

“Stories from the U.U. Canon: What You Have to Know”

Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley

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Opening Words

Dan Cozort

Like many of you, I’m a newbie to Unitarian Universalism. I go back to 1994, when what would become this congregation was a group that met monthly at the Friends Meeting House. I knew almost nothing about UU and was attracted to it not by what it was, but by what it wasn’t. I thought of it as a blank canvas on which our little group could paint whatever it liked.

Slowly, and to be honest, somewhat reluctantly, I’ve learned a little about the history of the two movements that merged fifty years ago to become the UUA. It is studded with fascinating figures, some famous and some not.

One way to view this history is to consider it a key to who we are — how we UUs got here, and why we are the way we are. That’s particularly true for those among us who have grown up in this tradition.

For the rest of us, this history gives us a chance to finally forge an identity. I have to admit that when I meet new people, or when for the first time I tell someone I know about my UU involvement, I still tend to describe us as a blank canvas. I say that we are a moral community of spiritual seekers; that we use the form of church but do what we want with it; that we take freely from the spiritual traditions of the world without making a commitment to any of them.

What I don’t do, but from now on intend to do, is to identify my religion as one with a great liberal tradition — one that stood up for individual conscience, one that opposed oppression, one that works toward peace and reconciliation.

Today we are presenting some stories from our tradition, ones that exemplify this great liberal tradition. These are the stories of men and women with whom we should be pleased to be associated, who give us a foundation for what we would like our religion to be today and tomorrow.

Stories from the U.U. Canon

16th Century: Michael Servetus

As I contemplate our last six months as your ministers, it’s difficult not to think about the legacy we will be leaving behind. Not “What will Duane and I be remembered for?” but rather “What have we left with you that is solid as a rock and will endure?”

Of course the most rock-solid UU’s you could possibly be would be as people who live your values and proclaim your Unitarian Universalism in your words and your ways. But there’s more to it. Not only do you have to know *who you are* as a UU and *be*

a UU; you have to know who you *were* so that you can stand on solid ground. Today Dan and I want to tell you some your history again, even though you might have heard it before. I want you to be firm in your knowledge of your own story, knowing it as thoroughly as Jew knows the Passover story or a Hindu knows the stories of the Ramayana. Of course there's no way to cover it all this morning, so we chose four examples of UU history and identity to give you some hooks to hang your history on.

We have a long proud history. Don't ever let anyone think that we're some fly-by-night trend; we've been around! Some would claim (and I am one of them) that Jesus was clearly a Universalist. But many U.U. historians date our ascension and visibility to a time of great religious fervor, the Protestant Reformation of the 16th and 17th centuries, and that is where I'd like to begin this morning, with Michael Servetus.

Servetus bears the questionable distinction of having been executed twice for his religious beliefs, once by the Calvinists and later, in effigy, by the Catholics. We can't legitimately claim him as a Unitarian; he actually was a Catholic with a lot of questions, although aspects of his theology — for example, his rejection of the doctrine of original sin — did influence those who later founded unitarian churches in Poland and Transylvania. But his martyrdom at the stake in 1553 for his anti-trinitarian beliefs is now interpreted as the beginning of a movement for religious freedom in Europe, a movement which ultimately became much more important to us Unitarian Universalists than his heretical religious theories.

The fact that we have a Spanish hero in our history is of considerable interest to the growing number of Hispanic Americans who are becoming attracted to our faith now. Miguel Servet was born in Aragon, Spain sometime around 1510. As a young student, he read the Bible, which the invention of the printing press had made newly and dangerously available. He was surprised to find the trinity nowhere explicitly mentioned in the sacred text.

In the service of a well-placed monk, Servetus became associated with the Court of the Emperor Charles V, a close ally of the Pope, where he quickly became disgusted by the riches of the church, the adoration accorded the Pope, and the worldliness of the priesthood.

He was quite a thorn in the side of the court with his insistence on theological dispute, eventually leaving the emperor's entourage and moving to the more tolerant city of Strasbourg, where in 1531 he published *De Trinitatis Erroribus (On the Errors of the Trinity)*.

Now think about this — how brash can you get? Publishing a book during a time of tremendous religious turmoil whose title claims that the foundational organizing doctrine of Christianity is an error? Of course he came to the attention of both the Catholic Inquisition, which was desperate to preserve the power and privilege of the Catholic church, and of the Protestants, who had no desire to call upon themselves still more Catholic denunciation.

So Servetus did what any smart fugitive would do — he went into the Witness Protection Program, moving to Paris under an assumed name and eventually developing a new career as a physician. We can thank Michael Servetus, under his pseudonym of Michel de Villeneuve, for the first accurate recording of pulmonary respiration and the circulation of blood through the lungs.

But he couldn't shake his conviction that *he was right* in his religious beliefs. He began a secret correspondence with John Calvin, who was by now the most prestigious figure in the Reform branch of Protestantism, sending him in 1546 the as-yet unpublished manuscript of his major theological treatise, *Christianismi Restitutio (The Restoration of Christianity)*. Calvin responded by sending Servetus a manuscript of his own, which Servetus returned to Calvin with “abusive annotations” written in the margins.

Outraged and insulted, Calvin betrayed Servetus's true identity to the Catholic Inquisition in France, which arrested and interrogated him, but Servetus managed to escape. He was probably headed for northern Italy, but he passed through Geneva on his way, where he was recognized while attending a Protestant church service. He was arrested and tried for heresy by Protestant authorities. Although Calvin requested a “merciful beheading,” the Church Council of Geneva insisted that he be burned at the stake with his book strapped to his thigh.

Spectators were impressed by the tenacity of Servetus' faith. Perishing in the flames, he is said to have cried out, “O Jesus, Son of the Eternal God, have pity on me!” Those who witnessed the execution observed that Servetus might have been saved had he but called upon “Jesus, the Eternal Son of God” instead. A few months later Servetus was again executed, this time in effigy, by the Catholic Inquisition in France.¹

I always think of Michael Servetus when I sing our next hymn, with its stirring words “Faith of the free! In thy dear name, the costly heritage we claim: their living and their dying.”

18th to 19th Centuries: William Ellery Channing

No one person can rightfully be called “the father of American Unitarianism” — our development as a faith was far too interwoven and complex for that. But clearly William Ellery Channing was one of those fathers, a minister of high reputation and historical significance who also was passionate about children's religious education, the pastoral needs of his congregation, and the kind of personal development that could be explored in small discussion groups at the church — precursors of our Small Group Ministries today.

Any UU minister worth her salt could preach five sermons about Channing without repeating herself — he was that important and influential. But since our topic today is “what you absolutely must know,” I'll stick with what most would consider his

¹ *The Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography*, <http://www25-temp.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/michaelservetus.html>

most significant contribution to our faith, the Baltimore Sermon. In this ordination sermon titled “Unitarian Christianity,” delivered in Baltimore on May 25, 1819, Channing put a positive spin on contemporary criticism of liberal Christianity, named it Unitarian with a capital U, and essentially created a new denomination.

Before Channing’s time, two generations of theological liberals had rejected New England Calvinism and rewritten Christian theology to conform to the rational doctrines and tolerant spirit of the Age of Reason. Channing, the highly respected minister of the Federal Street Church in Boston, was just the right preacher, at the right time and place, to formalize these doctrines of the “liberal Christians,” as they called themselves, and proudly claim the name Unitarian.

It was no accident that his address took place in Baltimore, 400 miles away from Boston. Many of the prominent Boston clergy who shared Channing’s convictions traveled to participate in the ordination of Jared Sparks, the first minister of the newly-formed First Independent Church of Baltimore. And they preached along the way, in New York, where a Unitarian church soon resulted, and in Philadelphia, where a struggling Unitarian church inspired by Joseph Priestley had been in existence for some years. Thus Channing’s sermon took on dual significance: it signified the willingness of the liberals to accept their own distinctive theological and ecclesiastical position at home, and it also declared their intention to carry the gospel of liberal Christianity to other parts of the land.²

In his sermon, Channing said that the Bible was “a book written for men, in the language of men” and limited by the culture that produced it. He defended the use of reason in religion, introducing principles of Biblical scholarship — such as linguistics and historical context — at a time when Scripture was assumed to be the inerrant Word of God.

He also exposed some of the doctrines derived from the Bible which “distinguish us from other Christians.” Among these were the unity of God (non-trinitarian), the unity of Christ (no dual nature) and the moral perfection of God, whose infinite goodness, justice and mercy manifest his concern for the virtue and happiness of human beings — in contrast to the Calvinist doctrines of original sin, human depravity and the election of only a few for salvation. Here we see already the common theological understandings of the Unitarians with the Universalists.

As he launched into his hour-and-a-half sermon, Channing said “God deliver us all from prejudice and unkindness, and fill us with the love of truth and virtue.” I would ask the same of all of us today.

Reading

The Arc of the Moral Universe
Theodore Parker (1810 – 1860)

² Wright, Conrad, ed., *Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism: Channing, Emerson, Parker*, Unitarian Universalist Association, 1986, p. 10

In 1853, Unitarian minister Theodore Parker preached a sermon that contained words often quoted more than a century later by Martin Luther King, Jr. Predicting the success of the abolitionist cause, Parker said:

I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice.

In August 2010, President Barack Obama's Oval Office was remodeled and a new beige carpet installed. It is bordered by five quotes, two of which originate with Theodore Parker—the Martin Luther King shortened version of this quote and one that became part of Lincoln's Gettysburg address, calling for our government to be one “of all the people, by all the people, for all the people.”

19th Century: The Abolitionists

Dan Cozort

Unitarians were in the thick of social movements in the 19th century — voting rights for women, education for all, better treatment of the mentally ill and so on. But slavery was by far the most divisive issue. Over the course of the first sixty years of the century, the movement to abolish slavery grew ever stronger and more radical, and eventually the nation was engulfed in a terrible civil war.

Many New England abolitionist leaders were Unitarians. One of the first anti-slavery tracts was written in 1833 by Lydia Maria Child, who called it “An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans.” This remarkable woman, a journalist and novelist and student of world religions, is best known for her poem, “Over the River and Through the Woods,” that we like to sing at Thanksgiving. Her tract asserted that slavery contradicted Christian teachings and degraded slaves and owners alike. She considered the North complicit in the system. At this early time, most people were not ready to challenge the status quo; they quit buying her books.

But she helped to spur on William Ellery Channing, the leading figure of American Unitarianism, who had been cautious in his opposition to slavery. His 1835 book, *Slavery*, was still not radical enough for Child and other radical abolitionists, but it showed that mainstream Unitarians were coming on board with abolition.

The most compelling Unitarian abolitionist was Theodore Parker, a dynamic Boston Unitarian preacher. He initially became famous, and infamous, for his shift away from conventional Christianity towards a more critical view of the scriptures and doubts about the miracles of Jesus. His anti-slavery position was of a piece with his idea that America becoming what he called an “industrial democracy”: in a phrase later made famous by Lincoln, he called for a government that was “of all the people, by all the people, for all the people” and that would be industrial in the sense that it would value people for their work and character and would promote the spiritual perfection of each individual.

In the early 20th century, a movement arose to institutionalize Humanism and make it into an organization. This movement came largely out of the Unitarian church, led by four Unitarian ministers who desired to further the cause of religious humanism. (One of these was John Dietrich, whose image is on your Bulletin cover.) They hoped that by organizing humanist thinkers into an identifiable group, they could publish Humanist journals and exert a more powerful influence on religion in America.

And indeed, they did, especially on the Unitarian religion. After World War II, humanism fueled a dramatic growth spurt in Unitarianism, largely through the Fellowship movement. Small lay-led groups met in homes or community centers; they were naturalistic in philosophy, socially activist in sympathies, scientific in orientation, and decidedly anti-clerical. Their services were intentionally designed *not* to feel like church — they were stripped of responsive readings, prayers, God-language of any sort, and often even of music. In our larger and longer-established congregations as well, the ideas and practices of religious humanism were quite common in the 40's and 50's through the 70's.

But these days many humanists within our congregations will tell you that they are feeling marginalized and disempowered, even ignored. And here's why I think that's not a bad thing or a loss: it's because humanist thought has become such a strong element of Unitarian Universalism that whether or not we name ourselves with that label, there are ways in which all of us are Humanists.

Consider this: We all start from and return to certain core human experiences in our feeling and thinking and talking about what is worthy of our love and summons our loyalty, what we assess to be true, and what we judge is right and wrong for us to do. The criterion for us remains: How does this jibe or not jibe with our own *human* experience? We Unitarian Universalists don't hold anything valid JUST because it's been written or handed down somehow; our beliefs have to pass through the fire of our own life experience.³

Many of the foundational ideas of Unitarian Universalism — the inherent worth and dignity of every person; the interdependent web of all existence; the value of a democratic society; the necessity of justice-making — these come to us from our humanist heritage and influence our experience as Unitarian Universalists today. So while many of you might not use the humanist label as your primary religious identifier, I have little doubt that the humanist tradition and heritage is informative, vital and integral to your current theological understanding, whether you are aware of it or not.

³ Excerpted and adapted from a personal communication with The Rev. Alice Blair Wesley.