

## **UU History Part 2 – UU in early America, the steppingstones**

December 6, 2009

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This is part 2 of our 4 part History of Universalism and Unitarianism. I'm focusing on roughly the 100 year period beginning around the American Revolution, with most of the emphasis on the earliest part of that period, when both a uniquely American Universalism and Unitarianism really began to blossom.

It's a great deal of ground to cover: many good stories I have no time to tell. As a representative piece of the story, I'm going to focus on a few key steppingstones, centered on two Universalists, John Murray, followed by Hosea Ballou. And Joseph Priestly, followed by William Ellery Channing, Unitarians.

In part 1, last month, Marianne Maene swept us through nearly 2000 years of early roots of two avowedly Christian traditions; albeit traditions that more mainstream Christians would denounce as heretical enough, sometimes, to lead imprisonment and even executions. Through our four-part series, we'll see, of course, those traditions evolve even further, into what some might see as the even greater heresy of a tradition that can embrace a wide range of beliefs, including unbeliefs, under one roof.

Marianne nailed it, I think, when she said there are two take-away messages early U\_\_\_ and U\_\_\_ (1) it included an impulse toward a more humane interpretation of Biblical teachings, (2) and (big time): an impulse toward thinking for ourselves, certainly an impulse that intensified during the period I'm covering, centered around the years of the Enlightenment.

As she concluded, Marianne left us with a guy on a boat. A sailing ship, really. The year is 1770. John Murray, Universalist, in despair after the death of his wife and his son, boarding a ship, “to lose myself,” as he put it, “in America.”

Murry was a preacher who had once held the Calvinist view that only an elect few would go to heaven, but the sinful majority were doomed to an eternity in hell. But he had come to embrace the radical Universalism that had taken an early root in England: a belief in salvation for everyone by a loving God. But in his despair Murray decides to leave preaching and religion behind in England as well.

So the short version of his story: he reaches America, but his ship runs aground in Barnegat Bay, a few miles north of here. The captain sends Murray ashore with a passing sloop to look for provisions. Tides shift, and the main ship leaves before Murray can return. Murray finds himself at the home of one Thomas Potter, in what is now Lanoka Harbor. Potter, it turns out, had built a small church for a scattering of local believers in Universalism to hold discussions, but had long hoped for an actual minister to appear. Potter greets Murray with “I have been expecting you a long time!” Murray resists Potter’s entreaty to preach in the little church, but eventually gives in.

Universalism was not a truly new idea in America. But Murray soon goes on to become preacher at a church in Gloucester MA, and his message of universal salvation – of HOPE rather than damnation -- is spread far and wide. By the 1990s, he has helped found the first formal Universalist denomination in the United States, which itself will flower and spread west as the new nation expands.

But there is also a relevant story of a second preacher on a ship bound for America, a little over 20 years after Murray’s journey. Marianne also mentioned this one and his

days in England: the great British scientist AND Unitarian minister, one of the founders of early Unitarianism in England. Fast friend of Benjamin Franklin, fellow experimenter with electricity, discoverer of oxygen: Joseph Priestly. By 1894, Priestly was leaving England for quite another reason than Murray: as Marianne told us, a mob had burned his house down as a consequence of a long set of grievances that included his support for the French Revolution, seen as a threat to the authority of the British king, but certainly also for his religious views, notably expressed in the publication of a two volume series called “The History of the *Corruptions* of Christianity.”

Earlier Unitarians may have rejected the notion of Jesus as an actual God, and of the related notion of a God-in-Three entities (father, son, holy ghost) Trinity.) In “Corruptions” Priestly takes a furious whack at what he sees as a cascade of distortions that had built up for centuries in Christianity, “isolating” as biographer Steven Johnson would put it, “every instance of magic and mysticism” in conventional religion. Priestly lashed out at notions like angels, saints, the mysticism of the communion Eucharist. You get the idea. (Show cartoon).

So at 61, Priestly, one of the most famous men in the world but also, as Johnson puts it, by the “the most hated man in England,” along with his wife arrives in America 1894 – and unlike the then-obscure Murray 21 years before, arrives to great fanfare.

When I began researching this piece of history, I suspected that signs of intertwining between Unitarian and Universalist strands would begin to appear at least towards the end of this century-long period. What I found is that they appeared very early.

Consider this: soon after he arrives, Priestly finds himself in the new nation's capital, which is? Yes, not D.C. but Philadelphia. Generally based on works like the *Corruptions*, he offers a series of sermons. But there is not yet a Unitarian church for the Unitarian minister to speak on: so the First Universalist church, on Lombard St. in Philly, offers him a guest pulpit.

Let's step back for a minute and think about how any of this religious ferment relates to what's going on in American life at the few decades just after the American Revolution. For most people, life isn't easy, for many downright awful. Descendants of Africans are held as outright slaves. Thousands of poorer Europeans have arrived in America indentured for periods of 5 or more years – “temporary slaves of debt,” as one historian put it. Many children are indentured out for years of unpaid work, in a largely un-mechanized world where everything, from washing clothes to building a chair is labor intensive.

But it is also the age that comes to be called the Enlightenment. Literacy has begun to rise dramatically. The costs of printing – of books and pamphlets has dropped and they proliferate. And educated people like Murray and certainly Priestly, along with many of the signers of the Declaration of Independence are products of it this age. Quick definitions of an often confounding and contradictory period are hard to come by, but let this suffice:

From scholar Dorinda Outram: the “Enlightenment was a desire for human affairs to be guided by rationality rather than by faith, superstition, or revelation; a belief in the power of human reason to change society and liberate the individual from the restraints of

custom or arbitrary authority ... a world view increasingly validated by science rather than by religion or tradition.”

Even before leaving England, Priestly has corresponded with Thomas Jefferson (who is back in Virginia during these days of Priestley’s first American sermons), and in fact it is through Priestley’s ideas that Jefferson is able to reconcile his own rationalist views with the idea of religion, and Christianity in general. (Jefferson later cobbled together his own version of the Bible, removing all reference to magic and miracle.) And would call himself a “Unitarian” although he had no U church to attend.

Jefferson, on Priestley’s arrival in 1794, is back in Virginia. But among the regulars at P’s Philly presentations is the then vice-president, and future second American president, John Adams. Just as an interesting note: Adams later confides to his wife Abigail that Priestly plans to dedicate a book based on these Philly sermons to Adams, and, as a future presidential candidate he worries that “it will get me the character of heretic.” (He later distances himself from the controversial minister. Does this have the ring of anything familiar?) (Years later, in an 1813 letter to Jefferson, Adams lays out his reasoning as to why he is both a ut and a uv).

So the first formal Uni church in America appears in Philadelphia as a direct offshoot of Priestley’s time there. But it’s really in New England that a formal Unitarian movement begins to flower in America. There ministers in several of the mainstream Congregational churches (Congregationalism itself was a Calvinist descendent of the early Puritan church) – many of these ministers graduates of Harvard – have begun urging their congregants toward liberal views of Christianity based on reason and rationalism.

In what would become one of the great touchstone Unitarian moments of the time, the Rev. William Ellery Channing delivers a sermon called “Unitarian Christianity” in 1819 at the ordination of a divinity student in Baltimore. Channing says the Bible is "a book written for men, in the language of men" whose "meaning is to be sought in the same manner as that of other books." He called for reason, not blind adherence to dogma. It's a long presentation, with his logic laid out in detail. But at the end of the day he makes four points that defined this emerging American Unitarianism. That Jesus was a man, not a god. That the Bible was open to question. That the concept of the Trinity was invalid. (paraphrased from Marilyn Sewell in “with Purpose and Principle”) And this, quoting Channing himself:

“We believe that God is infinitely good, kind, benevolent, in the proper sense of these words; good in disposition, as well as in act; good, not to a few, but to all; good to every individual...

Also says the Unitarians believe this of Jesus' role: sent to earth to teach humans how to live in goodness.

The Unitarians would break completely away from the Congregationalists. By 1925 an American Unitarian Association had been formed – unlike the Universalists who had formed a more traditional denomination, the AUA was an association of fully independent congregations. Twenty of the 25 oldest Congregational churches in New England went Unitarian, and altogether 125 congregational churches in the region joined the association.

Meanwhile, on the Universalist side, a preacher named Hosea Ballou was breaking new ground. In his 1805 Treatise on Atonement used reason to vigorously attack, once again, the Calvinist notion that a few were saved and many damned... pointing to the illogic of a displeased, wrathful God who saves only a few (maybe 10 percent, really) and then, for all the rest of us “employs his power and wisdom to make the works of his own hand a miserable as their natures will bear, for being just such creatures as he knew they would be before he made them.”

But in that same work you also see something new: Ballou weaves together the U\_ and U\_ strands “I contend that if (Christ) be the Son of God, he is the son of himself, and is his own farther. (This) is to confound good sense” And “If the Godhead consists of three distinct persons, and each of those persons be infinite, (then) the whole Godhead amounts to the amazing sum of infinity multiplied by three.” Ballou was, in other words, a Unitarian fully as well as a Universalist, and his work succeeded as the century progressed to converting most of Universalist preachers to a Unitarian – non Trinitarian--view as well. The threads were moving together.

Many prominent names left out, and so far, in a reflection of a world in which men had most of the power and agency, this has been a HIStory. I’ve left out the great love story of John Murray’s second marriage, to Judith Sargeant Murray, who would write the first American Universalist catechism: early RE materials, and become an essayist publishing some of America’s earliest tracts on women’s rights. Of the work, as the 19<sup>th</sup> century progressed, we would see the rise of social justice as a critical theme, in

Unitarian Women's suffrage leader Susan B. Anthony, as well as in the anti-slavery work of leaders like minister Theodore Parker.

We've really discussed the need for a more detailed separate message just about the movement, associated with the Unitarians, that came to be called transcendentalism, with major involvement from Ralph Waldo Emerson, son of a Unitarian minister and, until he moved on into the world of letters, Unitarian minister himself. As UUs, we like to claim the transcendentalists as our own. (Edgar Allen Poe called them "frogpondians"; the movement, which he distained, was centered around Boston – where there was indeed a frog pond in the Commons).

What exactly were the transcendentalists? The reason it confounded you so much in high school is that it was a cosmos of ideas, and very hard to define. Yes it had much to do with the power and glory of nature.

Short version: My cut on it: an intellectual rebellion against creeds, conformity, of following priests or gurus. It was virtually reverence for independence of mind. Emerson and his friend Henry David Thoreau so much as said, "don't follow me; think for yourself."

"This new generation looked at the previous generation's rebellions of the early 19th century Unitarians and Universalists against traditional Trinitarianism and against Calvinist predestinationarianism. This new generation decided that the revolutions had *not gone far enough*, and had stayed too much in the rational mode. "Corpse-cold" Emerson called the previous generation of rational



religion.” From Jone Johnson Lewis UU Minister who runs transcendentalists.com

I’ll pretty much leave you there, and leave to Michael Cluff in part 3 the continued evolution of our interweaving traditions. Except for this note: new ideas, new heresies would continue to visit the developing American shore. By the 1860s, a former Unitarian Minister named Octavius B. Frothingham was leading a group called the Free Religious Association. His own church in New York had gone rogue, so to speak, and redefined itself as an “Independent Liberal Church.” Fr... would note that he “believed that all the world’s religions were on equal footing and assumed man’s inherent spiritual nature.”

About the same time, one of America’s greatest orators, Robert Ingersoll was stirring things up. You can get the drift of his ideas by the nickname he acquired: “The Great Agnostic.” But an orator needs a podium, and according to author Susan Jacoby in her book “Freethinkers,” the usual venue for the Gr. Agn.. was in Universalist churches of the day.

Radical stuff. Change was in the air.