

FAITH LIKE A RIVER

WORKSHOP 9: Rise in the Sea -- Unitarianism

This workshop explores the unique identity of Unitarianism through key people and events from its history. We will trace the history of theological and institutional Unitarianism, highlighting important turning points.

Participants will become familiar with key events that defined Unitarianism as a theology and an institution. They will learn about the lives and contributions of some important Unitarians of the past.

This document includes four stories and three handouts:

Stories

1. The Baltimore Sermon
2. The Dedham Case
3. The Iowa Sisterhood
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Handouts

1. The Almighty Love
2. Defining Moments
3. Remembering the Iowa Sisterhood

STORY 1: THE BALTIMORE SERMON

William Ellery Channing was weary of having the epithet "Unitarian" flung at him in disdain. Ever since Henry Ware had been elected to the Hollis Professorship of Divinity at Harvard College, the temperature of public debate between orthodox and liberal factions of New England's Standing Order Churches had risen.

Many theological points were at issue. The turn to liberalism in New England churches had begun with the unitarian notion of the singular, or unitary, nature of God, antithetical to the trinitarian understanding of God as three: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But soon the debate widened. Was God a benevolent and loving presence that wanted the best for all humanity, or, as in Calvinist orthodoxy, a wrathful and exacting God? *That* debate called into question the orthodox idea of the elect, the notion that some are saved and others damned. Soon the orthodox/liberal controversy encompassed not only the nature of God, but also the nature of Jesus; was Jesus fully divine, or fully human, or partly each? Religious people debated the question of human nature—were humans good, and capable of distinguishing right and wrong, as the liberals believed; or, as in the orthodox view, were humans depraved, and captive to sin? And reason—where did that fit in? The orthodox insisted that the Bible alone was the valid basis for religious knowledge, while liberals maintained that the use of God-given reason and conscience was needed along with revelation. With Ware's election in 1805 to head Harvard College, the liberals had taken control of the seminary which was the primary training ground of New England's ministers. This caused great dismay among those of more orthodox beliefs.

By 1812, the young William Ellery Channing became the *de facto* leader of the Boston liberals following the untimely death of leading liberal Joseph Buckminster. Channing preached about a benevolent, loving God who had endowed humanity with innate goodness, rationality, and the wisdom to discern between good and evil. In a sermon delivered at the ordination of Jared Sparks in 1819 at the new liberal church in Baltimore, Maryland,

Channing decided to snatch the label of Unitarian from those who would degrade it and to claim it proudly as his own. His address, "Unitarian Christianity," stands as a hallmark of Unitarian history. As David Parke writes:

The "Baltimore sermon" gave the Unitarians a platform and a spokesman. It placed them for the first time on the offensive in relation to the orthodox. It was very probably the most important Unitarian sermon ever preached anywhere.

In the hour-and-a-half-long address, Channing took on two tasks. First, he established reason as valid and necessary for the interpretation of scripture—not as the only basis for religious belief, but as an aid to revelation, for reading and understanding the meaning of the Bible.

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... With these views of the Bible, we feel it our bounden duty to exercise our reason upon it perpetually; to compare, to infer, to look beyond the letter to the spirit...

Having set the stage for biblical interpretation, Channing's second task was to lay out four reason-based conclusions of Unitarian Christians. He began with the unity of God, as opposed to the doctrine of the Trinity. Next, he postulated Christ as fully human, as opposed to having two natures, human and divine. Then he spoke of the moral perfection of God, which negated such doctrines as Original Sin and the eternal suffering of some while others were elected to salvation.

Channing's fourth point was about the purpose of Jesus' mission on earth. He rejected the idea that Jesus' death atoned for human sin, allowing God to forgive humanity. Channing admitted Unitarians differed on Jesus' role in human salvation. Some, he said, saw Jesus' life as a moral example. Others understood Jesus' death leading humans to repentance and virtue. Yet, he said, Unitarians did not consider Christ and his death as a blood

atonement for human sin. Channing's fifth and final point was that Christian virtue had its foundation in the moral nature or conscience of humans, defined by love of God, love of Christ, and moral living.

Far from settling the simmering arguments, Channing's Baltimore Sermon brought them to a full boil. The Unitarian Controversy raged over the next quarter century. New England's churches continued to split along theological lines, and, within two decades of Channing's fateful sermon, one-quarter of Massachusetts' Standing Order churches became openly Unitarian. Other Unitarian leaders added defining voices to the movement, but Channing's Baltimore Sermon remains a key turning point in Unitarian Universalist history.

STORY 2: THE DEDHAM CASE

It wasn't the first of the Standing Order churches to split, but it sure made the biggest bang.

In Puritan New England, each town was organized around its church. The members of the *church* were those who made a confession of Christian faith, while members of the *parish* were those who lived in the town and paid the poll tax that supported the church, but hadn't had a religious experience of conversion in the church. Reflecting this two-tier arrangement, the minister was the spiritual leader of the church as well as the teacher of public morals to the townspeople. These were the Standing Order churches—church and parish in the same institution, with a religious leader and public preacher in the same person.

In Dedham, Massachusetts, a controversy about theology became an ecclesiastical, political, and legal battle—one of the first to challenge the Standing Order system. In 1818, the Dedham parish invited Alvin Lamson to be its candidate for the ministry. A majority of the church members, being orthodox, rejected Lamson's liberal views. They voted their refusal to have him as minister. By custom, the church members decided who the minister would be, but in Dedham, the parish—which was more liberal than the church membership—went ahead and called Lamson as the minister.

The church members weren't going to stand for that. So they left, taking the church records, the communion silver, and the financial assets with them. That's when Deacon Baker—of the liberal camp in the church membership—sued Deacon Fales—of the orthodox camp—for the return of all the church property. Fales and the church majority claimed that the assets were the property of the church, and since the majority of the church was leaving, the assets were theirs to take. Baker and the liberal church minority maintained that the assets belonged to the parish, and as the parish majority was staying put, they would like all their assets returned.

The liberal minority prevailed. A jury ruled that according to the law, the church was built and run at the parish's expense for the benefit of the whole parish, and the minister worked for the benefit of the whole parish. Therefore, the parish owned the assets, and what's more, the parish had the right to call the minister. Some cried "foul," noting that the presiding judge, Isaac Parker, was himself a Unitarian. But when all the appeals were finally over in 1821, the ruling stood.

The decision rocked the Standing Order churches, many of which had already started to come apart. In some towns, a liberal minority left to establish a new church. In others, an orthodox minority left to found a congregation of their own. The reverberations went on for decades, with a quarter of Massachusetts Standing Order Congregational churches becoming Unitarian within the next twenty years. Three of the churches chose to become neither Unitarian nor Congregational, but Universalist.

STORY 3: THE IOWA SISTERHOOD

Some of the first women ordained in the United States were Universalist or Unitarian. At the turn of the 21st century, a majority of Unitarian Universalist ministers were women. However, the path for women ministers in our faith tradition has not been easy. Of those early women who achieved ordination, few were allowed to serve in full-time ministries. Others were relegated to small, struggling parishes or assistant positions alongside their clergy husbands.

Despite the lack of encouragement, at the end of the 19th century a group of extraordinary women claimed their role as ordained ministers. Following the Women's Ministerial Conference organized by Julia Ward Howe in 1875, 21 Unitarian women founded the Iowa Sisterhood to serve churches throughout the Great Plains. Life was hard in the Plains states, with little glory to be earned by bringing liberal religion to the settlers of the area. Few male scholars from the seminaries of the East were attracted to the life. But if the Plains were beyond the recognition of an Eastern religious hierarchy, they were also remote from that hierarchy's rules and control. It was a place where women were accepted for their willingness to step in and serve, for their tenacity in the face of hardship, and for their ministry.

Perhaps one reason for the success of the Iowa Sisterhood was the non-academic, pastoral approach these women brought to their churches. They sought to make their churches extensions of the domestic hearth, thereby expanding the traditional role of women beyond the home and into the church. The Sisterhood brought family matters into the church not only on Sundays, but seven days a week, with social events and classes on domestic arts.

Although Jenkin Lloyd Jones, leader of the Western Conference, was a staunch ally of the Iowa Sisterhood, the grassroots Western success of these women and their churches did not translate into wider denominational acceptance. The women were seen as an embarrassment among the clergy back in Boston. By the turn of the 20th century, society in

general experienced a reassertion of male authority. Unitarianism's leaders began a concerted return to a more manly ministry in order to revitalize the denomination. The move of rural populations to the cities further undermined the Sisterhood's efforts and congregations.

Most of the women ministers were rushed into retirement. Others left to pursue work in peace, suffrage, and social work movements. Yet they remained vocal to the end about the rights of women and the place of church in society. It was not a large movement, nor was it long-lasting. The Iowa Sisterhood did not radically alter the possibilities for women in Unitarian ministry. But in its time and place, it was a shining vision of women called to minister and men called to support their work.

STORY 4: UNITARIAN SUMMER — THE ISLES OF SHOALS

Excerpted and adapted from Frederick T. McGill, Jr. and Virginia F. McGill, *Something Like a Star* (Boston: Star Island Corporation, 1989). Used with permission.

In July of 1896, Thomas H. Elliot of Lowell, Massachusetts, brought his wife to the Oceanic Hotel, on Star Island, one island in the Isles of Shoals located off the coast of New Hampshire. The Oceanic was a grand wooden summer resort hotel operated by Cedric and Oscar Laighton, but its operation was suffering from the changing recreational habits of their New England clientele who were increasingly opting for mainland resorts with more amenities and better access. This was the Elliots' first stay at the Shoals. They typically attended the North Middlesex Unitarian Conference meetings at the Weirs in New Hampshire. But Mrs. Elliot had been unwell, and hoped that the sea air would revitalize her. Many years after that first visit, Mr. Elliot recalled a conversation he had the day after arriving at Star Island with the hotel manager, Harry Marvin:

Mr. Marvin: How are you enjoying yourself, Mr. Elliot?

Mr. Elliot: Fine. This place suits me. It is after my own heart. There is only one thing that would improve it for me.

Mr. Marvin: What is that?

Mr. Elliot: There are some meetings going on at The Weirs that I value very much. If only we had them here, I should be as near heaven as possible.

Mr. Marvin: Meetings? What kind of meetings?

Mr. Elliot: Religious meetings.

Mr. Marvin: Well, why can't we have those meetings down here?

Mr. Elliot: (You see, he was looking for business, and was very hungry for it. We were paying 3-dollar a day apiece — a pretty good rate for those days.) In the first place, we could hardly pay your rates.

Mr. Marvin: What do you pay at The Weirs?

Mr. Elliot: We get a pretty comfortable fare for 10 dollars a week.

Mr. Marvin: I couldn't make any such rate as that.

(After thinking a bit). Mr. Elliot, suppose we could make you a 10-dollar rate. Do you think you could bring those meetings down here?

Mr. Elliot: (I looked around and took in the beauty of the situation. It was marvelous.) Mr. Marvin, if you will make me a 10-dollar rate here for next year, at both the Oceanic and the Appledore, I will fill them to the ridgepoles. (And then, with more courage than was wise, as I think of it now, I added) I'll go further. I will come under bonds to fill both your hotels to the ridgepoles, if you will make me a rate of 10 dollars a week.

Mr. Marvin: I'll talk it over with the Laightons and see what I can do. I'll do the best I can, for I want you to come.

Another source records Harry Marvin's conversation with Oscar Laighton, co-owner of the hotels. Laighton is reported to have said, "I told him we must act with caution. What is a Unitarian? Are they good people? It won't do to introduce any rough element." Marvin apparently replied that he did not know just exactly what a Unitarian was, but, judging from the Elliots, he would say that they were very nice, harmless people.

Marvin and Elliot prevailed, and, perhaps because of the financial incentive, perhaps because of the Elliots' enthusiasm, or perhaps it was just the right time, 610 people registered for, as it was advertised, "Unitarian Summer Meetings at the Isles of Shoals, ten miles at sea—10 dollars per week," six times the usual attendance at the Weirs. In fact, "one or two late applicants had to be turned away because a couple of Appledore employees had already given up their rooms to guests and were sleeping on cots in bathrooms."

Reminiscing about that first conference thirty-five years later, Thomas Elliot said, "The enthusiasm of that first year has never, I think, been quite equaled... Given 610 people of one mind and one purpose, and something was bound to happen, and did happen. I cannot but think that life that season on that sublime island was more like heaven than any other similar experience on this broad earth."

HANDOUT 1: THE ALMIGHTY LOVE

From Eugene B. Navias, *Singing Our History*
(Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1975).

The lyrics of "The Almighty Love" were written by Theodore Parker (1810-1860). In 1841, early in his ministry, Parker preached a controversial sermon, "The Transient and the Permanent in Christianity." Eugene Navias summarizes the sermon:

Parker considered the transient elements of Christianity to be miracles, revelations, creeds and doctrines; and the permanent elements to be in the moral sense within the hearts of good persons. Any truths which are in the teachings of Jesus are there because they meet the practical tests of life, not because of the outward authority of Jesus, the Bible, the church, or creeds.

Soon after controversy erupted over the sermon, Parker was invited to become the minister of the Twenty-eighth Congregational Society (Unitarian) in Boston, which came eventually to meet in Boston's Music Hall, where Parker spoke weekly to congregations of up to 3,000 people. The hymn "The Almighty Love," written in 1864, reveals Parker's understanding of the nature of God.

Lyrics: Theodore Parker, 1864

Music: Transylvania L.M., 16th Century Hungarian Melody, or Old Hundredth L.M. (commonly known as the Doxology)

In darker days, and nights of storm,

Men knew Thee but to fear Thy form,

And in the reddest lightnings saw

Thine arm avenge insulted law.

In brighter days we read Thy love

In flowers beneath, in stars above;

And, in the track of every storm,
Behold Thy beauty's rainbow form.
Even in the reddest lightning's path
We see no vestiges of wrath,
But always Wisdom, —perfect Love,
From flowers below to stars above.
See, from on high sweet influence rains
On palace, cottage, mountains, plains;
No hour of wrath shall mortals fear,
For the Almighty Love is here.

HANDOUT 2: DEFINING MOMENTS

SECTION 1: Arius's Letter to Eusebius (319 C.E.)

But what is it that we say and believe, and that we have taught and teach? That the Son is not uncreated or any part of an uncreated being, or made of anything previously existent. He was brought into being by the will and counsel (of God), before time and before the ages, as unbegotten God in the fullest sense, and unalterable; and before he was begotten, created, determined or established, he did not exist. But we are persecuted because we have said, "The Son has a beginning, but God is without beginning" We are also persecuted because we have said, "He is made from nothing." But we have so said because he is not a part of God or made from any thing previously existent. It is for this reason we are persecuted; the rest you know.

SECTION 2: Faustus Socinus, the Racovian Catechism (1605)

What are the things relating to his Person, which I ought to know?

This one particular alone,—that by nature he was truly a man; a mortal man while he lived on earth, but now immortal.

SECTION 3: John Biddle, *His Confession of Faith Touching the Holy Trinity* (1648)

article iii. I believe, That Jesus Christ, to the intent that he might be our Brother, and have a Fellow-feeling of our Infirmities, and so become the more ready to help us, (the consideration whereof, is the greatest Encouragement to Piety that can be imagined) hath no other than a Human Nature, and therefore in this very Nature is not only a Person (since none but a Human Person can be our Brother), but also our Lord, yea our God.

article iv. Whence, though he be our God, by reason of his Divine Sovereignty over us, and Worship due to such Sovereignty, yet he is not the most high God, the same with the Father, but subordinate to him.

SECTION 4: Jonathan Mayhew, *Seven Sermons* (1749)

Thus it appears that a regard to our own interest ought to put us upon examining and judging for ourselves religious concerns. The same thing might be argued for the faculty of reason itself, which is common to all. If we suppose an intelligent author of our nature, who had some design in giving us our present constitution, it is plain that his end in endowing us with faculties proper for the investigating of truth and right, was, that we should exercise them in this way.

SECTION 5: William Ellery Channing, *Baltimore Sermon*, 1819

We do, then, with all earnestness, though without reproaching our brethren, protest against the irrational and unscriptural doctrine of the Trinity...

"To us," as to the Apostle and the primitive Christians, "there is one God, even the Father." With Jesus, we worship the Father, as the only living and true God. We are astonished, that any man can read the New Testament, and avoid the conviction, that the Father alone is God. We hear our Saviour continually appropriating this character to the Father. We find the Father continually distinguished from Jesus by this title... "God sent his Son." "God anointed Jesus." Now, how singular and inexplicable is this phraseology, which fills the New Testament, if this title belong equally to Jesus, and if a principal object of this book is to reveal him as God, as partaking equally with the Father in supreme divinity! We challenge our opponents to adduce one passage in the New Testament where the word God means three persons, where it is not limited to one person, and where, unless turned from its usual sense by the connexion, it does not mean the Father. Can stronger proof be given that the doctrine of three persons in the Godhead is not a fundamental doctrine of Christianity?

HANDOUT 3: REMEMBERING THE IOWA SISTERHOOD

The words "Great Over-Soul and Inter-Heart" were written by Mary Safford (1895) and edited by Eugene B. Navias to be sung to the tune Duke Street L.M., Hymn 35 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.

Ministers of the Iowa Sisterhood

Mary Augusta Safford
Eleanor Gordon
Florence Buck
Mary Collson
Caroline Julia Bartlett Crane
Adele Fuchs
Marie Jenney Howe
Ida Hultin
Mary Leggett
Rowena Morse Mann
Mila Tupper Maynard
Amelia Murdock Wing
Marion Murdock
Anna Jane Norris
Margaret Titus Olmstead
Elizabeth Padgham
Gertrude Von Petzhold
Helen Grace Putnam
Eliza Tupper Wilkes
Helen Wilson
Celia Parker Woolley

Hymn: Great Over-Soul and Inter-Heart

Great Over-Soul and Inter-Heart,
Of whom we feel ourselves a part,
To whom all souls forever tend,
Our Father, Mother, nearest Friend.
This church with love to thee we bring,
And while our spirits inly* sing,
We pray that it may ever be
A Home for all who seek for thee.
The home of faith in all things true,
A faith that seeks the larger view,
The home of love that yearns to bless.
The home of truth and righteousness.
Long may it stand, the outward sign
Of that indwelling Life divine,
Which makes thy children truly free,
And draws them ever nearer thee.

*The word "inly" was in common usage in Mary Safford's day and means inwardly, intimately, thoroughly.