

# Changing the Words: An Historical Introduction to Unitarian Universalist Hymnody

Jason Shelton

Studies of Unitarian Universalist hymnody have been done before. The works of two men come to mind: Henry Wilder Foote's 1959 compilations *American Universalist Hymn Writers and Hymns* and *American Unitarian Hymn Writers and Hymns* and Eugene B. Navias' 1975 work, *Singing Our History* (written to supplement David Johnson's adult religious education curriculum, *The Disagreements Which Unite Us*). Both of these authors recognized that our hymnbooks have a story to tell, and their work has been most helpful in my own study. However, where Foote and Navias seemed to be more interested in the stories behind the hymns and their authors, I will focus on the hymnbooks themselves.

Why this interest in hymnbooks? It is my contention that a hymnbook represents the theological and ecclesial self-understanding of a religious movement at a particular moment in history. Even for a movement like Unitarian Universalism, which claims to hold no particular text as "sacred" more than any other, our hymnbooks have functioned very much like sacred scripture. They serve as proselytization tools for visitors to our churches by making statements about our common values and beliefs through the theological content of our hymn texts and the variety of musical traditions whence we draw our tunes. Further, we can note the rate of theological evolution in our movement by paying close attention to the longevity of any particular hymnbook – the call for a new hymnbook almost always comes from a sense of the current tome being "out-of-date," of there being something about the book which doesn't quite capture the essence of who and what we are anymore.

And so the purpose of this paper is to sketch a history of Unitarian Universalism by looking at selected hymnbooks from our past. Drawing largely from the prefaces of hymnbooks of the past two centuries, I will attempt to make connections between some of the major movements within the history of our denomination(s) and the way those movements were expressed in common worship through song. The prefaces of our hymnbooks, after all, have often served as a general introduction to Unitarian Universalism for our church's visitors for more than two hundred years. That those first few pages make a clear statement about our identity is both a current necessity and a historical fact.

•

The history of Unitarian and Universalist hymnody begins long before either group could rightfully be called a denomination.<sup>1</sup> <sup>1</sup> In the late eighteenth century, following the lead of the English nonconformists, both Unitarians and Universalists began to compile collections of hymns. Until this time the vast majority of music sung in the Protestant churches had been metrical (or poetic) settings of the psalms. These new hymns gave birth to a new genre: sacred poetry. The first Universalist hymnbook printed in the United States was John Murray's 1776 reprint of James Rely's *Christian Hymns* (1770). The liberal Congregationalists, who would later accept the moniker Unitarian, saw their first hymnbook published in 1783, when *Collection of Hymns --- designed for the use of the West Society of Boston* appeared.

What is remarkable about these early hymnbooks is not so much what they contain, but what they do *not* contain. Putting together a hymnbook is an act of compilation. The compiler or editorial committee charged with the task of assembling a hymnbook culls the hymnbooks of the past, makes choices regarding the inclusion of the previous hymnbooks' selections, and then adds new material.<sup>2</sup> <sup>2</sup> Many of the early "Unitarian" hymnbook compilers were sharply criticized by their fellow Congregationalists for the omission or alteration of certain "favorite" hymns whose texts were deemed out of line with the religious sentiment of the community. Almost from the beginning, Unitarians and Universalists were disparaged for changing the words of hymns to suit their particular needs. It was these needs, however, that would define their movements as distinct from the mainstream of American Protestantism in the years that followed.

The Rev. Jeremy Belknap (1744-1798), the first Congregational minister of Boston's Federal Street Church (having previously been a Presbyterian church) is often better remembered as William Ellery Channing's predecessor than for his own unique contributions to Unitarianism. However, Belknap's hymnbook, *Sacred Poetry: consisting of Psalms and Hymns adapted to Christian devotion in publick [sic] and private. Selected from the best authors, with variations and additions* (1795), was to serve as the principal Unitarian hymnal for nearly forty years. Belknap had hoped to compile a hymnal which would prove satisfactory to both the liberal and conservative branches of New England Congregationalism. In the preface to the hymnbook Belknap writes:

In this selection, those Christians who do not scruple to sing praises to their Redeemer and Sanctifier, will find materials for such a sublime enjoyment; whilst others, whose tenderness of conscience may oblige them to confine their addresses to the Father only, will find no deficiency of matter suited to their idea of the chaste and awful spirit of devotion.<sup>3</sup> <sup>3</sup>

In the end, however, Belknap's vision of a hymnbook which would meet the needs of both sides of the growing Unitarian controversy proved shortsighted as the Congregationalists eventually split in two in the early nineteenth century.

The compilers of the earliest hymnals admit quite freely that they have made at times substantial changes to the texts of their chosen hymns "in all cases where it was deemed necessary." <sup>4</sup> However, they are generally not explicit in stating the theological underpinnings for their editorial decisions. A brash yet charming exception is the Rev. George Rogers, who compiled a hymnal for his Universalist congregation in Cincinnati in 1842. This extended quote from his preface makes exceedingly clear just what kind of editorial methods he used in putting his hymnbook together, and makes a compelling statement about the theological direction of Universalism (and Unitarianism, for that matter) in the mid-nineteenth century. Note that Rogers speaks of himself in the second person:

In another aim...he hopes to have succeeded more to the satisfaction of all concerned, viz., in that of making his book, throughout, consistent with the good sense, and religious sentiments, of the denomination for whose use it is more especially designed. That this is an aim of no very easy accomplishment he has fully experienced, and he is therefore the more disposed to excuse the failures in this respect, which are exhibited in the several previous compilations of hymns for the use of Universalists...for much they did toward the fulfillment of this object, by their judicious alterations of many of their selected hymns, whereby the labor of the present compilations was materially lessened.

Much, nevertheless, *very* much, remained to be done in the way afore-mentioned, and there was no labor connected with his undertaking, which the undersigned found at once to be so difficult and delicate – *delicate*, because he experienced a sincere repugnance at altering hymns that in other respects were really excellent, especially those of them that had become so familiar by frequent use, that their very errors were respected by the *feelings*, however clearly condemned by the judgment. Many supplicatory hymns addressed to Christ are of this category. But, the undersigned respectfully submits, whether Universalists (who are also Unitarians) *can*, conscientiously, address prayer to Jesus Christ? Do the scriptures any where – did the Savior himself at any time, warrant such a practice? The undersigned thinks not, and, consequently, he has guarded against the error in this book.

And, together with several other errors which he was careful to exclude, is that of pharisaically addressing one class of men under the appellation of *saints*, and another under that of *sinner*s – a thing quite foreign from the practice of either the Savior or his apostles. Jesus more commonly employed toward sinful men the term, "friends," and in *no single instance*, in a direct address to them, did he call them *sinner*s...The undersigned pleads these considerations as his apology for omitting these offensive distinctions wherever it was practicable, and for substituting other less invidious forms of address as the measure and accent of the piece in each case would admit of. <sup>5</sup>

Even greater theological distance from mainstream Protestant Christianity can be seen in the work of Samuel Longfellow and Samuel Johnson. These two Unitarians compiled their first hymnal, *A Book of Hymns for Public and Private Devotion* (1846), while they were students at Harvard Divinity School. Along with their second hymnal, *Hymns of the Spirit* (1865), these two men introduced Unitarian worshippers to some of the finest American poetry of the mid-nineteenth century, and were by no little measure influenced by the Transcendentalist school.

Their hymnbooks reflected a growing Unitarian emphasis on theism over strict Christianity, and they are imbued with the evolving natural theology of the time. As they state in the preface to *Hymns of the Spirit*:

Gathered around the central idea of God as the Present Spirit and the Indwelling Life of all, these Hymns will be found to present Nature as His outward manifestation; the human Spirit as His more intimate revealer, and its experiences as the steps of its growth in union with Him; human Life as the doing and bearing His will; and Human history as the process of His education of the race. 6<sup>6</sup>

To this end, Longfellow and Johnson made at times drastic adaptations and revisions to many familiar hymn texts.

While their hymnbooks never quite gained the popularity of those of their predecessors, they did serve as primary source material for many of the later Unitarian hymnbooks, and many of their hymns can still be found in our current book, *Singing the Living Tradition* (1993).

In the nineteenth century, Unitarians and Universalists produced more than fifty hymnbooks – far more than any other single denomination. Given the relative size of the movements, this number reflects both their remarkable artistic and literary productiveness as well as their tendency toward individualism (many hymnals were produced by ministers for the use of their own congregations). It was not until the latter part of the century that each of the denominations more or less sanctioned the publication of an "official" hymnbook.

The first hymnbook to be published by the American Unitarian Association was *Hymn and Tune Book for the Church and the Home* (1868). Among the notable advances of this hymnbook was the coupling of hymn texts and tunes – a practice heretofore unseen in Unitarian hymnbooks.<sup>7</sup> The compilers admit that they made no special effort to find new hymns for inclusion in their book – they simply selected from among the best work available to them. The growing conflict between those of a purely theistic orientation and those who ascribed a more prominent role to Jesus is seen clearly in the preface:

In respect to a class of hymns addressed to Christ, as to the propriety of which there are considerable difference of opinion among us, the rule followed has been inclusive rather than exclusive: to insert hymns expressive of the highest standard of Christian faith, and ascribing to the Saviour all that is rightfully implied in his mediatorship and his own solemn assertions, - "I and my Father are one;" and "he that honoreth the Son honoreth the Father. 8<sup>8</sup>

This hymn book was completely revised in both 1877 and 1914, and was the most widely used hymnbook in the denomination during the period.

It was not, however, the only hymnbook around. Growing tensions between the establishment of the denomination in Boston and the more radical factions in the western states can be seen in the hymnbooks of the Western Unitarian Conference in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. This group, which would later play a significant role in giving birth to the Humanist Manifesto in 1932, trumpeted a "rising faith" which looked

radically different from that of their New England counterparts. Their hymnbook, *Unity Hymns and Chorals*, was first published in 1880. A revised edition, more concretely Humanist in tone, was issued in 1911. This excerpt is from the Preface to the revised edition:

As before, our hymns reflect the religious feelings underlying what is called the Liberal Faith, - feelings of moral longing and consecration, of dependence on the One in All, of childlike trust in the Eternal Goodness, of happy thankfulness for life, of free communion between man and man in brotherhood, and between the child-soul and the indwelling Father-Soul. There are not so many hymns of Duty, Brotherhood and Service in the book as we had hoped, - mainly because such hymns, in singing and poetic forms, are not yet many in the world. But there is more than the usual proportion of herald-songs, - songs of the Good-to-Be. More, also, than is common of hymns touched with a sense of wonder and beauty of Nature, and of what may perhaps be deemed "poems" rather than "hymns." Songs suffused with the thought and feeling, without the name, of God will be used increasingly as "hymns," we think. The imagery of Christian hymns has been largely borrowed from a drama of salvation now passing out of credence; its place will be taken by imagery drawn from Nature and life, - and this is almost equivalent to saying that "hymns" are likely to broaden in their scope, and, in broadening, to grow more poetic and more beautiful. 9<sup>9</sup>

The compilers also make no apologies for the considerable changes they have made to many of the hymn texts:

The editors belong with those who think that the honor due the maker of a noble hymn is best ensured and manifested, not by a scrupulous care to retain his exact words or else pass by his good work altogether, but by claiming reverent right to change his words, when change will prolong his service, and the gratitude felt for it, to after-generations. Many a hymn achieved its immortality in this way, - by alteration that fits it better to the needs of changing faith and taste....All rich, impressive "liturgy" abounds in echoes, as it ought; but in echoes, not in exact quotations. 10<sup>10</sup>

While the Unitarians were wrangling with issues of theological identity, the Universalists were also demonstrating their shift in denominational emphasis through the development of new hymnbooks. Adin Ballou edited *The Hopedale Collection of Hymns and Songs, For the Use of Practical Christians* in 1849. According to Foote, the term "practical Christians" refers to those "who were seeking to apply Christian teachings to the social problems of the time." 11<sup>11</sup> This collection, with its particular focus on ethical behavior and social justice, highlights the growing importance of the "social gospel" for the denomination. The hymnbook became the denominational standard when it evolved into *Church Harmonies* in 1877 (the first hymnbook published by the Universalist Publishing House), and was again updated as *Church Harmonies New and Old* in 1895.

In the early twentieth century, as both the Unitarians and Universalists were preparing to revise their most current hymnbooks, a proposal was made that their respective Commissions on Hymns and Services "should cooperate in editing jointly a book to be recommended to the two groups of churches." 12<sup>12</sup> The result was *Hymns of the Spirit* (1937), a title obviously recycled from Longfellow and Johnson's 1865 hymnbook. In addition to

hymns, the Commissions prepared a book of Services for use in the "Churches of the Free Spirit." Here, in no uncertain terms, was a concrete admission of the essential theological and liturgical commonality of the two denominations, though it would be another twenty-five years before their administrative components could make the same connection. At the same time, the Commissions hoped in vain that their work would prove useful to other religious movements which had become loosely associated in the Free Church movement.

The rationale guiding the editorial work of the Commission was similar to what we have seen previously. Of primary concern was the inclusion of hymns in line with the ever-evolving ideology of the liberal churches:

The editors have particularly sought for hymns with a strong ethical note, which emphasize the newer social applications of religion, and for hymns which give expression to modern conceptions of the human soul and its relation to the universe. Satisfactory new hymns, in which these ideas are phrased in adequate literary form for public worship, are not numerous...

A hymn book intended for continued service by a given constituency cannot be, on the one hand, merely an anthology of the great hymns of the ages, for a large proportion of even the great hymns written by the generations that are gone express other ideas and ideals than those of today. They have their secure place in the literature of Christian devotion as the classic utterances of the soul's aspiration and conviction, but they often speak a language which we cannot make our own. Such is inevitably the case wherever religion is regarded as a living experience forever taking on new forms with the passing centuries, rather than as a fixed and static revelation to which no man may add and from which none may take anything away.

But, on the other hand, the hymn book should not be too narrowly limited in its range of thought and expression by a sectarian dogmatism which harps upon only a few of the many strings which give utterance to the religious life. And, while fresh and living expressions of modern thought should be welcomed, it must be remembered that propagandist verse, written primarily to advocate a particular or a passing point of view, whether theological or sociological, seldom rises above the level of doggerel or has any lasting value, however true for the moment may seem the sentiment which it strives to express...

So far as the great hymns of the church can still be used as a genuine utterance of a living faith, they have been retained. So far as modern hymns express the thought of our day in a reasonable acceptable lyrical form, they have been eagerly accepted... And they have also included a limited number of hymns, especially among those for Christmas and in the group at the end of the book, which are endeared to not a few people by tradition, although they may express theological ideas no longer held in a literal sense... 13<sup>13</sup>

When the two denominations did finally consolidate in 1961, the new Unitarian Universalist Association quickly set about to producing its first hymnbook. Published in 1964, *Hymns for the Celebration of Life* continued the same tradition of combining the best of classic and contemporary hymnody with no apparent aversion to making textual adjustments as the hymnbook commission deemed necessary. Of note was the inclusion of a large number of American folk tunes into the hymnbook repertoire, with the accompanying recognition of the expanding pool of musical and cultural resources from which Unitarian Universalists might draw for use in common worship. Not long after its publication, however, social unrest and upheaval made clear some of the problems and limitations of this latest hymnbook.

The women's movement and the growth of feminism in the latter portion of the twentieth century brought attention to issues of gender and language on an unprecedented scale. As early as the late 1960's, it became clear that the use of words such as man, mankind, and brotherhood would no longer be acceptable as terms which were meant to include all of humanity under their masculine umbrella. Some congregations set about the task of editing their existing hymnals on their own, highlighting problematic words and offering alternatives in the margins.

The concern with language extended beyond references to humankind. Many felt it unacceptable to continue referring to God in gender-exclusive language (He, Father, Lord), and thus sought thorough revisions of our liturgical language as well. The UUA's Commission on Common Worship offered several paperback versions of revised hymns from *Hymns for the Celebration of Life*, recognizing that the unfolding concern for inclusive language reduced the usable portion of the hymnbook from 327 hymns to 58. From the preface to the 1978 edition of *Hymns in New Form*:

The history of hymnody is a history of amending and altering words and music to fit current needs. Changes are prompted sometimes for psychological, sometimes for theological reasons. This collection of revisions for many of the most popular hymns in Unitarian Universalist congregations thus continues a historical process.

We seek to move beyond gender in the language of our worship. The old patriarchal forms are contrary to present needs and ideals. If any portion of a congregation feels excluded by the words sung or spoken in unison, the words fail to express the intended community. If religious language perpetuates views of the divine or the human in purely masculine forms, it runs contrary to our best understanding. Just as in the past Universalists removed hell and Unitarians eliminated the Trinity by recasting old hymns, this brief collection provides changes that should make many hymns more appropriate for our time...

This collection is produced in paperback form to indicate the open ended nature of our work. We hope others will join us in the process of rewriting existing hymns and writing new words and new music to create a Unitarian Universalist hymnody that is truly inclusive. 14<sup>14</sup>

The 25 hymns of the 1978 collection were expanded to 51 in 1988. At that same time a newly appointed Hymnbook Resources Commission had already begun working on a new hymnbook that would represent Unitarian Universalism into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. *Singing the Living Tradition* (1993) builds on the best traditions of previous hymnbooks, is conscious of language issues, and makes a bold step forward in the exploration of words and music of cultures not generally associated with the movement. Though some smaller publications had begun to include hymns or songs from various cultures mid-century, *Singing the Living Tradition* was the first standard denominational hymnbook to include songs from Unitarians in Eastern Europe, spirituals from the African American tradition, folk and popular songs, music of major, non-Christian religious traditions, and chants and rounds gathered from the various traditions of the world.

All of this diversity was inspired by the Association's accepted statement of principles and purposes in the mid-1980's. That we now recognize a broad base of sources from which we build our religious foundation necessitates a wider range of musical possibility than a "traditional" hymnbook could provide, and the Hymnbook Resources Commission responded to their challenge by giving us a gift which represents us better than many dared to hope possible. Yet there is already talk of creating a supplement to *Singing the Living Tradition* which would consist of new, recently composed materials, and even more selections which meet our expanding concerns for multi-culturalism and religious pluralism.

Our hymnbooks represent who and what we are at a given moment in history. Because ours is a living faith, we sing a living tradition – one which must constantly change if it is to continue to reflect an accurate picture of our religious community. I am reminded of a hymn, Creation's Lord, We Give Thee Thanks (#311 in *Hymns of the Spirit*), written by William De Witt Hyde in 1903. The hymn appears in *Singing the Living Tradition*, though it seems doubtful that Hyde would recognize it, having undergone extensive adaptation by Beth Ide (#289 – Creative Love Our Thanks We Give). Nonetheless, the final stanza is almost untouched from its original form:

Since what we choose is what we are,  
And what we love we yet shall be,  
The goal may ever shine afar –  
The will to reach it makes us free.

In keeping with the tradition, of course, I feel compelled to change the words to fit my own needs:

Since what we *sing* is what we are...

May it continue to be so.

---

<sup>1</sup> Much of the material in this section is drawn from Henry Wilder Foote's *American Universalist Hymn Writers and Hymns* and *American Unitarian Hymn Writers and Hymns*, both compiled in January 1959. These were submitted to the Hymn Society of America for inclusion in a proposed Dictionary of American Hymnody. It is unclear whether such a volume was ever produced. I discovered Foote's texts in typed manuscript form in the Meadville/Lombard Theological School library – whether they were ever officially published is also unclear.

<sup>2</sup> Especially in the cases where the hymnbook was assembled by a single compiler, most of the new hymns were the work of said compiler. An interesting if arduous method of self-promotion for a writer.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Foote, *American Unitarian Hymn Writers and Hymns*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>4</sup> Sebastian and Russell Streeter, compilers, *The New Hymn Book, Designed for Universalist Societies: Compiled from Approved Authors, with Variations and Additions*, (Boston: Thomas Whittemore, 1829), Preface (page unnumbered).

<sup>5</sup> George Rogers, compiler, *Universalist Hymn Book: Comprising a Great Variety of Sacred Effusions, Original and Selected; Suitable to the Livelier as Well as Graver Purposes of Devotion*, (Cincinnati: R.P. Brooks, 1842), pp. 3-4.



---

<sup>6</sup> Samuel Longfellow and Samuel Johnson, *Hymns of the Spirit* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1865), Preface (page unnumbered).

<sup>7</sup> The permanent association of a particular hymn text with a particular tune is a fairly recent phenomenon. Earlier books would print only the text, then simply note the meter of the text (8.6.8.6., or C.M., for example), to which the accompanist would match a suitable tune from a collection which was generally published separately from the hymnbook.

<sup>8</sup> *Hymn and Tune Book, for the Church and the Home* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1868), p. iv. The book was compiled by an editorial committee, whose names are not listed.

<sup>9</sup> William C. Gannett and Frederick L. Hosmer, *Unity Hymns and Chorals: Revised and Enlarged* (Chicago: Unity Publishing Company, 1911), p. iv.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. v.

<sup>11</sup> Foote, *American Universalist Hymn Writers and Hymns* (1959), p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> *Hymns of the Spirit: for use in the Free Churches of America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1937), p. v.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. v-vii.

<sup>14</sup> *25 Familiar Hymns in New Form from Hymns for the Celebration of Life* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1979), Preface (page unnumbered).