

“A Faith for Our Time”

It's said that faculty politics are so fiercely combative because so little is at stake. But in some instances, a great deal can hinge on the appointment of a particular professor to a particular chair at a particular university. And that was the situation when Henry Ware Sr. was appointed Hollis Professor of Divinity at Harvard in 1805, not only because that was the triggering event that led to the establishment of our own congregation two hundred years ago, not only because dozens of other churches across New England also split into liberal and conservative factions, Unitarian versus Calvinist, and not only because it signaled the transformation of Harvard from a provincial Bible college into a world renowned university, but also because it represented a wholly unprecedented shift in human self-understanding, the dawn of historical consciousness.

Up until this moment, history didn't exist, or didn't exist in quite the way that you and I now take for granted. People just didn't know about dinosaurs or Neanderthals or what's called the "Higher Criticism" of the Bible. They thought the world was a few thousand years old at most, that it had always looked pretty much the way it appears now, and that events were following a plan prescribed by the Almighty at the beginning of time, whose providential hand guided the pilgrims to America to build a new Israel that would outshine the one of old and bring a divine finale to the proceedings on this terrestrial sphere. It had all been foreordained.

And then, about two hundred years ago, the realization dawned that nothing, not even God, is fixed or unchanging. Everything evolves. In England, by the close of the eighteenth century, an astronomer named William Herschel had built a gigantic forty foot telescope that allowed him to peer deeper into space than anyone had ever seen before, which led him to conclude that objects he gazed upon were not just very distant but very, very old, with the universe in continuous transition, stars being born and galaxies slowly spiraling to an end. In France, naturalists like Buffon were speculating that the earth itself had originally been in a molten state and that as it cooled, over the course of millions of years, water vapor gradually condensed and fell as rain to form the first oceans, where the residual heat acted on naturally occurring compounds in the shallow seas to generate the first living organisms. So our planet, like the cosmos, was in continuous flux. In Germany, meanwhile, scholars like Eichhorn and von Herder were proposing that the Bible also had changed and grown over the centuries, that not all the letters of Paul were actually written by the apostle, for instance, that the gospels weren't necessarily set down by eyewitnesses but might rely on some older, missing document, that the Song of Songs was not originally written as an allegory of Christ's love for the church but was just a piece of ancient Hebrew love poetry. So the scriptures could not be read as a simple statement of God's word to man; they were instead a complex documentary record of humanity's words and developing ideas about God. And insights like these presented a crisis of faith for many people, either to embrace a world of constant change where the future is open-ended and certainty hard-to-find, or to cling obstinately to the past.

Words, interestingly, also have history. And the term "innovation" changed its meaning at this juncture. Earlier, the word had a derogatory connotation. "Innovators" were like anarchists, spreading confusion and turmoil, upsetting the predictable order. "Innovation" was considered particularly dangerous in religion. But then sometime around the beginning of the nineteenth century, the word acquired a more positive meaning. To be an innovator was a compliment on your ingenuity and enterprise. Innovation became associated with scientific and creative thinking. And the founders of our faith were innovators in both senses, first looked upon as dissidents and rebels, then as change agents and harbingers of progress.

These same founders--scientists, Biblical scholars, linguists--helped to bring all of these currents, these new ways of thinking about time and nature, God and revelation, to a convergence in 1805. So when a Unitarian was appointed as Hollis Professor, the oldest chair of divinity in the country, it was not only a college revolution. It was an intellectual and spiritual revolution, also. Harvard had been founded in 1636 to train clergy for Puritan New England. As one chronicler recorded,

After God had carried us safe to New England and wee had builded out houses, provided necessaries for our livelihood, rear'd convenient places for God's worship, and settled the civill government; One of the next things we longed for and looked after was to advance learning ...

But from its very inception, Harvard had not one, but two Latin mottoes: "Christae et Ecclesiae" and "Veritas." Serving Christ and Church was not always compatible with dedication to the Truth, and within a few generations, some were questioning the old doctrines like predestination that sentenced souls to hell before they'd even been born. Fearing that deviations might spread beyond the student body and infect even the faculty, Increase Mather proposed that all future presidents and fellows of Harvard take an oath to uphold strict New England Congregationalism. And when he failed to impose such a test, the orthodox quickly moved to establish a rival institution called Yale, where everyone would swear by the Westminster Confession, which constituted the prevailing standard of ecclesiastical correctness at that time.

But quite a different spirit prevailed on the banks of the Charles. When Christ Church, the first Episcopal church in Cambridge, was built in 1760, for example, the Harvard faculty allowed students to attend services there, rather than insisting they worship at the college chapel (which is now the Unitarian church in Cambridge). Yale, in contrast, forbade her students from attending Church of England services well into the next century. But at Harvard, a passion for freedom and inquiry was stirring. The questions debated at commencement can stir the blood even now.

1743 Is it Lawful to resist the Supreme Magistrate, if the Commonwealth cannot otherwise be preserved? Samuel Adams argues the affirmative.

Political and religious liberty were struggling to be born, and the issues were momentous. What does it mean to be an educated person? Can varied viewpoints and

opinions co-exist within a single community? What relationships ought to prevail between the individual, the church, and state? Answers that we may take for granted were not so obvious then.

The struggle between revolution and reaction played itself out again. In 1807, two years after Henry Ware became the Hollis Professor and Unitarians had Harvard firmly in hand, conservatives withdrew and established the Andover Theological Seminary, which drafted adherence to the Westminster Confession into its articles of incorporation, stipulating that all professors would have to renew their allegiance to this convoluted Calvinist creed every five years, whose exact words should "forever remain entirely and identically the same, without the least alteration, addition, or diminution." They were determined to build a bulwark against history, against innovation.

Harvard, in contrast, took a more forward-looking approach. Recognizing change as a constant, educators there deliberately set out to transform what had been a small, regional, parochial college into a modern university. Within a few years of the Unitarian "takeover," the student body expanded dramatically, so that by 1810, eleven percent of the entering class was from outside New England. During those same years, the college welcomed its first Roman Catholic students and its first Jews. The Divinity School was established on a non-sectarian basis in 1821, and a decade later, a pamphlet written for the Corporation reported that faculty and administration included six Unitarians, three Catholics, and one each Calvinist, Lutheran, Episcopalian, Quaker and Sandemanian (whatever that is!) If religious liberals had indeed seized control of Harvard (and seven out of ten presidents during the 19th century were Unitarians), it was not to keep the institution to themselves, but to share it with others; not to impose their own brand of thinking, but to open the school to diverse modes thought.

And that is what the noise was all about. Harvard's appointment of Henry Ware was the fuse which set off an explosion across New England, so that within fifteen years there were over a hundred Unitarian churches in eastern Massachusetts, and ten in other states. The bomb dropped locally when Daniel Sanders, who had been Burlington's first preacher decided to devote himself full time to his duties as president of the University of Vermont. That was in 1806, just a year after Harvard's faculty fight erupted. No doubt Reverend Sanders felt the time was ripe to leave, before flames ignited on the shores of Lake Champlain. And the burning issue became, who would be the next minister here in Burlington? One faction, consisting of the confirmed members of the church (who mostly hailed from Connecticut), wanted Daniel Haskell of Yale to serve the congregation. The other, larger party, composed of all those citizens whose taxes paid the pastor's salary (and most of whom happened to have moved to Vermont from Massachusetts), preferred a Harvard educated preacher named Samuel Clark. So freedom of conscience was a stake. Could a majority of the town's inhabitants be compelled to pay for the upkeep of a church and minister they didn't support?

Unable to agree, the congregation split. Conservatives formed the First Calvinistic Congregational Church (now located on North Winooski Avenue). And on January 29, 1810, one hundred thirty-five individuals of more progressive views signed the Articles

of Association that formed our Society, pledging to "promote and inculcate harmony, friendship, morality, Christian faith, religion and piety among the members of this Society and mankind at large." Theological differences were important in the separation. For one camp, faith was defined as adherence to dogma: God-in-Three-Persons, Substitutionary Atonement, and the rest. For liberals, Christianity meant primarily charity toward one's neighbor, good citizenship and following the golden rule.

But the defining issue in the divorce was not so much a dispute over original sin, or christology, or differing interpretations of scripture. After all, it was only a matter of time before our Unitarian forbears would change their minds about all these items, and by the 1930's, members of this congregation would be petitioning the Board to excise references to Christianity from our worship altogether. The cross came down from our sanctuary in the 1950's. Symbols, liturgy, and ritual were all negotiable.

But some things stayed the same. What distinguished Unitarians from the very beginning and what's held constant across the two centuries of our existence has been a distinctive attitude toward time, an understanding that faith is a journey and not a resting place, an invitation to the spirit to adventure and explore. Unitarian Universalism for this reason has been called a movement rather than a denomination. And this has made it difficult to explain ourselves to others, sometimes even hard to understand ourselves. For what is most solidly fixed in our religion is the absence of fixity. What we hold to be unconditionally true is that all mortals are conditioned by history, creatures of time and circumstance who can never entirely extricate themselves from the vanities and prejudices of their particular era but who nonetheless have to try.

This sense of historicity has made Unitarian Universalism, first of all, an optimistic faith, believing that revelation is not sealed, that not all truth has yet been discovered. As William Ellery Channing, the minister of Boston's Federal Street Church, put it in 1830, "In giving myself as I have done to long and patient inquiry into the subject of religion, I have found cause to change my views in particular subjects—and I think of this with pleasure, for had no changes taken place, had I adhered pertinaciously to all my early opinions, I should have great reason to fear that I had not used my mind freely and fairly. We all start with errors, and it is a bad omen if they are not detected." Realizing that today's firmly held conclusions may be tomorrow's discarded notions makes ours a humble religion. Arrogance is hard to justify when every perspective is subject to correction. Yet knowing this, liberals fear stagnation more than change.

Secondly, ours is a self-made faith. Believing that the future has not yet been determined, and that the past is not necessarily a guide for how to live in the present, history is in our hands. We have an acute awareness of moving upon a stage where the backdrops and cast are continually entering and exiting, being replaced new and different actors whose dialogues have only a glancing acquaintance with the script that went before. And no one, not even God, has written the final scene to this drama. So we're improvising. Each of us has our role. The production's outcome may be beyond our control; history's a chancy affair. But we are responsible for our own beliefs and

actions. Whether our successors look upon us as heroes or villains or buffoons depends on how we choose to play our part.

Finally, ours is an evolutionary faith. Knowing that we inhabit a cosmos much bigger and older than any mere human purpose can encompass, we experience wonder in the presence of nature and a creativity that includes but exceeds our own. We can glory with the Psalmist of old, "When I look up at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars set in their place by thee, what is man, that thou art mindful of him?," knowing that science merely magnifies the unlikely privilege of reveling in such unfolding beauty.

As a people immersed in the never ending flow of beginnings and endings, we can celebrate the bicentennial of the First Unitarian Universalist Society of Burlington, grateful both for how much we share in common with our forbears and for how much has changed. The almost forgotten folks who built this meetinghouse might not approve of all that goes on inside it, but they would understand the children's ways are not those of the parents. As they handed this legacy down to us, knowing we would inevitably test and leave behind much that they held dear, we hope to pass it on intact to coming generations, realizing how quaint our fashions and customs will one day seem to our posterity. Their minds will change and, in changing, remain true.