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Unitarianism: Where Did We Come From?

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Unitarianism: where did we come from? What a question! There is a story of a young boy who asked his mother that same question, “Mum, where did I come from?” After a long and awkward explanation of the birds and the bees, the wide-eyes child replied, “Oh, my friend said she came from Lebanon and I was wondering...” As with all Where did we come from questions, we quickly get over our heads and find out more than we ever wished to know. I hope this is not the case this morning.

Our theme today could take us several weeks, months maybe, and would, most probably, stretch my knowledge of things historical and theological further than it goes. Much of what I want to say I have already said in one form or another and has been said by others. As Elizabeth Speyer has said in her new book, (*Beneath The Surface*), quoting André Gide, “Everything important has already been said. But no one was listening, so it must be said again.” Consider what I have to say as another, not likely my last, kick at the can. I hope someone is listening.”

The topic of who birthed our Unitarian movement may not excite you or inspire courtroom battles, like the recently one over the baby lost after Tsunami, yet I do believe that our future as a movement depends upon a more accurate storying of our history. A few weeks ago Charles Eddis gave us a glimpse of our Canadian Unitarian history. History, à la Charles, is never dull. I want this morning to take us further back into our history and, more than anything else, I want to plant a question in your mind. I want to raise a doubt.

The way we story ourselves into being, the way we spin our past, obviously shapes the present and either limits or expands our future possibilities. Too often in history, we all know, that the one who controls the spin, or the one who gets his spin counted as truth, is usually the winner of wars and debates, whether political or theological. Our reading this morning about the founding of The United States of America is a case in point. No matter how many times George Bush tries to maintain that America was founded on Christian principles, the facts contradict him. The founding of America is much more deist, if not Unitarian, rather than Christian and owes more to the Enlightenment than to Jesus. Brooke Allen writes,

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Our nation was founded not on Christian principles but on Enlightenment ones. God only entered the picture as a very minor player, and Jesus was conspicuously absent ... The Founding Fathers were not religious men, and they fought hard to erect, in Thomas Jefferson' s words, a wall of separation between church and state ... If (Jefferson) had been completely scrupulous, he would have described himself as a deist who admired the ethical teachings of Jesus as a man rather than as the son of God....(a Unitarian in other words) ...not a Christian at all. (“Our Godless Constitution”, Brooke Allen, The Nation, February 21, 2005)

Might our world not be a safer and more tolerant place for diversity if the USA were to embrace a more Unitarian story of its founding?

Now, on to things Unitarian. As Unitarians what spin are we putting on our past, what perspectives are we trying to birth into being and establish as truth? R. D. Laing once said, *‘The range of what we think and do is limited by what we fail to notice.’* What are we failing to notice as Unitarians? At the present time you know that Canadian Unitarian congregations are talking about rewriting the principles and sources – Yea, I know, changing them before most of us have even learned the old ones, sorry. The committee has come up with a draft statement of shared values and aspirations, based on what we told them and we are now being asked for our responses. Do the suggested words and phrases highly resonate with us, mildly resonate, mildly irritate or highly irritate us? This morning I want to speak about one phrase that, I must admit, highly irritates me.

The draft statement felt the need to make a comment or two on our historical roots, to ‘out’ our parents, as it were. I think they should have done a more thorough DNA testing. The draft statement reads, “From our historical roots within Protestant Christianity, we have drawn on the Unitarian challenge to Church doctrine and the Universalist belief in unconditional divine love.”



Apart from short shifting both Unitarianism and Universalism in that brief statement, what highly irritates me is tracing our roots back to Protestant Christianity. Like Bush, if we repeat this often enough someone might actually believe it to be true. Is this an accurate statement? When you are asked, do you say that Unitarianism finds its roots in Protestant Christianity? What makes you say that? Do the facts hold up the assertion? Let's go deeper.

Within Unitarian circles there are three main stories about how we were conceived. Three parents, as it were, are contending for the child. One parent is Protestant, one parent is Catholic and the third parent is not even Christian. Most credible historians cite a complex genetic makeup. If this is so, why is it today that the party line, like the one in our draft statement, speaks only of one parent, as if we were miraculously conceived outside of some heavy duty cross-breeding?

Being Unitarian, of course, all three potential parents involve us with books and learning – hardly a surprise. – “What is a book (someone once asked)? Paper, cardboard, vellum, calfskin, glue, ink? (A book is) the embodiment of our ideas, the corporal representation of our souls? (*Out of The Flames*, Lawrence & Nancy Goldstone) Each of our potential parents and their books give shape to the corporal representation of the soul that is Unitarianism in very different ways.

Let's begin with parent number one: Protestant Christianity, and in particular ask which part of Protestant Christianity do we wish to claim as our biological parent? Obviously not main-line Protestantism. The idea of punishing 'heretics' was so pervasive in main-line Protestant Christianity that it didn't even occur to most thinking Protestants that killing someone for their beliefs was un-Christian. (Sebastian Castellio and *The Struggle for Freedom of Conscience*, papers published in *Essays in the Philosophy of Humanism*, eds. D.R. Finch and M. Hillar, Vol. 10, 2002, pp 31-56) No, this isn't the part of Protestant Christianity we want to claim. Ours would have to be a more tolerant Protestant Christianity, right?

Neither do we want to claim as parent a Protestant Christianity, which began by making powerful critiques of Catholicism, (and) quickly turned their guns on each other, producing a bewildering array of churches each claiming the exclusive path to salvation. (The Enlightenment www.wsu.edu)



No, no, our Protestant Christian parent would need to be more of a free thinker, a more rational Protestant Christianity. When we look more closely at the statement that we are rooted in Protestant Christianity, we must admit that we are so rooted only in a very nuanced way. To claim Protestant Christianity as parent we must look to the very margins of Protestant Christianity.

This Protestant birth story usually takes us to a book written in 1531 by a Spanish Protestant named Michael Servetus. Servetus was a radical within a Protestant Christianity that had lost its nerve. The Reformation had quickly calcified and become reactionary. Main-line Protestantism was enraged by this young upstart Servetus who, at only 42 years of age, boldly challenged Protestantism on its own theological compromises. Servetus' book *On the Errors of the Trinity*, opened up a can of worms that main-line Protestant reformers, Luther, Calvin and Zwingly, had agreed not to open, in other words the Trinity. Main-line Protestantism knew that the Trinity was not in the Bible and had arisen as a theological-philosophical concept, growing out of a political compromise in the year 325 of our Common Era at the Council of Nicaea. The problem was that for Protestant Christianity too this concept had become "The holiest concept in Christianity." In addition to liking the power it gave them, they feared that Protestantism might split apart if the Trinity were debated openly. In other words they chose not to discuss the elephant in the room, all that is, except Servetus. Ironically, without Servetus' book the Protestant churches might well have later rejected the Nicene Creed and adopted Servetus' view of the Trinity. (*Out of the Flames*, , 71, 73)

It was more biblical anyway. Main-line Protestantism, the parent we want to reject, and in particular The Geneva Council, instigated by John Calvin himself, was so furious with Servetus that they had him burnt at the stake on October 27, 1553, accusing him of being an Anabaptist and Antitrinitarian.

You must know all or most of this by now. Yet, usually when we cite this radical edge of Protestantism we are less than truthful, and are often very selective as to which parts of Servetus' biological heritage we want to claim as our own. We often leave off the part about Servetus' motivation. He challenged main-line Protestantism in order to restore purity to Christian doctrines so that Protestants – real Protestants that is – would be more successful in converting Muslims and Jews to a purer Christianity.



Within this Protestant Christian story of our lineage, Unitarians also like to cite another person and his books, this time a French Protestant named Sebastion Chastillon, who usually goes by the name Castellio. Have we here found a more suitable Protestant parent? Maybe we are getting warmer. Earle Morse Wilbur, noted Unitarian historian, believes that Castellio, more than Servetus, should be credited as the founder of liberal Protestantism, particularly because of the three religious concepts that he preached, namely 'Freedom Reason and Tolerance'. These three concepts, as Philip Hewett has pointed out, (Racovia) were first advanced by the Italian scholar Francesco Ruffini.

The year after Servetus was murdered (1554), Castellio anonymously wrote a small book: the short version of the title reads simply Concerning Heretics (De haeretics). Its contents and implications were anything but simple. The preface, written by Castellio himself, citing ancient and contemporary sources, outlines a concept of religious toleration. (*Sebastian Castellio 1515-1563*, Guggisburg, p. 87, 89) His second book *Conta libellum Calvini*, not published till 1612, was a direct attack on John Calvin and his ideas, accusing him of cruelty, rashness, lack of love and lust to kill. In it he accuses Calvin of murder and states one of his most famous phrases, "to kill a man does not mean the defence of a doctrine, but the death of a man."

If we are honest with ourselves here too, the Protestant Christianity even of Castellio does not quite suit us either. Castellio required belief in two fundamentals: belief in God and in Jesus Christ the Saviour. He was indifferent to other religious doctrines and so could be tolerant towards those who ignored or denied them. If, on the other hand, you didn't fall into line over these two beliefs you were a heretic and he would abandon you to the magistrates for punishment. Castellio, quite frankly, hated heretics of this sort. His quarrel was with the method of punishment and with the arbitrary designation of who was a 'heretic.' (*Sebastian Castellio and the Struggle for Freedom of Conscience* published in the *Philosophy of Humanism*, eds. D.R. Finch and M. Hillar Vol 10, 2002)

"Truth is not found in the names but in the acts ...but if they deny God, if they blaspheme, if they overtly speak ill of the holy doctrine of the Christians, if they detest the holy life of the pious, I abandon them to the magistrates for punishment, not because of their religion, which they do not have, but because of their irreligion." (*Sebastian Castellio and the*



Struggle for Freedom of Conscience, in the Philosophy of Humanism, eds. D.R. Finch and M. Hillar Vol 10, 2002)

So, where are we in all of this? If we subtract all of the parts of Protestant Christianity that we don't want to be associated with, and those parts that don't want to associate with us, our claim to be rooted in Protestant Christianity gets rather thin, doesn't it? We are only able to claim the most marginal parts, the Anabaptists and those people that Protestant Christianity either burned or persecuted. Is this really enough for us to claim that our roots are found here?

Let's face it; the spirit that is Unitarian never lived peacefully within Protestantism. Main-line Protestantism has always tried to push us out. Each time we have tried to demand a place within Protestant Christianity there has been a howl and cry against us, whether that was in Boston or here in Montreal. Let's not forget that the first minister of this congregation, Rev. David Hughes, who died of cholera in 1832 after only delivering four sermons, poor dead Rev. Hughes was denounced openly in a Montreal newspaper (the *Courant*.) His obituary read, "His sudden departure would be borne by his brother-Unitarians in the spirit of Christian resignation." A letter to the editor begged to differ and denounced the whole obituary as a snare, a trap for unsuspecting Christians. "Christian resignation, These are roguish expressions designed to gull Christians... a Unitarian is no more a Christian than an Arian, or a Jew is one. (*Montreal's Unitarians 1832-2000*) This is 1832.

Protestant Christianity has always been wise enough to call a spade a spade and to say that we were not really Christian no matter how many adjectives we put in front of the word: liberal, radical or Unitarian. If we define Christian as a person who believes in the divinity of Jesus Christ, then it is safe to say that we are not Christian at all and have not been since Arius in the 4th century of our Common Era. I have never really understood our desperation to be considered rooted in Protestant Christianity anyway. Did the spirit that is Unitarian not simply pass through Protestant Christianity, more often than not as an unwelcome guest? The spirit that was Unitarian was larger than anything Protestant Christianity had to offer or could contain.

Enter potential parent number two. This parent is to be found in the Catholic Christianity of Italy, of all places. Earl Morse Wilbur said, "The first springs of the Socinian-Unitarian



movement ... are to be found not in the Protestant lands to the North, but in Catholic Italy,” and Charles Eddis in his pamphlet *What Unitarians Affirm* states, “The emphasis on sensible, ethical religion which characterizes Unitarianism goes back to a reform movement of Christians in Italy in the 1530s and 1540s who drew on humanism and enlightened Catholicism of Erasmus as much as on Protestant thought.” Both authors point to Catholic Italy as a parent of our movement. Might we find suitable parents within these Italian Catholic intellectuals who, were led to regard the traditional dogmas more in the light of philosophy than in that of theology and while still maintaining an outward conformity to the (Catholic) church, they were often, even in clerical circles, at heart more pagan than Christian? (Wilbur Vol. 1, p. 77)

Maybe we should claim a fifteenth century Italian named Lorenzo Valla (1407-57) who was secretary to Pope Nicholas V as our parent? He was a man who greatly influenced Erasmus who in turn influenced Castello. Lorenzo Valla, though a priest, attacked medieval traditions with such boldness and independence of thought that he was accused of heresy and anticipated many of the views of the Protestant reformers. We might look to another Italian Catholic friar as parent: Bernadio Ochino. Ochino, a fifteenth and sixteenth century Capuchin friar was vicar general of the order. He was so radical no one wanted him. He fled the inquisition only in turn to have to flee from the Calvinists.

There was also an Italian Catholic woman in the group who might merit consideration as a parent of our movement. Her name was Olympia Morata. Born in 1526, her father encouraged her rare genius by immersing her in Greek, Latin and the classics. She explored astronomy, meteorology, botany, zoology; writing at age sixteen. She too was so radical and dangerous that she had to flee the inquisition in 1551.

Obviously the spirit of freedom, reason, tolerance and plain guts was not limited to, and quite frankly at times absent from, Protestant Christianity. It was certainly to be found in these Italian Catholic intellectuals. One Protestant parent, one Catholic parent, should we stop our search here or maybe we need to look even further afield to find a suitable parent that embraces the height and breadth of our great movement? Maybe the spirit that birthed Unitarianism only passed through, and frankly lived somewhat uncomfortably, within Christianity, both of the Protestant and Catholic variety?



As I said at the beginning, there is a third contender for the title of parent of our movement. This spin on our story takes us outside of Christianity altogether and beyond the reform movements within Catholicism and Protestantism. The spirit that birthed us was perhaps too large to be contained by any one faith tradition. Perhaps the only parent worthy of the name is to be found within the restless, subversive, heart of humankind itself. Maybe it is most accurate to say that we are children of the Enlightenment and before that children of the Renaissance.

What was the Renaissance, that marvellous period of 15th century human history? “It is great rather for what it designed than by what it achieved, that period which paved the way for the ‘*éclaircissement*’ the Enlightenment of the 18th Century. One scholar of the period describes its aims this way. “To reconcile forms of sentiment which at first sight seem incompatible, to adjust the various products of the human mind to each other in one many-sided type of intellectual culture, to give humanity, for heart and imagination to feed upon, as much as it could possibly receive.” (*The Renaissance, Stories in Art and Poetry*). Is this not the spirit called Unitarian? Is it not from such a parent that we learned to embrace complexity rather than the simplified, unified, authoritarian and in many ways false, systems imposed by Catholicism or Protestantism.

“The movement of the 15th century was twofold: partly the Renaissance, partly the coming of what is called the ‘modern spirit’ with its realism, its appeal to experience: it comprehends a return to Antiquity and a return to nature.” (*The Renaissance, Stories in Art and Poetry*, p. 31,113) Our first source claims ‘direct experience’ as the first source of religious knowledge, rather God or a sacred text or creeds or tradition. Is this not the spirit called Unitarian? Did this genetic material not come directly from the Renaissance? Roland Bainton, one of the foremost and respected authorities on the history of Christianity states, “The cardinal notes of the Renaissance are held to have been freedom, emancipation, individuality and the capacity of man to mould his destiny. The Renaissance was Promethean.”

(R. Bainton, *Early and Medieval Christianity*, p. 204)

Is this not the spirit called Unitarian? Was it not from this bursting, subversive and questioning spirit of humankind that Unitarianism was born?



The Renaissance called us to look scientifically at the world the way it was, not as we might like to believe that it was and to develop curiosity and objectivity. Bainton continues, “The Renaissance was subversive to authoritarian religious systems offering instead syncretism, relativism and the tolerance of all religions.” (R. Bainton *Early and Medieval Christianity* p. 207/8) Is this not closer to a parent worthy of the name?

Perhaps the birthplace of Unitarianism cannot be contained within Christianity or even within Western thought. Might we not dare to claim all those who asked why ; those “*libres penseurs*” who challenged claims of absolute truth or obedience? Might we not claim women and men of all traditions, religious and secular alike, who dared to question, whether Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish or Muslim?

I must end here. I hope that I have planted a seed of doubt in your mind or at least muddied the waters some. I hope that the next time you are asked where Unitarianism came from, you will stop before claiming too quickly that Protestant Christianity alone or even primarily was our parent.

You might ask, “What difference does it make how we spin our story?” I think it matters a great deal. How we tell our story shapes who we will become. To define our roots within Christianity limits us, and at times causes us to hesitate from going boldly beyond Christianity and even beyond religion altogether. An inadequate story holds us back from exploring new language and form, holds us back from exploring new names for ourselves, beyond church and congregation, and keeps us pretending to be who we are not and never were. What might happen within our movement if we dared to embrace a more expansive story of our origins? I’d love to see where we might fly.