

## **A Unitarian Perspective on Joseph Smith**

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The year is 1803. Ralph Waldo Emerson was born, a personal hero of mine although he felt mostly antipathy towards the clergy. He said it was the better part of a man that moved him to resign from the ministry, which is exactly what he did after four brief years as a Unitarian minister in Boston's Second Church. Emerson maintained that God builds his temple in the heart on the ruins of churches and religion.

In 1803 Lucy Smith, still two years out from delivering her son Joseph Smith, felt she wasn't going to survive much of anything, that she was, in fact, destined to die soon. She wanted a minister to baptize her so that her soul would be right with God so God would look more kindly upon her when the day came. But the problem was she couldn't find a minister anywhere to perform the rites of baptism. With evangelical piety soaring at dizzying heights, all the righteous preachers around Tunbridge, Vermont required proof of church membership before ministering any rituals. The Smiths were religious people without belonging to a church; Lucy her whole life had vowed to serve God with all her heart.

It's 1803 and William Ellery Channing who would eventually become the architect of American Unitarianism preached his first Thanksgiving sermon, permeated with human sin, the depravity of human nature, and the threat of divine retribution. He declared, "There is nothing in us to recommend us to God. Sinners as we are, we are vile in his sight. Our sins cry out to God for unmingled vengeance." Even the precursors to Unitarianism caught the evangelical fervor; Sin weighed heavily on everybody's mind.

The year is 1803 and Harvard College faces an enormous upheaval with the death of the orthodox David Tappan, Hollis Professor of Divinity, the oldest and most prestigious endowed chair in America. There was until his death a delicate balance between liberal and conservative forces on the faculty. Upon his death, the new tension at Harvard mirrored the bifurcation of our young nation, a tension that ironically still exists today. The Harvard faculty was split in those bygone years between the adherents of evangelical piety stemming from the First Great Awakening and those who embraced the Enlightenment, known as the Age of Reason. Both these competing eras (The Great Awakening and the Enlightenment) overlapped for about 40 years during the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century. The inherent tension between intellect and religious frenzy falls well within our ken even these days with our unimaginable I-Pads and X-boxes.

In Europe, The Enlightenment centered around the salons of Paris with their famous philosophes like Rousseau and Voltaire. But The Enlightenment figured heavily in this country as well with the likes of Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams and Ben Franklin who felt that the human intellect could perfect society; reason and scientific knowledge would advance us to a higher level. The enlightenment crowd,

mostly described as Deists who believed that God may have gotten the universe off to a good start but left the scene entirely after that, were few in number. (They always are). But sin was sin, or people were not living up to their potential, and so the remedy was either to scare folks into decent behavior with threats of Judgment Day, or coax them into good behavior with the optimistic promise of a well-developed mind.

In 1805, the Unitarian scholar, Henry Ware, Sr. was appointed to fill the vacated Hollis professorship at Harvard significantly tipping the balance in favor of reason and rational religion. The Enlightenment won the battle at Harvard. The orthodox faculty of Puritan Congregationalists knew for whom the bells tolled when Harvard also announced the Unitarian, Samuel Webber, to become their next president. The defeated conservatives left Harvard altogether.

In that same year, 1805, Joseph Smith is born to Joseph Smith, Sr. and Lucy Mack who did survive her illness without any clerical interference. Joseph's maternal grandfather, Solomon Mack, lived without religion his whole life until the age of 75 when he finally succumbed to the evangelical pressures of the time and converted. The maternal grandmother had no formal church connection.

Joseph's paternal grandfather, Aesal Smith became a Universalist in radical dissent with Congregational orthodoxy. Joseph Smith's father attended church only sporadically.

The Smiths, for several generations, found themselves pretty much outside of mainstream Protestantism. Mainstream Protestantism was not like we know it today. Churches competed to swell their ranks with converted sinners. Mainline Protestantism was fully preoccupied with evangelical revivalism. One really didn't go church-shopping in those days because the churches all fell pretty much inside the same envelope. For instance you couldn't go looking for a more moderate Calvinist church because there was no such thing as "moderate" Calvinism. It would be like trying to find a moderate Tea-partier today. Revivalism depended on a Calvinist sense of alienation from God, and the belief that grace and grace alone could redeem people. Joseph Smith grew up in the margins of evangelical religion, making him a tad skeptical about religion but he could not dismiss the urgent call to salvation that simply dominated the times.

His mother, Lucy, a bit susceptible to the religious tidal wave, gave revivalism an occasional try. And she literally dragged her husband with her. When the Universalist grandfather Asael discovered that his son and daughter-in-law were attending a Methodist church, he threw a copy of Tom Paine's *Age of Reason* into their house and yelled: "Now you keep reading that until you believe it."

Somehow it worked, but the great revival of 1816 and 1817 was in progress when the Smiths arrived in Palmyra renewing pressure on Joseph Sr. and Lucy. Joseph Sr., had dreams and visions himself which revealed an unconscious attraction to the

sweeping forces of religion at that time. His own visions made him more receptive to the visions his son would later share with him.

Revival meetings in upstate New York at that time were especially intense. There was a lot of talk about the devil, human depravity and eternal punishment. When the preaching finally overwhelmed the congregant with fear of judgment, they would move to what was called “the anxiety bench” and plead for their salvation.

Joseph Smith, by age 12, just following the great revivals of 1816 and 1817, began to feel religious stirrings himself. Concern about one’s immortal soul was in the Palmyra air and water, and so one day Joseph Smith confessed that he wanted to get religion, too...that he wanted to feel and shout like the rest of them but could feel nothing. Standing in the wings of the evangelical stage, Smith observed with some objectivity the hypocrisies and contradictions of the churches and the congregants themselves. People still acted in mean-spirited ways despite being “saved.” He wondered (and doubted) that any of the churches held the right doctrine.

Ralph Waldo Emerson expressed the view that the history of the Christian church reflects the degradation of faith. The Christian church has distorted Jesus’ message. Churches are built not on his principles but on old meaningless conventions.

Emerson, far more educated than Joseph Smith, and raised in a more urbane environment, scoffed at the churches and its ministers offering misguided messages. But Joseph Smith didn’t have the intellectual capacity to “scoff” at anything the way a Brahmin might. The small town of Palmyra in Western New York became oppressive for those avoiding conversion. Converts were expected to deny themselves the usual forms of good times and keep their thoughts fixed on eternity. They typically gave up music and drinking and card playing and dancing, and even Brigham Young at a later date said he found his cheerless upbringing in a Methodist house nearly unbearable.

For Joseph Smith, the values shaped by the revivals had a profound impact on him personally. Even as an adult, Smith had qualms and reservations about loud laughter. As a young man he worried about small indulgences and falling victim to temptations and appearing unsightly in the eyes of God. He felt condemned for his weakness and imperfections.

At age 18, overwhelmed by guilt, (and what young man in that environment wouldn’t be), he prayed one night when the family was all asleep...prayed to God for forgiveness of his sins. While praying he found the room growing lighter until it was brighter than broad daylight, and a person identifying himself as Moroni appeared to him. True, that’s when the golden plates were revealed to Joseph, and the sensationalism of that vision has colored the Mormon Church since. But the focus for me rests more with the subtlety of a young man wrestling with how God viewed him as outside the evangelical fold, and what the consequences might mean for his immortal soul. It is impossible to escape the fact that Smith’s vision, most likely spun

from his own sense of sin and guilt, included Moroni saying to him initially (during the first part of the vision), that his sins were forgiven and that he enjoyed the acceptance of God. What relief that must have brought him in this age of unrelenting penitence.

Furthermore, Moroni just happened to quote all the Old and New Testament prophecies related to the end of days with which Joseph was familiar precisely because those were the texts that swirled around that environment. Joseph's vision confirmed what was commonly preached, that the last days were near, but fortunately, he was "okay" in the eyes of the Lord. Moroni told him so.

Emerson wrote in his journal: A certain wandering light comes to me which I instantly perceive to be the Cause of Causes. It transcends all proving. It is itself the ground of all being; and I see that it is not one and I another, but this is the life of my life. That is one fact, then; that in certain moments I have known that I existed directly from God, and am, as it were, God's organ. And in my ultimate consciousness Am God.

Emerson later goes on to say that genius is the quality of allowing the spirit to have its way with us.

The spirit certainly had its way with both Emerson and Smith, but although they are not exactly on the same theological page, I am drawn to these two men who share a similar thorny position: Committed to religion, owning strong religious emotions yet defying any religious pigeon-holing, sharing an antipathy and suspicion towards churches and clergy, standing outside the sway of revivalist religion. Yet Smith and Emerson are still able to mold and shape the American religious landscape more artfully than any of their 19<sup>th</sup> century peers. They both have visions draped in white light, probably a pre-condition for visions...(what do I know?), but the message contained within their visions reflect a parallel insight: Despite not being "churched," they are still validated religiously: Smith learns God still loves him despite his failings and Emerson maintains he's God organ and ultimately IS God.

In the 1820's William Ellery Channing began making monumental adjustments to his preaching and theology, reflecting, I think, the penetrating influence of the Enlightenment. Refraining from the rhetoric of human depravity and divine retribution, Channing began referring to Unitarianism as "a recovery of pure Christianity." Not quite the "restored church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints," but still unsettling to our Unitarian ears today. Channing wanted to combine enlightenment thought with religious tradition when he addressed "the progress of the human mind" which he hoped would offset the irrational terror planted by Calvinism in people's hearts. The word of the day, however, was "evidence." The enlightened folks wanted "evidence" of revealed religion. The enlightened folks argued that all miracles conflicted with the laws of nature.

Channing responded most cleverly that although miracles may well defy laws of reason and nature, the miracles as expressed in the Bible remain credible. He argued that “since God is the author of the code of nature, the serious question for theology was not whether God could cause a miracle, but why God would do so.” Channing followed up by saying that God’s purpose was always to advance the mind. The year 1830 marked the birth of two notorious movements in American religious thought: Mormonism was organized as a bona fide religion through the genius of Joseph Smith and Transcendentalism became a legitimate American expression of European romanticism mostly through the genius of Ralph Waldo Emerson. (Genius defined as allowing the spirit to have its way with us).

Although Mormonism is not remotely connected with Transcendentalism, both religious movements challenged the pervasive religious customs and expressions, and both were condemned as heretics and infidels by the standard bearers of society’s religious norms. Infidelity meant a falling out of line both in theology and society. Infidels were viewed as threats to the church and to the state.

The Unitarians in Boston at that time held steadfast to the Channing ideas of endorsing Biblical miracles and the divinity of Christ. Everything else, including individual religious experiences, was condemned as irrational; they could not be proven empirically by either science or any of the five senses.

Transcendentalism was a revolt against the corpse-coldness of reason, insisting instead that one was more spiritually informed through feeling than thinking. Intuition trumped the physical world of empiricism because, according to Emerson, miracles needed to be understood as “the perpetual openness of the human mind to new influx of light and power, inspiration and ecstasy.”

Joseph Smith, facing more than his fair share of insults and criticism, ran head-first into the new formulation of religious orthodoxy tempered with a tinge of enlightenment. All efforts to suspend reason except in scripture became fodder for ridicule, including witchcraft, dreams, revelations and even healings. Where Joseph Smith sought converts to be sure by offering a new gospel of the true church that removed the doubts and hypocrisies he had always experienced himself, both he and Emerson swam against the tide of mainstream religion. And they both wrestled with Calvinist piety and enlightenment, not accepting most people’s definitions of either, thus forging entirely new religious movements.

Both considered themselves prophets. Smith because the Lord had selected him to be His mouthpiece to the nations in that age of the world; and Emerson who would mostly claim his prophethood privately, liked to say: “I’m a chartered libertine, free to worship and free to rail.” (Ron Paul would have loved it).

In the context of the religious and political world of early 19<sup>th</sup> century America in which Emerson and Smith both matured as religious leaders, each at some point in his life held enormous distrust for the institutional church. Although Emerson was

once a part of it and Smith later developed one of his own, they were radical and courageous in their respective interface with mainline churches perpetuating the fear of Calvinist doctrine. They did not share similar theologies, perhaps revealing more a difference in their education and cultural upbringing. For they surely shared the same sentiment expressed by Emerson in that breakthrough year of 1830: "A trust in yourself is the height not of pride but of piety, an unwillingness to learn of any but God himself...It is by yourself without ambassador, that God speaks to you."

We're sitting in a Unitarian church today probably because we resonate more with what God said to Emerson. But our friends sitting in ward houses today, share a similar history with ours, derived in part from Universalist teachings and a leader who also had visions and spoke to God without ambassadors. Mormons may prefer their prophet to ours, but we're all still trying to understand the role of the spirit in history and how our society so obviously fraught with trouble, might improve its situation. Through an appreciation of Emerson's struggle with how religious insight is gleaned, we might be able to appreciate another fully misunderstood person in that era, Joseph Smith. They both railed against barriers posed by a religious fundamentalism dripping with hypocrisy.

Emerson and Smith obviously pursued very different kinds of lives, but society's ease about religious condemnations which both experienced during their formative years obviously played a huge role in their ultimately coming to terms with God. If time permitted I'd share with you the enormous pressures that revival meetings placed on individuals as expressed by Elizabeth Cady in Troy, New York and Emily Dickenson in Amherst, MA. My interpretation of Joseph Smith is one that cannot be separate from the trauma imposed by Calvinism. It was a vicious period of time to find one's way, and lives were formed as a response to the prevailing judgments about human nature. Emerson and Smith took divergent paths, but the spirit touched them both as they, as well as we, try to make sense of it all.