

# Can We Believe What We Want?

June 18, 2006

The Reverend Susan Davison Archer  
Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church  
Bethesda, Maryland

Famous anti-war and social justice activist, and former chaplain at Yale, William Sloane Coffin, died in April. I have lots of memories about him from the sixties and seventies! I often agreed with his politics but I almost always appreciated his fervor. UU minister Jack Mendelsohn tells of one time, however, when Reverend Coffin got it wrong!

It was in 1967, in the Public Garden in the Boston Common, just outside of Jack's church, Arlington Street Church in Boston. If you have been there, you know that there stands a wonderful statue of Unitarian minister, William Ellery Channing. While they were preparing to address a group of anti-war young people, Reverend Coffin commented: "Oh, Jack, you Unitarian Universalists, so thin in theology, so thick in social justice." Jack's thoughts: "Oh, Bill, if you knew the minister memorialized by the stature behind you, you'd understand why for us theology is not a matter of thick and thin, but of broad and inclusive. And as for social justice, our aspiration is indeed to be in the thick of it." (UU World, March/April, 2005)

This morning, I want to talk about our theology, about our Unitarian Universalist beliefs.

From time to time I hear UU young people say:

"In my religion, I don't have to believe anything;" Or, "I can believe anything I want."

From time to time I hear UU adults say:

"In my religion, I don't have to believe anything;" Or, "I can believe anything I want."

Actually, it is more than from time to time, it is more times than I can count!

Recently, some of our Cedar Lane teens wondered if our faith isn't wishy washy, isn't just like all those other faiths that lift up the golden rule and hope for the best.

It is an understandable place to get to. Our religion is complex. We don't reduce it well to a catechism! Although we have begun to try to begin with our younger children, to give them some words about their faith—for the playground, and then to build on as they mature. I know some of you have heard our chapel song (originally, I believe, by Barbara Marshman) to the chorus of "Oh, Susannah": "Freedom, Reason, Tolerance and Truth, If you practice one, two, three of these, you'll have the fourth forsooth! Yeah!"

The point is that our faith is based not on what we don't believe, or on our un-belief, and it is certainly not wishy washy. We may not require a creed, but we do have beliefs. They come from a long and rich history, a tradition built not on abstractions, but on ever-widening experience, scholarship, and the tutelage of heart and mind.

Today I want to talk about one piece of our heritage, the liberal American Unitarian tradition, the tradition through which our Unitarianism was first named. The story of American Universalism,

also, of course, was part of this as were strands of Unitarianism and Universalism from England. But, on this Fathers' Day, I have chosen to focus on one major Unitarian forefather and his own historical milieu which included a bevy of amazing colleagues, men and women, in the first decades of 19<sup>th</sup> century New England. I speak of Unitarian minister, William Ellery Channing.

First, a little background:

Please know and be clear that our faith on this continent emerged directly from the roots laid by those 1620 Separatists in Plymouth and those Puritans of Mass bay colony. Were they Unitarian when they came here? No! But their resistance to external religious authority telling them what to believe and how to run their churches remains bedrock in our UU congregations today. And it was many of those congregations established by the earliest English settlers in New England, including those in Plymouth, that became Unitarian in theology and then by more formal association with each other formed our denomination.

Now, were these earliest European settlers to New England, on the whole, a religiously tolerant people as we like to think of ourselves? No, they were not. Most were strict Calvinists. But, over time, purity of doctrine became less and less important to them, creed being replaced by a commitment to congregational covenants: "in which [David Bumbaugh tells us] people pledged, with God's help, to live a Christian life in accordance with the teaching of the scriptures. It was assumed that a church member would have had some personal religious experience, some sense of election in which his spiritual life and participation in the church was grounded, but there was no standard for assuring the validity of that experience. What creeds there were functioned as standards of belief, but were not understood as binding on the various churches." (Bumbaugh, p.97)

Over time, to the horror of some, laxity about doctrine continued to grow. There began to be a divergence from standard Calvinist thought about predestination and the divine nature of Jesus.

Over time there was also less witness to personal religious experience. This became so pervasive that eventually the requirements for church membership in Massachusetts were even altered, not only from fewer explicit creedal requirements but also from the need of a conversion experience. There were "Half-way Covenants" by which children of members who lived moral lives could be part of the church—without creed, without conversion.

An unsettled time for the Old Guard!

Then in 1734 "The Great Awakening" movement began with Jonathan Edwards at its helm. Religious fervor spread again, marked by emotional and deeply felt repentance. (Bumbaugh, 99)

But, it was not only the fervor that spread, but also the reaction to it by many of a liberal bent. In Bumbaugh's words:

"The long term effect of this effort to revive and reinvigorate the old Calvinist consensus would be a permanent division between those who saw in the revival the hand of God, and those who, shaped by the growing liberalism of recent decades, saw only madness and raw emotion and who preferred a religion of reason and sobriety."(Bumbaugh, 100)

Growing division!

"By 1750, some thirty ministers were said to be unsound in doctrine. For the most part, these ministers were accused of neglecting the Doctrine of the Deity of Christ. And, over time, those accusations would prove to be accurate." (Bumbaugh 100-101)

The spirit of our American Revolution cemented the acceptance by many of more liberal religious thinking. The commitment to the Trinity was falling away. “By 1800, of the 200 churches of east Worcester County, 125 were liberal in their theology. Of 20 churches in Plymouth County, 18 were infected with liberalism. And 8 of the 9 churches in Boston were considered unsound in the Trinity. Harvard College, which trained the ministers for the Massachusetts churches was considered a hotbed of heresy.” (Bumbaugh 105-106)

It was into this scene we see the emergence of William Ellery Channing.

Channing in 1780 was the third born child of William and Lucy Ellery Channing. It was a notable family. His mother’s father had signed the Declaration of Independence. His father was Attorney General of Rhode Island.

As the family was growing up, they attended the church of Samuel Hopkins, a disciple of Jonathan Edwards, and a man with a very harsh theology which stung the young Channing as he grew. It was not an uncommon theology of the time and could be heard from both established pulpits and from traveling preachers. This story comes from an article by Frank Carpenter:

“One Sunday William’s father took him to hear an itinerant preacher. Overwhelmed by the fiery sermon, William felt ‘a curse seemed to rest on the earth and darkness and horror to veil the face of nature.’ His father’s remark at the sermon’s end ‘Sound doctrine that!’ - led the boy to expect that upon reaching home they must fall on their knees and pray for deliverance from impending doom. Instead, the family ate their usual meal, and then his father sat by the fire, puffed his pipe and read the newspaper. The boy concluded he should not take so seriously what people said, but study their behavior to know what they meant. But it would take

him many years to be rid of his “early gloom” regarding religion.” ([www.uuua.org/iijs/duub/articles/williamellerychanning.html](http://www.uuua.org/iijs/duub/articles/williamellerychanning.html))

At age 15, when he went off to Harvard College, he read a Scottish philosopher, Francis Hutcheson, who challenged the Calvinist human depravity that Channing had been taught while growing up. Hutcheson instead wrote about a “universal capacity of unselfish benevolence.” (Carpenter)

“Unselfish benevolence” in human beings. Hmm. Interesting idea! Something new here!

Thus began Channing’s understanding of the dignity and potential of human nature—a huge departure from Calvinism and the orthodoxy of New England Congregationalists!

Part of his religious formation also came from nature. “No spot on earth [Newport beach] has helped to form me so much as that beach. There I lifted up my voice in praise amidst the tempest . . . There, in reverential sympathy with the mighty power around me, I became conscious of the power within.” (Carpenter)

“Power within!” Hmmm! Again, a huge departure from Calvinism!

Channing also was developing some interesting ideas about reason and about the place of debate and intellectual scrutiny. While studying for the ministry he wrote “It is always best to think for ourselves on any subject, and then to have recourse to others for the correction or improvement of our own sentiments. . . . The quantity of knowledge thus gained may be less, but the quality will be superior. Truth received on authority, or acquired without labor, makes but a feeble impression.” (Carpenter) The educator in him was emerging!

Again, a huge departure from Calvinism, and, one which had wonderful and far-reaching implications for the evolution of UU religious education for both adults and children.

Channing's preaching never was what you would call orthodox. His ideas were emerging long before the legendary Baltimore sermon of 1819, when the growing liberal theology, his and that of so many colleagues and congregations, was finally named as "Unitarian Christianity".

This landmark sermon was delivered in Baltimore on the occasion of the ordination of Jared Sparks. It was 1 1/2 hours long and focused on defining the areas of faith in which Unitarians and Orthodox disagreed. This sermon was not written on a whim, but after bitter debate and actions on the part of the orthodox in Boston. Some might have called the orthodox mean-spirited. Besides Channing, other liberal clergy also traveled to Baltimore just to be part of this event. They knew it would be a big deal!

Some of highlights:

Christian scriptures ARE Unitarian; "book written for men, in the language of men" whose "meaning is to be sought in the same manner as that of other books." By careful reading, for Channing there did not seem to be evidence in the Bible that Jesus was God!

God made human nature. People were made in the image of God and have the capacity of spiritual and moral progress. How could humans be depraved, as Calvinists claimed, if they were made in God's image?

Unsealed revelation: 'I call that mind free which jealously guards its intellectual rights and powers, which calls no man master, which does not content itself with a passive or hereditary faith, which opens itself to light whencesoever it may come, which

receives new truth as an angel from heaven, which, while consulting others, inquires still more of the oracle within itself." ( Frank Carpenter)

The Baltimore sermon was one of the most of most famous sermons ever—8 editions and thousands of copies were printed in the first few months after it was delivered.

Ministers of both stripes jumped right into the debate. The issues around scripture led to more debate about the use of reason, conscience and human experience as religious authority. Authority and where it resided was the big question. For the orthodox, it came from the Bible as framed through doctrine; for the new liberal breed of Unitarian Christians it came from the Bible and elsewhere framed by continuing experience and one's own inner voice.

Churches split over the issues.

1820 - of 544 Congregationalist churches in MA, 135 became Unitarian; Of 25 oldest, 20 became Unitarian; Only 1 congregation in Boston was not Unitarian.

The Calvinists were therefore spurred into new vitality with lots of evangelical revivalism and fury at the Unitarians. The debate was heated to say the least.

David Bumbaugh, from whom I have already been quoting is one of my favorite and esteemed UU ministers, now teaching at Meadville Lombard, describes another part of the controversy: "Orthodox leaders charged that Unitarianism was lukewarm to religion, to morality, to piety, that Unitarians catered to fashionable society, and that as a consequence of Unitarian dominance, vice and crime had increased in Boston and moral values were in decline." (Bumbaugh, 117-118)

“Once more it fell to Channing to defend the Unitarians against these charges. At the dedication of Second Unitarian Church in New York in 1826, he addressed the topic, “Unitarian Christianity Most Favorable to Piety.” He contrasted the teachings of Unitarianism and orthodoxy, arguing forcefully that Unitarianism was not only the more reasonable, but also the more moral of the alternatives. He likened Calvary to setting up a gallows at the center of history and challenged the moral authority of a theology that demanded the public execution of an innocent man in order to achieve human salvation.”

Channing’s remarks did not exactly make nice with the orthodox!

But he had lots of supporters as well.

It is clear that the issue over Unitarianism v. Trinitarianism, one God or three, was not the issue in and of itself. The question about the nature of Christ led people to ask if we needed a divine figure to redeem an inherently depraved humanity. Because Channing and the Unitarian cohorts did not accept the inherent depravity of humanity, the NEED for Jesus to be divine did not exist and for them all the centuries of machinations to assure Jesus’ divinity were seen as unbiblical and a folly of church fathers. The question of the validity of the Trinity had led to something much more important and relevant: the nature of humanity—free will, capacity for reason, understanding, good works, creativity.

Channing’s understanding of this issue, the nature of humanity, had, of course, great implications for the rest of his life.

\* He loved to stir the discourse of ideas! He encouraged George Ripley (founder of Brook Farm) to found the Transcendental Club in which there could be free discussion on a host of ideas. Many who were part of that and other groups Channing participated in are famous figures in American history, and a good many of them were

Unitarians. (See what can happen when there is no TV! Up with adult programs!).

\* Further on this Father’s Day, I am delighted to bring up his care for children. After every church service he invited older children to the chancel for dialog. He was vitally interested in HOW children learn and grow. He worked and discussed with Elizabeth Peabody, Bronson Alcott, Dorothea Dix, and Horace Mann on education issues: “There is no office higher than that of a teacher of youth, for there is nothing on earth so precious as the mind, soul, character of the child.”(We are in the midst of teacher recruitment!)

\* In another arena, he spoke out against slavery as early as 1825 and worked with Unitarians like Lydia Marie Child and a host of others on this issue.

\* He opposed the War of 1812 and was outspoken about the duty to criticize it. The Peace Society of MA (1815) was founded in his study, first such society.

Channing always did a lively dance between religion and social discourse, which makes perfect sense when the basic underlying religious belief is about the capacity of human beings.

In Channing’s later years and after his death, the “flowering” of New England continued in so many ways, with incredible ideas developing through Unitarians and Universalists like Thoreau, Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and Theodore Parker: ideas about God in us and throughout all was a mark of the years to come. Ever broadening ideas that led to the Free Religious Association, the World Parliament of Religions, social reform and education movements and more.

But what came later was in many ways built on beliefs articulated by Channing, especially the idea that people have the capacity to do good, to create, to think, to decide for themselves. The specifics

about what to believe exactly about who or what or if God is, about death, about the big life questions that come to all human beings, are something that each of us does have to work out. But the larger religious question for us remains, what is the nature of a human being? The optimistic way we have answered that in our history totally shapes who we are as a faith community.

So when William Sloane Coffin spoke of UUism as “so thin in theology, so thick in social justice “ he was wrong! Our theology is the basis of our social justice!

Our “doing” came from our believing in human dignity, out of our belief in human capacity.

Our love of nature came from our believing that we can trust our inner experience.

Our way of doing religious education comes from our believing that we are born with curiosity and reason and the capacity for compassion.

Our tolerance, is not a wishy washy indecision, but comes from our believing that all human beings are made, as Channing would put it, in the image of God.

All this comes from what we believe about humanity and its possibilities.

I will close with some last thoughts from Mendelsohn:

“To Channing, the spirit in liberal Christianity was a hunger for more freedom, more justice, more fairness, more inclusion, and more fulfillment for ever more people. He lifted his voice against slavery, strengthening the abolitionist cause. And he supported Horace Mann’s ideas for a revolutionary American approach to public education, Joseph Tuckerman’s ideas for the creation of a new American profession-social work among the victims of urban poverty-and some of the liveliest harbingers of early American feminism, including Elizabeth Peabody, a pioneer of early childhood education.”

“Knowing that contemporaries would mock him as an unredeemed romantic about human nature, he put them on notice and paved the way for twentieth-century religious humanism: [Said Channing,] “I do and I must reverence human nature. I shut my eyes on none of its weakness and crimes. But injured, trampled on, and scorned as our nature is, I still turn to it with intense sympathy and strong hope. And I thank God that my own lot is bound up with that of the human race.”

On this Fathers’ Day, I give thanks for the rich heritage from the many parents of our faith. May we be challenged, as they were, to use our reason, our compassion, all the capacities of our human nature, to apply our faith to lives well lived in a world well cared for.

Closing words:

Be ours a religion which, like sunshine, goes everywhere;  
Its temple, all space;  
Its shrine, the good heart;  
Its creed, all truth;  
Its ritual, works of love;  
Its profession of faith, divine living.

Theodore Parker

Bibliography

Andrews, Barry. “The Roots of Unitarian Universalism in New England Transcendentalism,”  
<http://www.uua.org/re/other/andrews.html>

Bumbaugh, David. *Unitarian Universalism: A Narrative History* (Meadville Lombard Press, 2000).

Carpenter, Frank, “William Ellery Channing,” *Unitarian Universalist Historical Society*, 1999-2006.

Marshall, Megan. *The Peabody Sisters: Three Women Who Ignited American Romanticism* (Houghton Mifflin, 2005)

Mendolsohn, Jack. "William Ellery Channing's Public Faith," *World Magazine* (UUA, March/April 2005)

Mendelsohn, Jack. *Channing, The Reluctant Radical* (Little, Brown, 1971).

Robinson, David. *The Unitarians and the Universalists* (Greenwood, 1985)

Wesley, Alice Blair, Peter Hughes and Frank Carpenter "The Unitarian Controversy and Its Puritan Roots," *Unitarian Universalist Historical Society*, 1999-2006