthodoxy with a heretical outcome."<sup>8</sup> All of that changed with the publication in 1805 of Hosea Ballou's, *A Treatise on Atonement*. Ballou declared that sin was the finite product of an infinite God. Sin was a means to an end, part of the process by which human beings would be reconciled to God. The key part was that "It is human love for God that is renewed in the atonement, not God's love for humans."<sup>9</sup> It was human beings who required reconciliation to God.<sup>10</sup> Ballou resolved any doubt about the Unitarian tendencies of these ideas when he flatly declared "that the Mediator [Jesus] is a *created dependent* being."<sup>11</sup>

Murray was greatly distressed by Ballou's departure from Rellyism. Murray, prior to understanding Ballou's theology, had invited Ballou to preach at his church in Boston in his absence. Murray's second wife, Judith Sargent Murray was so distressed by Ballou's preaching that she had a member of the choir announce during the service "that the views presented by the occupant of the pulpit of this church to-day, are not those that are usually promulgated here, and they are not in accordance with those entertained by Mr. Murray."<sup>12</sup>

By 1825 when the American Unitarian Association was organized (marking the formal separation of the Unitarians from the Congregational Churches) the Unitarians were almost uniformly universalists; and the Universalists were almost uniformly unitarian -- albeit both with different forms of unitarianism and universalism. The Universalists, following the lead of Hosea Ballou, proclaimed (with an important exception that will be noted hereafter) a universal salvation that did not require punishment for anyone after death. The Unitarians generally believed in limited punishment following death. All would eventually be reconciled with God, but only after some indefinite period of time. Ballou's unitarianism, however, was Socinian while the Unitarians was Arian.

Not all the Universalists agreed with Ballou. In 1817 Ballou agreed to a series of debates about the nature of universal salvation. Out of these debates arose the Restorationist Controversy. The Restorationist believed (as did many Unitarians) that there would be punishment after death and only then would humanity be fully restored. Some of the Universalist ministers who took the Restorationist side switched fellowship to the Unitarians. By the mid nineteenth century, it was Ballou's position that prevailed.

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<sup>8</sup> Ballou, Hosea. *A Treatise on Atonement*, 14th ed. Boston: Universalist Publishing House, 1902. Introduction by John Coleman Adams, p. xxix. Quoted in Robinson, David. *The Unitarians and the Universalists*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1985. Page 61.

<sup>9</sup> Robinson, Page 64.

<sup>10</sup> Ballou, Hosea. *A Treatise on Atonement*. Boston: A. Tompkins, 1848. Page 106.

<sup>11</sup> Ballou, Page 113.

<sup>12</sup> Miller, Russell E. *The Larger Hope - The First Century of the Universalist Church in America 1770-1870*. Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1979. Page 44.

The Unitarians also had their theological controversies beginning with the Transcendentalist Controversy in the mid nineteenth century. Ralph Waldo Emerson was the son of a Unitarian clergyman. A graduate of Harvard, Emerson became minister in 1830 of Second Church in Boston. Two years later he resigned when the congregation declined to excuse him from serving the Lord's Supper. Emerson went on to become famous as an essayist, lecturer and leader of the Transcendentalist movement. Transcendentalism was a complex movement with many facets - part religious, part philosophical, and part literary. Religiously it stressed the ability of the individual to have a direct awareness of the divine. Nature and the human mind reflected the divine. The miracles were an intrusion into the divine of the natural world. Following Emerson in the Transcendentalist tradition was Theodore Parker. Unlike Emerson, Parker remained a Unitarian minister although he was so radical that other Unitarian ministers would not exchange pulpits with him. Parker's controversial sermon, *The Transient and Permanent in Christianity*, explicitly rejected the miracles and declared the Bible was but a transient revelation of an underlying spiritual reality. Transcendentalism split Unitarianism between those who believed in a supernatural basis for religion and those who did not. It presaged the free church controversy that occupied Unitarian attention in the last half of the nineteenth century.

In 1865 Henry W. Bellows formed the National Conference of Unitarian Churches. The National Conference was organized to promote the spread of Unitarianism to the west. A more radical group -- the Free Religious Association (the "FRA") -- was organized in 1867 by those who saw the AUA and the National Conference as too conservative. Within Unitarian Churches a new vision was emerging - a vision of a truly universal church that did not limit itself to a particular belief system, but sought to ground itself on the truths that transcended creeds and other finite expressions of the infinite. Any hint of a creed was anathema to this movement which feared that the National Conference or AUA would circumscribe Unitarianism so as to exclude those who did not wish to accept the traditional Christian foundations. The free church movement led by the FRA was itself a precursor to the humanist controversy in the first half of the twentieth century.

The humanist movement questioned the necessity of a belief in God in order to be religious. Humanism substituted an ethical basis for religious belief in lieu of God. The humanist movement had parallels in Reform Judaism, resulting in Humanistic Judaism and Ethical Culture. The humanist movement established Unitarianism as a religion that celebrated its Jewish and Christian roots, but also declared itself independent thereof. Notwithstanding that independence, there remain a significant number of Unitarian Universalists who characterize themselves as Christians with a variety of theological perspectives.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the Universalists were also beginning to feel pressure to accept non Christians. The Winchester Confession had prevented as much "theological drift" as had occurred among Unitarianism. But there were still those who were beginning to see Universalism not as a religion based on belief in universal salvation, but as a universal religion that should speak to all. The limitations of the Winchester Confession -- even with the "liberty clause" were beginning to chafe.

At the turn of the century there were some revisions made to the Winchester Confession, but the essential elements remained and Universalism continued closer to its beginnings than Unitarianism. The pivotal movement for Universalism away from a strictly Christian foundation began in the 1940s when the Universalists were denied membership in the Federal Council of Churches. In 1945 a group of students and young clergy met and organized the Humiliati. The Humiliati were a study group that examined different theological issues. They led the drift away from a solely Christian Universalism.

The movement towards a universal religion was evidenced by the logo adopted by the Humiliati, a circle with a small off center cross. The circle symbolized inclusiveness and the cross symbolized Christianity. The off center location of the cross indicated that while universalism included Christianity, it was no longer central to the movement -- there was room for others. The Universalists had taken a different route, but they, too, had come to see themselves as more than Christian.

The Universalist Church of America never adopted the circle and off center cross of the Humiliati. However, it became widely used in Universalist churches prior to the merger with the Unitarians in 1961; a usage that testifies to the influence of the Humiliati and the movement of Universalism towards a self understanding as an open religion truly independent of creeds.

The Unitarians and the Universalists were always theologically close to one another. Ministers frequently moved back and forth between the two denominations. Several efforts were made during this century to merge or at least provide a framework for cooperative efforts. Those efforts culminated in the merger in 1961 when the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America became the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations. The symbol of that association -- two interlinked circles with an off center flaming chalice -- says a great deal about the theology of Unitarian Universalists today. The two circles represent the merger of the two traditions. The use of a circle is borrowed from the Humiliati symbol. The circles symbolizes inclusiveness. The flaming chalice is borrowed from the Unitarian Service Committee established in 1940 to provide relief in Europe. Theologically inclusive, we are dedicated to service and to be an example for others.

It is difficult to define Unitarian Universalists theologically today because we are so theologically diverse. We are the most theologically diverse denomination today, and yet our name reflects the distinct theological doctrines that defined us two hundred years ago. Despite the great distance we have moved, there is an excerpt from a letter by Thomas Jefferson that is still applicable today. In his advice to his nephew, Peter Carr, Jefferson said,

[S]hake off all the fears & servile prejudices under which weak minds are servilely crouched. Fix reason firmly in her seat, and call to her tribunal every fact, every opinion. Question with boldness even the existence of a god; because, if there be one, he must more approve of the homage of reason, than that of blindfolded fear. You will naturally examine first the

religion of your own country. Read the bible then, as you would read Livy or Tacitus.

. . .

Do not be frightened from this inquiry by any fear of it's consequences. If it ends in a belief that there is no god, you will find incitements to virtue in the comfort & pleasantness you feel in it's exercise, and the love of others which it will procure you. If you find reason to believe there is a god, a consciousness that you are acting under his eye, & that he approves you, will be a vast additional incitement; if that there be a future state, the hope of a happy existence in that increases the appetite to deserve it; if that Jesus was also a god, you will be comforted by a belief of his aid and love. In fine, I repeat that you must lay aside all prejudice on both sides, & neither believe nor reject anything because any other persons, or description of persons have rejected or believed it. Your own reason is the only oracle given you by heaven, and you are answerable not for the rightness but uprightness of the decision.

Today you will find a wide variety of theologically beliefs in our churches. A Christian may sit next to a Humanist who sits next to a Buddhist who sits next to a person interested in earth based spirituality. This is possible because we do not believe a person's worth is determined by what they believe. Rather, ever person has the potential that gives them worth and dignity. The true measure of an individual is, as Martin Luther King observed, to be found in the content of his or her character – not their creeds. Therefore, we welcome all who would join with us to build a religious community founded upon covenant, freedom of conscience, and congregational polity in the belief that we are answerable not for the rightness, but the uprightness of our decisions.