

Reading:**To Dr. Thomas Cooper Monticello, November 2, 1822**

DEAR SIR,

-- Your favor of October the 18th came to hand yesterday. The atmosphere of our country is unquestionably charged with a threatening cloud of fanaticism, lighter in some parts, denser in others, but too heavy in all. I had no idea, however, that in Pennsylvania, the cradle of toleration and freedom of religion, it could have arisen to the height you describe. This must be owing to the growth of Presbyterianism. The blasphemy and absurdity of the five points of Calvin, and the impossibility of defending them, render their advocates impatient of reasoning, irritable, and prone to denunciation. In Boston, however, and its neighborhood, Unitarianism has advanced to so great strength, as now to humble this haughtiest of all religious sects; insomuch that they condescend to interchange with them and the other sects, the civilities of preaching freely and frequently in each others' meeting-houses. In Rhode Island, on the other hand, no sectarian preacher will permit an Unitarian to pollute his desk. In our Richmond there is much fanaticism, but chiefly among the women. They have their night meetings and praying parties, where, attended by their priests, and sometimes by a hen-pecked husband, they pour forth the effusions of their love to Jesus, in terms as amatory and carnal, as their modesty would permit them to use to a mere earthly lover. In our village of Charlottesville, there is a good degree of religion, with a small spice only of fanaticism. We have four sects, but without either church or meeting-house. The court-house is the common temple, one Sunday in the month to each. Here, Episcopalian and Presbyterian, Methodist and Baptist, meet together, join in hymning their Maker, listen with attention and devotion to each others' preachers, and all mix in society with perfect harmony. It is not so in the districts where Presbyterianism prevails undividedly. Their ambition and tyranny would tolerate no rival if they had power. Systematical in grasping at an ascendancy over all other sects, they aim, like the Jesuits, at engrossing the education of the country, are hostile to every institution which they do not direct, and jealous at seeing others begin to attend at all to that object. The diffusion of instruction, to which there is now so growing an attention, will be the remote remedy to this fever of fanaticism; while the more proximate one will be the progress of Unitarianism. That this will, ere long, be the religion of the majority from north to south, I have no doubt.

Sermon

“That this [Unitarianism] will be, ere long, be the religion of the majority from north to south, I have no doubt.” Why did Jefferson think that? What did he see in Unitarianism that he thought it would catch on in the new country of the United States of America? Perhaps these questions, and what Mr. Jefferson was thinking, will be answered when we see what Unitarianism and Universalism have to offer.

We first have to acknowledge that Mr. Jefferson guessed wrongly. Unitarianism did *not* become the religion of the majority in the country. Not even close!

Like some people today, Jefferson was worried about the religious condition of the country. Like perhaps some of us, he felt there was far too much excessive religious emotion, saying it was light in some places, denser in others, but too heavy overall. He knew that Unitarians stressed an emphasis on reason and tolerance in religion. These are also important values for us today.

The value of religious tolerance, I think, is something most people understand. The use of reason in religion invites more explanation. Reason had become the primary source of knowledge and basis of authority in the eighteenth century during the Age of Enlightenment, replacing religious sources. Jefferson was born into and came of age in this intellectual climate.

The champions of the Enlightenment asked, “if God has created us, were we not also given minds and therefore reasoning power? Would God ask us to believe things to the complete contradiction of that reasoning ability?” Their conclusion was, no, God would not ask that of us. God would not give us the ability to reason and then say, reason does you no good concerning matters of religious truth.

Reason guided the contributions by Unitarians and Universalists in the early nineteenth century. The first of these contributions by Unitarians was refuting the doctrine or the teaching of the Trinity. The main architect was Rev. William Ellery Channing. Channing and others said that there were several problems with the doctrine of the Trinity. First, the formula by which it is known has no basis in the bible. Except for a few mentions of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the New Testament, no Trinitarian formula exists in Christian scripture. The word, Trinity, cannot be found there. Proponents of the doctrine of the Trinity, Channing argued, would have to go outside of scripture for its defense. They would have to use the so-called ecumenical councils of the Church, which were convened and operated under very strange and political circumstances.

In addition, the doctrine of the Trinity contradicts the first confession of the Jewish faith found in Deuteronomy (6:4), “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord is one.” The Trinity seemed to be too far a divergence away from Judaism and a denial of the continuity of that tradition into Christianity. For many, the God of the Israelites did not seem to be the same God as the God of the Christian church.

The third problem with the doctrine of the Trinity is that you can’t get to it by human reason. Let me give you an easy version of the formula for the Trinity. The church says that the Trinity means; God is three persons who are at the same time everywhere and who have infinite awareness, but they are of the *same* substance.

Are you confused? If so, that’s okay, because if you are like me and don’t understand this, you are not alone! Throughout history, many have not understood the teaching of the Trinity. Did you know, for example, that the rise of Islam in certain places in Europe was due in part to the confusing formula of the Trinity in the church? Some Europeans in the early Middle

Ages said, “How can there be three beings who are **all** infinite?” Islam was attractive to many because it was much easier to understand, didn’t seem like a belief in three gods, and didn’t go against human reason.

In addition to rejecting the teaching of the Trinity, the Unitarians also called the teachings of Calvinism into question. This was their second contribution and the second thing I want you to remember. Some of us are familiar with the teaching of predestination and think of Calvinism with predestination in mind. Predestination is the opposite of free will. It means that God has already chosen who will be *saved* and who will be *condemned*. You can see that it doesn’t give humans much ability to change, improve, or have a voice in their destiny. Predestination was refuted by early Unitarians.

But, it was the belief in the complete evildoing nature of human beings, also taught by Calvinism, that was attacked most strongly by Unitarians. Calvinism taught we are so spoiled by sin, nothing good can come from us and we can do nothing about this condition. Even our ability to reason is damaged beyond repair. That’s why they believed God chooses a small few who will be saved since no one deserves it anyway. Wow, how *depressing* is that?

Unitarians, taking their lead from Rev. William Ellery Channing, taught that we have a seed planted in us at birth, a divine seed given by God that if we would just cultivate it, it would grow and flourish and we could accomplish and experience *extraordinary things*. As he wrote, “*The great end is to awaken the soul; to bring understanding, conscience, and heart into earnest, vigorous action on religious and moral truth, to excite and cherish spiritual life.*” This teaching was consistent with the teachings of the Enlightenment, so influential in those days. This understanding contributed to the intellectual development and social reformation in our country.

We turn now to the Universalists for the third point or third contribution of our religious forebears. The Universalists were about recovering the true, loving nature of God. They believed that God was a God of love and that it was logically inconsistent for God to condemn any part of his, or her creation for eternity. So, they believed salvation was for everybody and called it universal salvation. The Universalists also challenged Calvinism that said only a select few would be saved with the majority condemned for no apparent reason. How did that doctrine square with the loving nature of God, they asked?

Universalists believed that sin was not an infinite evil requiring infinite punishment. In fact, they argued that the whole purpose of punishment was to reclaim someone who was doing harm to others or self. They viewed sin as a misunderstanding of what makes for true human happiness and that this misunderstanding would have immediate dire consequences in this lifetime. In simple terms, a person reaps what they sow and that sin equals misery.

Love overcomes all things, the Universalists would say. God’s main characteristic is love, which is freely given to us. It was a refreshing message back then, in an atmosphere of so much doom and gloom. It is still a refreshing message today.

Let me review these points. First, Unitarians took issue with the understanding of God in three persons, known as the Trinity. The Trinity was not a formal teaching of the Christian church *until the fourth century*, and was opposed by many from the beginning, especially since the bible was not clear on the subject.

Second, Unitarians also took issue with teachings of Calvinism, especially the belief in the total evil of mankind. This teaching was in contradiction to what those Unitarians understood about God and what they understood about humanity.

Third, Universalists embraced their belief in universal salvation. They came to that conclusion through their understanding of the bible, their experience of the unconditional love of God, and their use of reason.

Refuting the Trinity, refuting the total depravity of mankind and promoting universal salvation were important in the early nineteenth century. These three things were the significant contributions by our liberal religious forebears. These contributions to theology were derived by the use of reason in religious matters, which was perhaps the most significant contribution.

We come back to the reasons Thomas Jefferson guessed wrongly. First, people are emotional creatures and he underestimated the power of emotional responses. The famous psychologist, Carl Jung, once wrote, "We should not pretend to understand the world only by the intellect. The judgement of the intellect is only part of the truth." He also said, "There can be no transforming of darkness into light and of apathy into movement without emotion."

Secondly, throughout much of history, church traditions won out over reason. Jefferson did not consider this possibility. The journalist, Ellen Goodman wrote, "traditions are the guideposts driven deep in our subconscious minds. The most powerful ones are those we can't even describe, aren't even aware of." The Reformation primarily addressed church authority and the related corruption centered in the catholic church. The main current of the stream in the Reformation left the traditions of church teaching alone. Our spiritual ancestors came from the Radical wing of the Reformation, a side channel so to speak, who examined everything through reason, even church teachings.

Unitarians believed God is a unity. Today, we might say that the divine is whole and intact. Universalists believed that God loved everyone and that everyone was saved. Today, we might say that *everyone* has a place at the table and can have a share in what the divine or the holy has to offer. If that is out of the stream from the main current of Christianity, I am content with that, because I believe it is closer to the teachings of Jesus. Yet I believe we who are Unitarian Universalists have two important ideals to offer the world and I don't mind sharing that message.

One ideal is that we will continue to hold up the high value and great potential of the human being. The other is that we humans are in this together. What is available to one person that is good, valuable, and cherished is available and *must* continue to be available to all.