

## Preliminary Conclusions in the Search of Philosophical Grounds for Contemporary Unitarian Identity

By Neville Buch

*The Unitarian denomination itself always remained small, of course, but the Harvard moralists had resigned themselves to this very early. "Our object is not to convert men to our party, but to our principles," they declared. "Unitarians have done more...by promoting a real though gradual change for the better in the opinions of other sects, than by building up their own denomination". [Daniel Walker Howe. The Unitarian Conscience<sup>1</sup>]*

*Whether it be Utilitarianism or Unitarianism, [William] James argued in 1868, the philosopher's role includes not only crystallizing the doctrine but also presenting it in the most persuasive light to the populace. [Gerald E. Myers. William James: His Life and Thought<sup>ii</sup>].*

William James remark on the philosopher's role in a letter to Oliver Wendell Holmes in 1868 is a direct challenge to a disempowering attitude that has unfortunately prevailed in Unitarianism since the remark of James Walker in 1830 as quoted by Daniel Howe above. The disempowering attitude is unfortunate because it can be shown that its own advocacy is eroded by an apparent meaninglessness when clear preciseness is demanded. To deconstruct Walker's statement -- what has been overlooked is that 'our party' and 'our principles' are related in an inseparable Unitarian identity. "Our party" is the Unitarian body. "Our principles" are Unitarian principles, that is, principles belonging to the Unitarian body. They are principles marked out as Unitarian because Unitarians have claimed them as their own. The philosophical reasons for this claim are not yet apparent. If, as suggested by Walker, the aim is not to *convince* (and here I take a softer meaning of 'to convert') *women and men* of the value of the Unitarian body, but to convince them of *Unitarian* principles such that *non-Unitarian* ("of other sects") opinions are made better, that is, non-Unitarian theological beliefs are enhanced, what is left in the Unitarian identity? To answer reductively that Unitarians claim their principles as their own is insufficient. Immediately there is a problem if the same principles can be absorbed into non-Unitarian theological belief systems. Why should Unitarians claim these principles as their own? A disempowering attitude which pays little attention to the need to provide philosophical grounds for Unitarian identity is not presenting Unitarianism in the most persuasive light to the populace. It is presenting Unitarianism in the most unpersuasive manner.

The role of a Unitarian philosopher to crystallize the principles ('doctrine') is needed; otherwise the claim that the principles are Unitarian is simply fraudulent. The fact that Unitarianism existed as a powerful force in the nineteenth century, such that it did influence belief in non-Unitarian bodies, is due to the existence of philosopher-theologians, such as William Ellery Channing, Theodore Parker, and even James Martineau, who could argue what comprises Unitarian belief with a certain philosophical preciseness. The fact that Martineau resisted a distinctive denominational identity demonstrates, not that the Unitarian identity was unimportant, but that the disempowering attitude continued to afflict influential Unitarian thinkers and resulted in being counterproductive in organizational terms. As great a

thinker Martineau was, his prophetic sense proved utterly wrong. History demonstrated that Martineau was mistaken – Unitarians, in the end, could not survive without a clear Unitarian denominational structure. As helpful as his philosophical theology was to articulate Unitarian belief, his advocacy of a diluted Unitarian identity in a free and loose association across the theological spectrum did the Unitarian movement a great disservice. He failed to foresee that such a free and loose association ended up with many liberal religionists mainstreaming Unitarian beliefs within their own liberal Protestant identity, and casting the Unitarian ‘shell’ aside, robbed Unitarian identity of any mainstream credibility it was due. Liberal (or even post-liberal) Protestant theologians have continued to articulate what would be considered as traditional Unitarian beliefs but without any Unitarian identity, and hence, today, Unitarians have become largely irrelevant in the main theological discourses.

It is possible to find some philosophical ground for Unitarian identity as it was in the nineteenth century. Daniel Howe calls it ‘Harvard Moral Philosophy’.<sup>iii</sup> The problem is that we do not live in the nineteenth century, and, as those who were ‘traditionally’ progressives, Unitarians have never seen it fruitful to live in the past. What then is the philosophical grounds for contemporary Unitarian identity? This is no idle question. I was approached by the Professor of Systematic Theology at the Joint Faculty of Theology affiliated with my university, and was asked “I would like to understand what the chief contemporary basis of Unitarianism is, as distinct from the historical developments”. I knew I was in a difficult situation. To a sharp mind, as one would expect of a professor of systematic theology, the contemporary stated principles of Unitarianism, as best and most fully expressed in the Principles of the Unitarian Universalist Association, appear only as platitudes *without* philosophical grounds for holding together the concepts being espoused. Where was I to find those philosophical grounds?

I had yet to see any seriously systematic attempt in grounding contemporary Unitarian belief that is likely to impress philosophers of religion, even though many of the academics at Unitarian theological schools, such as Meadville/Lombard and Starr King, are doing good work. But before looking in this direction (which I shall return to), we must first consider possible philosophical articulation for Unitarian identity outside of the distinctly-defined Unitarian schools, places such as Harris Manchester College at Oxford and Harvard Divinity School. The reason to begin here is that this is where some documents of Unitarian bodies subtly suggest that the more ‘heavy-weight’ Unitarian thought occurs. But in these cases such Unitarian self-reflection is difficult to single out since these institutions have allegiances beyond the Unitarian identity. Harvard Divinity School is interdenominational, affiliated with a secular university. The tradition of Harris Manchester College is described broadly as ‘non-conformist’, and its current Principal is a Methodist minister. There is a tendency in contemporary Unitarian literature to appropriate current philosopher or theologians, such as Gordon Kaufman (a Mennonite), where the association with a Unitarian identity is weak or accidental. This is particularly the case when John A. Buehrens and Forrest Church suggests a philosophical grounding for Unitarian theology in the work of Charles Hartshorne, who Buehrens and Church tells us is “a Unitarian Universalist in Austin, Texas”.<sup>iv</sup> Reading Hartshorne’s books it would be difficult to see any significance in that association. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy simply describes Charles Hartshorne as “like Alfred North Whitehead, the son of an

Anglican minister, although many of his ancestors were Quakers” with no reference to his Unitarian Universalist affiliation.<sup>v</sup>

While the process philosophy of A.N. Whitehead, Charles Hartshorne, and John Cobb might provide some philosophical grounds for a *particular* Unitarian belief, it would require someone to explain why process philosophy requires an Unitarian identity and does not work in a non-Unitarian Christian identity or some other identity.<sup>vi</sup> Otherwise, process philosophy is not philosophical grounds for Unitarian belief, but grounds for belief that Unitarians might share with Non-Unitarians. We still have no contemporary basis for Unitarian identity. Buehrens and Church no more suggests Hartshorne and process philosophy as “one facet of contemporary Unitarian Universalist theology” then their advocacy is eroded immediately by an apparent meaninglessness. In that disempowering spirit we have identified, they tell us that no particular doctrine is needed, only “what Channing called ‘practical religion’”; that is, according to Buehrens and Church:

“...supporting one another in our ethical and spiritual living, attempting to bear witness to our highest values in our everyday lives, and in that way having a positive influence on community life...[and].. does not mean a theoretical, spiritual, or mental conformity.”<sup>vii</sup>

When philosophical preciseness is demanded, it is clear that Buehrens and Church are simply talking dribble. First, Channing would never own Buehrens and Church’s definition. Channing would require more than the platitudes they offer for a Unitarian identity. Secondly Buehrens and Church confuse rejection of conformity for rejecting a clearly defined common basis. A particular doctrine is required, especially when non-conformity is a central issue. The failure to clearly articulate a particular doctrine means unnamed political forces exist, hidden behind platitudes, which hold the non-conformity together. I am not suggesting that any conspiracy exists, only that there is always self-interest to prevent probing too deeply into one’s self-identity for fear that we find something fragmented and dislocated. However, credibility and integrity of contemporary Unitarian beliefs --if they are truly ‘Unitarian’-- demand that we can say what precisely ‘our’ is, as in the Buehrens and Church reference to ‘our ethical and spiritual living’ and ‘our highest values’. Our reply is inadequate if simply use unclear adjectival labels or a phrase from a historical figure unfamiliar with the contemporary world we live in.

In the clearly defined Unitarian schools, academics are publishing. There are two different recent examples of academic work produced in ‘Unitarian’ scholarly settings which illustrates useful research but with the much further need of a more systematic approach. I am grateful Thandeka’s treatment of Friedrich Schleiermacher and ‘The Embodied Self’.<sup>viii</sup> Schleiermacher’s notion of the subjective is very important to liberal religion as a whole (both Unitarian and Non-Unitarian), but it is quite unclear how the notion of the ‘Embodied Self’ is distinctly related to Unitarian belief. I am also grateful for Rebecca Parker’s *Proverbs of Ashes*; the notion that violence and suffering do not bring salvation intuitively seems to me an important statement of Unitarian belief.<sup>ix</sup> That it is a philosophical basis for Unitarian identity has yet to be explained. It should be noted that Parker has dual fellowship with the United Methodist Church and the Unitarian Universalist Association.<sup>x</sup> A review of Parker’s recent co-written book described it as “a first step in an interesting but unfinished

theological project”.<sup>xi</sup> Obviously there is a need for a systematic tome to be produced aimed specifically at contemporary Unitarian identity. Such a tome, or tomes, would have to approach the standard of philosophical writing of what appears to be the last ‘heavy-weight’ Unitarian thinker, James Luther Adams. Adams was prolific in producing philosophically-grounded ‘Unitarian’ theology.<sup>xii</sup> Although Adams may be a measure of the task required, Adams himself also fails us in providing current philosophical grounds for distinct Unitarian belief. Adams addressed broadly liberal Christian concerns, and reflected the religious existentialism of his mentor Paul Tillich rather than formulating his own philosophical theology. In Adams’ writing we still struggle with the question about what is distinctly Unitarian.

The question arises, if a contemporary systematic tome which provides philosophical grounds for contemporary Unitarian belief is not available, how is seriously thought-out Unitarian theology being produced? Modern Unitarian-Universalism has generally answered this question by teaching a ‘do-your-own’ (i.e. ‘do-it-yourself’) theology. At one level there is nothing wrong here, and is perfectly in accordance with the principle of liberal religion. However, there is a problem if the ‘do-it-yourself’ theology opens the door to the disempowering attitude that refuses to address the need to provide philosophical grounds for contemporary Unitarian identity. Why should my ‘DIY’ theology be called Unitarian just because the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) runs ‘do-it-yourself’ theology programs? The usual answer is that my ‘DIY’ theology measures up to the UUA Principles, but what makes the UUA Principles ‘Unitarian’? Here we have again returned to the challenge of bridging these principles -- which in isolation are no more than statements that many Non-Unitarians could subscribe to -- with a philosophical articulation and defense of a Unitarian identity.

Of course, there is also a Universalism present, in the case of the Unitarian Universalist Association. The distinction between traditional Unitarian beliefs live out in current times, as typified by most Unitarian congregations outside the United States, and Unitarian-Universalism makes little difference in the need for philosophical grounding, but it does explain something of the difficulty that exists. The temptation is to blame Universalism for the modern (or postmodern) crisis in Unitarian identity. However, the problem is not a basic concept of Universalism -- that there some entities, values or beliefs that do or should exist in all places and all time -- but with a particular -- and in my view -- faulty interpretation of Universalism. I have been using the term ‘Unitarian identity’ in a way that is inclusive of Universalist (religious) doctrine. Here I am thinking of the traditional understanding of ‘Universalist’, meaning that all human entities, and maybe non-human entities as well, are valued equally such that a particular proportion can not be condemned eternally, separated from those deemed to have passed into a form of ‘salvation’. All human entities, or possibly all ‘creation’, are held together by one ultimate force, function, or super-entity. That is what I see as an interpretation philosophically defined in the tradition of Universalists. What, however, has crept into Unitarian-Universalism is a non-philosophically defined interpretation which says, not all human entities or all entities, but *all beliefs* are valued equally such that no belief can be condemned as false, wrong, mistaken, etc, separate from beliefs which are deemed falsely (which is a contradiction within this basic conception) to be truer. I would call this an idealistic egalitarian Universalism, all ideas or beliefs are equally valid. One attempt to give idealistic egalitarian Universalism some justification is to distinguish

between intolerant beliefs and tolerant beliefs, so it is not all beliefs, but *all tolerant beliefs* that are held together by one ultimate force, function, or super-entity. Although on the surface this has some appeal, it is extremely problematic. How do tolerant beliefs tolerate evil? Can no tolerant belief be false? The way out of idealistic egalitarian Universalism is to understand the limits of both believing and knowing. We should be able to believe that some beliefs are false because a concept of evil appears to be still valid as a basis for beliefs about how we experience life. There is proximity between evil and falseness (significantly harmful disempowerment from deception, tragic loss from false promises). This is not to suggest that falseness or error is necessarily evil or bad (fairy stories for children, lying to protect life, fortuitous and fortunate mistakes), but suggests that we may be reluctant to recognize false beliefs because, in recognizing them, evil maybe lurking close by and we fear the discomfort in confronting it. Knowing what beliefs are false is the difficulty. But if we presume to know nothing of the worth of a belief then we have undermined any appeal to ethics. There is too often confusion between postmodern uncertainty and agnostic relativity. To be uncertain does not necessarily lead to the denial of all knowledge. Either we say we know, albeit with a degree of uncertainty, what being identified as Unitarian means and what it does not, or we abandon Unitarian identity altogether. If we say we know, we should be able to communicate it with philosophical preciseness, or else, our assumed knowledge is apparent meaninglessness in any normative sense.

The idealistic egalitarian Universalism is then a non-philosophically defined ideology which is feeding the disempowering attitude. Another factor in feeding the disempowering attitude is an ill-defined, blurred or fluid boundary between Christian and Post-Christian parts of Unitarian identity. Does the contemporary Unitarian identity belong any more within the sphere of Christian religion? Non-American Unitarianism generally is still focused on liberal Christian theology, whereas Unitarian-Universalism encompasses post-Christian and non-Christian identifications along with liberal Christian theology. Both contemporary versions of Unitarian identity rest on the same basic conceptions of liberal religion and religious pluralism but the interpretation of religious pluralism differs, and as with Universalism, there is in some quarters, an assumption that pluralism implies an egalitarianism of beliefs. Even if it is a limited egalitarianism where liberal or process theism, religious humanism, transcendentalism are held together in Unitarian identity, there must be some philosophical basis for holding these collections of beliefs while rejecting anti-religious, or simply non-religious, political ideologies as a sufficient basis. For if there are no clear philosophically-definable religious tenets, all that is holding together these collections of beliefs together is political expediency. Some basic philosophical articulations of complex multiple concepts used to describe Unitarian identity -- liberalism, naturalism, transcendentalism, humanism, and pluralism -- are needed. And – here’s the catch – for Unitarian identity to be justified, it must be explained how all these concepts relate together into one doctrine which is called Unitarian. I have – to date – no evidence that this is happening. It seems to me that, today, much has gone under the name of Unitarian theology which is simply assimilation of ideas from non-Unitarian sources without any philosophical articulation of why those ideas should be treated as distinctly Unitarian. That is the intellectual bankruptcy that the disempowering attitude has brought.

Somewhere along the line Unitarianism has 'dropped the ball'. On one hand, to find notable philosophical articulation and defense of stated Unitarian principles that has a clear Unitarian identity we have to turn to theologians and philosophers that have long departed this world. What living Unitarian identity can gain the attention of the community of philosophers of religion? On the other hand it seems very odd that Unitarians bodies claim to be the places that represent the Unitarian principles of liberal religion, religious pluralism, religious humanism (and so forth), and yet among the leading and respected thinkers on the topics of religious pluralism, theological liberalism, religious humanism none seem to be Unitarian. If one wants an expert opinion on religious pluralism, one would read John Hick and his critics. If one wants to know the current opinion from theological liberalism, one would look to John Spong. If religious humanism is the go, then you would turn to Don Cupitt. In Unitarian literature often references are made to contemporary notable philosophers in the attempt to justify Unitarian belief, but when investigations are made we find little to justify Unitarian distinctiveness. Hence Gordon Kaufman is a Mennonite, and there is little to tie Charles Hartshorne, John Cobb and Process theology to a Unitarian affiliation. There is simply no notable Unitarian voice I can hear, and I find that very strange.

We need to be concern to see Unitarian bodies re-establish their place in wider and current intellectual debates. This can only happen if stated Unitarian principles can be bridged with Unitarian identity.

## References

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- <sup>i</sup> Daniel Walker Howe. *The Unitarian Conscience: Harvard Moral Philosophy 1805-1861*. Harvard University Press 1970, p. 7; Howe cites James Walker in the *Christian Examiner*, 9 (1830), p. 18.
- <sup>ii</sup> Gerald E. Myers. *William James: His Life and Thought*. Yale University Press 1986, p. 464; Myers cites a letter of William James to Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., in 1868 quoted in Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James* Vol. 1, pp. 512-18.
- <sup>iii</sup> Howe, *Op Cit.* p. 1.
- <sup>iv</sup> John A. Buehren and Forrest Church. *A Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism*. Beacon Press 1998, p. 177.
- <sup>v</sup> <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hartshorne/> as of 23 January 2002.
- <sup>vi</sup> Buehren and Church *Op Cit.* pp. 176-177; Rebecca Parker at Starr King studied under John Cobb, and has a special interest in process theology, [http://www.sksm.edu/people/f\\_rebecca.html](http://www.sksm.edu/people/f_rebecca.html) .
- <sup>vii</sup> Buehren and Church *Op Cit.* p 177.
- <sup>viii</sup> Thandeka. *The Embodied Self: Friedrich Schelliermacher's Solution to Kant's Problem of the Empirical Self*. State University of New York Press. 1995.
- <sup>ix</sup> Rita Nakashima Brock and, Rebecca Ann Parker. *Proverbs of Ashes: The Trouble with Redemptive Suffering and the Search for What Saves Us*. Beacon 2001.
- <sup>x</sup> [http://www.sksm.edu/people/f\\_rebecca.html](http://www.sksm.edu/people/f_rebecca.html)
- <sup>xi</sup> Stephen Joseph. Book Review of *Proverbs of Ashes: The Trouble with Redemptive Suffering and the Search for What Saves Us*. *Library Journal*, Nov 15, 2001 v126 i19, p. 71.
- <sup>xii</sup> An example of Adams' theological reflection has been edited by George K. Beach in James Luther Adams. *An Examined Faith: Social Context and Religious Commitment*. Beacon Press 1991.