

In Whom Do We Have Faith?

Like T.W., I was raised in a very different religious environment, Episcopalian, not 5 miles from where T.W. attended the Greek Orthodox church in Cleveland. I left the church as a teenager when I could no longer accept the dubious assertions, contrary to reason. Fifteen years later, I was introduced to the UU church and thus began a long, evolving examination of what I was committed to, what I believed in, what I had faith in.

Last week I explored the evolving definition of the words "faith" and "belief." We saw how in Greek, the original language of the New Testament, and later in Latin, faith meant to trust, to have loyalty, to be committed to. We saw how even when the word "belief" was substituted in the King James Bible, the first English translation of the scripture, the meaning did not change substantially. Belief in 1611 meant something different. It did not mean to accept a dubious assertion, contrary to reason. It meant "loyalty to a person to whom one is bound in promise or duty."ⁱ, as when a parent believes in her child.

For Jesus, faith meant that his disciples have loyalty and trust in him, trust themselves and trust in the power of faith to "move mountains." He also expected his followers to have trust in God their father, as one would expect of a Jewish teacher, healer and mystic in Palestine 2000 years ago. What Jesus did not ask, according to many Biblical scholars, was that his followers accept that he was God incarnate. These scholars do not think Jesus thought this of himself.

I left us last week on the cusp of the development of the Unitarian and Universalist denominations in America in the 1700's. What did faith mean to them. How did their thinking evolve?

First, to be clear, Unitarianism and Universalism in America were largely home grown. Our Unitarianism did not evolve from the Unitarianism of Europe, particularly Transylvania. Universalism was introduced by English immigrant John Murray, but evolved extensively for Murray and later Universalists.

As I tried to tease out what faith and belief meant to our Unitarian and Universalist forebears in the 18th and 19th centuries, I began to realize that this project could be a doctoral thesis, one that I am unprepared to write. The meaning of faith and belief were evolving, as we saw last week. Beginning in the 17th century, "belief" in the scientific community was disparagingly used to describe acceptance of an often dubious proposition. This definition caught on more slowly in religious usage, but by the mid-1800's, it was widespread. It's not clear to me when "faith" became more or less synonymous with this definition of belief, but that is where we find ourselves now.

My answer to this conundrum of shifting definitions is to try to describe the shifting theology of our history without using the words faith and belief. But first, we must be aware of where they started.

"The New England Congregational Church, originating with the Puritans, [and before that with John Calvin], was the dominant religion [of the American colonies.] The orthodox theologians of the church still clung to the idea of original sin, the depravity of humans and predestination. This latter was the belief that only a portion of humankind would be saved, and this had been predetermined by God from the beginning."ⁱⁱⁱ

Here are some highlights of how Unitarians and Universalists took exception to and changed that theology. First, the Unitarians.

The Great Awakening swept New England in the 1740's and encouraged heart knowledge over head knowledge. In response, early Unitarian Charles Chauncy argued three points. 1) Logic and reason were critical in theology; 2) the Bible was the word of God, but required critical and historical analysis; 3) moral aspiration, by which is meant "character building and self-cultivation" (p13), is the focal point of the Christian religion.ⁱⁱⁱ

In 1819, Unitarian William Ellery Channing gave his famous 13,000 word sermon "Unitarian Christianity." (aside: my sermons are usually about 1800 words.) He claimed the descriptor "Unitarian" that had been pinned on the liberal ministers of the Northeast. His sermon was not about the reality of God. This was a given among most Unitarians. The sermon was about the nature of God: was God judgmental or was God forgiving. It was [about] the nature of humankind: were we born in sin, were we subject to eternal damnation or could we, through good works, achieve forgiveness. And finally, on the Trinity: it wasn't a question of whether or not Jesus was divine. Jesus was considered divine [by both religious conservatives and liberals]; it was a question of whether Jesus was equivalent with God, part of a Trinity, sitting at the right hand of God the Father, or whether Jesus was some lesser divine being.^{iv}

As the 19th century progressed, however, the Unitarians gradually drifted away from biblicism, or the divine origin of the Bible, and the divinity of Jesus.^v Movements under the Unitarian umbrella that shook things up included the Transcendentalists of the 1830's and the Free Church Movement of 1860's and 70's. Notable spokespersons included Ralph Waldo Emerson and Margaret Fuller, an early feminist and close friend and intellectual equal of Emerson. Her life was tragically cut short when she died in a ship wreck. Famed abolitionist Theodore Parker published "The Transient and the Permanent in Christianity" in 1841. Later seminal works included Henry Bellows "The Suspense of Faith" in 1859; Reason in Religion" by Frederic Hedge in 1865; and Octavius Frothingham's "The Religion of Humanity" in 1873. This latter work argued "in a thoroughly nonsupernaturalistic way that God worked 'in and through human nature.'"^{vi} Near the end of the century, in 1894, the Unitarian denomination unanimously adopted a declaration that they were noncreedal, meaning that there were no set beliefs to which one had to ascribe to call oneself Unitarian.^{vii}

The early 1900's saw the rise of the humanist movement in Unitarianism, "an attempt to reformulate liberal theology on completely nontheistic grounds." The debate, led by Curtis Reese

and John Dietrich, caught fire in the denomination and echoes still reverberate today.^{viii} For much of the 20th century, humanism was the predominant theology within Unitarianism. James Luther Adams countered in the 1930's. Quoting David Robinson from his book "The Unitarians and the Universalists," "Wary of the overly facile belief in human dignity and ultimate human progress that had marked liberalism from its inception, Adams called for a revival of liberal religious principles that would focus on a recognition of the 'tragedy' of human life and human progress and the necessity of active 'commitment' to which such a recognition of tragedy must lead."^{ix} Adams work was influential, but never caught on in the same way that humanism did.

We switch gears now to look at how Universalist thinking evolved.

In 1770, Universalist John Murray arrived on the shores of New Jersey and began preaching universal salvation, a radical notion for which he had been driven out of England. Remember, for the Calvinists, humans were depraved and only a select few would be "saved." Murray's message was a popular one, although he was not popular among the Unitarians. This likely had more to do class than with theology. Murray was an itinerant preacher, not part of the religious establishment. Those attracted to his preaching did not include the wealthy, well educated merchant class of New England.

By 1803, the Universalists had formed a national association and published the "Winchester Profession of Faith." The three major tenets of the profession were: 1) that the Bible was the revealed word of God; 2) eventual salvation was a certainty for all; and 3) doing good works was a moral imperative.^x

The Universalists were closely identified with universal salvation in the early 1800's, a radical notion, but were still theologically more conservative than the Unitarians in other ways. They still subscribed to biblical authority and the centrality of Jesus and his atonement on the cross to save humankind, as laid out in the Winchester Profession of Faith.

Hosea Ballou's influence was seminal in the first half of the century. His "Treatise on Atonement," published in 1805, was a frontal attack on Calvinism, much more so than Murray. Over his long ministry, Ballou came gradually to the opinion that there would be no punishment after death, but rather that one paid for one's sins in this life.^{xi}

By the time of their national conference in 1870, Universalist thinking had evolved beyond universal salvation. "They were beginning to see that *Universalist* could denote the universal community of all men and women and the necessity of working toward the secular realization of that community through peace and justice on earth," says Robinson.^{xii}

The move toward a much broader universalism continued, along with the commitment to social justice. In 1917 the Universalist General Convention adapted the "Declaration of Social Principles and Social Progress, written by Clarence Skinner. Going well beyond a rejection of "inherent depravity," it declared "that mankind is led into sin by evil surroundings, by the evils of

unjust social and economic conditions." It stated that democracy is "not only an inherent right, but also a divinely imposed duty." A long list of social recommendations included equal rights for women, prohibition, "democratization of industry and land," guaranteed free speech, "some form of social insurance," and work toward a world federation.^{xiii} One hears an early version of our seven principles.

In 1961 the Unitarians and Universalists merged. A mid-1960's survey of 80 congregations and more than 12,000 questionnaires reveal some interesting, but not surprising, things about who we are and what we are committed to. We are uncomfortable with traditional terms of Christian religion. Think prayer, worship, faith and belief. Views on God were all over the map, from God being a harmful concept to irrelevant to "the ground of all being." Only a tiny percentage believed in a supernatural being; only ten percent in immortality. Three quarters thought that modern science strengthens liberal religion. We were firmly oriented toward social action and political change and were almost unanimous in our affirmation of human progress. While in many ways this survey probably still does a good job of describing UU's, I wonder whether as many of us now accept the inevitability of human progress.

After all of that history, in whom do we believe? In whom do we trust? To whom do we have loyalty? Like those UU's of the 1960's, a survey of this congregation, conducted four years ago, shows that we struggle with the God word. However, we trust in each other and in the inherent worth and dignity of all humans, all beings. We are loyal to democratic process. We support each other in our faith journeys. We are committed to justice and the power of social action. We trust the importance of reason while standing in awe of the beauty and improbability of creation and life. We trust in the power of love and compassion to heal and change our lives and the world around us.

So may it be.

ⁱ Karen Armstrong, *The Case for God*. 87

ⁱⁱ Bryan Plude, *From Calvin to Emerson*, March 26, 2016.

ⁱⁱⁱ David Robinson, *The Unitarians and the Universalists* 10, as quoted in Bryan Plude, *From Calvin to Emerson*.

^{iv} Robinson, as referenced in Plude, *From Calvin to Emerson*.

^v David Robinson, *The Unitarians and the Universalists*, Greenwood Press, Westport Connecticut, 1985. 5

^{vi} Robinson, 6

^{vii} Robinson, 7

^{viii} Robinson, 7

^{ix} Robinson, 7-8

^x Robinson, 4

^{xi} Robinson, various

^{xii} Robinson, 6

^{xiii} Robinson, 140