

# **Reflections on Class in the History of Unitarianism, Universalism, and Unitarian Universalism**

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Recently Unitarian Universalists have begun a gingerly exploration of issues of class as they relate to our mission and to our self-understanding. It is indicative of the bias we bring to the discussion that we use the term "classism" rather than class, as if to make clear at the outset our moral distance from the concept. In the brief time that we have, I will offer a few reflections on class as it appears in our history, in the conviction that understanding who we have been may make clearer the possibilities and the moral imperatives which confront us. Let me be clear that my understanding of class is not limited to an economic definition. I believe that class has to do not so much with wealth and possession as with access to resources and to the sources and instruments of influence and power.

Without attempting to tell the entire story, let me suggest that eastern European Unitarianism was rooted in and indebted to the upper classes of society. Polish Socinianism was drawn from the educated classes, from the rising middle class, and while concerned for the fate of the poorest of the poor, it never made serious overtures to or inroads upon the vast underclass of Polish society.

Transylvanian Unitarianism reflects a similar class make-up. Unitarianism in Transylvania was almost completely the creation of the governing classes and the scholar class. Anyone familiar with this history will recognize the names of Queen Isabella, King John Sigismund, Royal Counselor and Physician Georgio Biandratta, Court Preacher, Francis David, Royal Counselor Gaspar Bekes. All of this impressive cast, were drawn from the greater or lesser nobility.

Like its cousin, Polish Socinianism, Transylvanian Unitarianism owed a great debt to the scholar class. The scholars were the ones swept up by the lucidity and cogency of Francis David's arguments during those week-long debates with the orthodox. They were the ones who read and understood and embraced the doctrines which filled the pages pouring from the press at Koloszvar. They were the ones who created and sustained the famed schools. It is their legacy which is reflected in the judgment of contemporary observers that the Unitarians in Transylvania continue to be the best educated and most peaceful of all the groups in that land.

The history of Unitarianism in England is perhaps the most complex and difficult to sort through. What does seem clear, however, is that Unitarianism in England is to be identified once more, as a religious movement, of the rising middle class.

When Theophilus Lindsey founded the Essex Street Chapel in England in 1774, the faith he offered attracted the middle-class and included amateur scientists and scholars like Benjamin Franklin. Priestley's Unitarianism grew out of the rigorous intellectualism of the dissenting academies and was a movement of the merchants and scholars and the literary class. It included people like Priestley, and Josiah Wedgwood, and Charles Dickens and Florence Nightingale and Neville Chamberlin--none of whom were representative of the laboring classes. Unitarianism in England was the creature of a middle class as it reached for respectability and access to power and influence.

The class position of Unitarianism in the United States is obscured by the fact that the early years of the Republic's history present a culture in which, while clearly an important aspect of social reality, classes among Euro-Americans appeared fluid and their barriers permeable. Throughout the nineteenth century, it was not uncommon for the children of the poor to rise above the station into which they were born, lending credence to the myth that on this continent a truly classless society had been created.

What all of this obscured was the fact that American Unitarianism in its home base of Massachusetts, was an upper-middle-class faith. It controlled the government of the state. Its adherents were powerfully connected, socially and politically conservative merchants many of whom made fortunes in morally questionable ways, and who sought a religion which sustained and justified the status-quo and which would support a morality shaped by a sense of noblesse oblige.

In their book, *The American Establishment*, Leonard and Mark Silk suggest that not only is there an American Establishment, but that "(t)hough it has become an overwhelmingly secular institution, the American Establishment can trace its roots to a real religious establishment--the Unitarian church in Massachusetts".

There is a myth that suggests that Universalism was a lower class faith. Early Universalism was seen as part of the enthusiastic religion which emerged from the Great Awakening. John Murray was an itinerant who preached his message in barns and fields before he settled in Gloucester. Caleb Rich, the Ballous, and to some degree, Elhanan Winchester followed a similar pattern. However, it should be remembered that the first Universalist congregation was organized among the prosperous merchants and ship captains of Gloucester, MA, and Elhanan Winchester's congregation in Philadelphia included such luminaries as Dr. Benjamin Rush and Dr. George deBenneville. The Universalism that emerged in the Oxford, MA region was organized by respected community leaders.

True to their evangelical heritage, the early Universalists were quick to see the opportunities of the frontier and to spread their gospel wherever they could find an audience. From our contemporary perspective, we often think of them

preaching plain truths to illiterate settlers. But a reading of the texts of these frontier preachers reveals carefully reasoned arguments, a rich knowledge of Biblical and literary sources and an expectation of a degree of sophistication in the listeners. The fact is that many settlers from the east carried with them a dream of recreating in the wilderness the middle-class society which they had known or to which they had aspired, and Universalists were not immune to this hope.

Like many new faiths, Universalism lusted for respectability. They established institutions of higher learning from coast to coast. Their newspapers covered the nation and did much to inculcate middle class values and virtues. Before long Universalists would become the champions of middle-class virtue in small-town and rural America. While never attaining the elite social status of the Unitarians, and always laboring in the shadow of a theological heresy which carried with it the suggestion of subtle moral impropriety, Universalism saw itself as solidly middle class, proclaimed a solidly middle-class God whose benevolence extended to all people and who asked nothing of people but that they accept and live by the same standards which that God exhibited--rational, temperate, loving generosity to all.

It would be folly to assume that the merger of these two groups into the Unitarian Universalist Association would result in any significant change in the class structure, the social values, the cultural attitudes which have characterized them both over the centuries. Every survey ever been taken of the Unitarian Universalist movement has demonstrated beyond question its peculiar class structure. We are, whether we recognize it or not, still part of the American Establishment, tied as we are to the great Universities and the dominant professional groups in this country.

I would like to suggest that our class identity may be less the result of wealth than a consequence of the educational levels we have attained and value. It may be our style, our peculiar spirituality, based on those dominant educational levels, rather than our theology which defines us as a movement. (On this point, read Paul Conkin's *American Originals*, a study of homegrown Christianity which examines such groups as the Disciples of Christ, the Adventists, the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Mormons, the Christian Scientists, the Holiness and Pentecostal churches and the Unitarian Universalists. Conkin suggests that a tendency to reject the doctrine of the trinity, a tendency to embrace universalism, and a penchant for congregational polity are common elements in these faiths, regardless of the social class to which they speak and out of which they have emerged.) Unitarian Universalists tend to encounter the sacred through rational rather than emotional pathways. That is who we are; that is how we have learned to encounter the world; and any spiritual path which is right for us will begin with that reality. It is this style, rooted in educational attainments, which provides the real divide between us and other social classes and groups.

The Commission on Appraisal of the Unitarian Universalist Association recently issued a report entitled *Interdependence*, which examined our distinctiveness as a people, the rigidities which keep us from attracting many from outside our historic class and educational strata and came to the inarguable conclusion that this is who we have been and this is who we are and if it were not for who we have been and who we are we might very well be otherwise. I would simply add that our history suggests that this class definition of Unitarian Universalism is not a recent development--it has persisted throughout our history. Therefore, it is not likely to change very much.

The real question which confronts us is not why do we appeal to the people to whom we appeal rather than to other people. The question is, given who we are and the position we occupy in society what is our religious responsibility? We are not the church universal, the only voice speaking truth to power. Rather, we are part of a large and complex mosaic which is the religious community in our time, speaking with many voices. We are charged to speak our truth, clearly and forcefully in the dialect and mode which is most consistent with who we are.

We are the people who are called to address from within the comfortable, the self satisfied, the self-congratulatory with a reminder that we live in a world in which one fifth of the population consumes 86% of all the globe's goods and services; a world in which 225 individuals have a combined wealth equal to the annual income of the poorest 47 percent of the world's entire population; a world in which over one billion people are currently unemployed; in which more is spent annually on ice cream than the estimated annual cost of providing clean water and safe sewers for the world's entire population. We are the people who are called to remind the self-congratulatory that their well being rests upon the misery and hopelessness of a global underclass. And we are the people who are situated to insist that national, international, institutional priorities shift in the direction of opening access to resources, power and influence for those who cling to the world's margins.

The world will be little changed by a successful campaign to broaden the class appeal of Unitarian Universalism. We might be better off for such a campaign, but the world would be little changed. I dream of a Unitarian Universalism which spends less time looking inward and more time looking outward, which understands its position in the world, which recognizes the fundamental unfairness of the system from which we benefit, and which has the courage to demand fundamental change.