

Unitarian History

A Sermon Delivered by Rev. Tom Goldsmith

First Unitarian Church of Salt Lake City, Utah

**February 22, 2009**

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On the last Sunday in February, every year, we commemorate the founding of the First Unitarian Church in Salt Lake City back in 1891. It gives us an opportunity (or an excuse) to review a bit of Unitarian history. We can take a lot of pride in serving as stewards of this church, which for 118 years and counting, has preserved the liberal light of reason against the harsh gale winds of a dogmatic and conservative majority.

When the minister from Denver, Samuel Atkins Eliot, first preached in the Salt Lake Theater in November, 1890, in order to advance the idea of liberal religion in our town, his message still smacks of enormous relevance for today. Imagine Eliot speaking on the corner of State Street and 100 South, probably where the old Planetarium used to be - - Now O.C. Tanner...imagine him speaking to 300 unsuspecting Salt Lake folks curious about liberal religion.

Aside from warning them that Unitarians promise no future immunity from hellfire, and that Unitarians do not value conformity of belief, he proclaimed a few extremely important aspects that we still take to heart today. Eliot said: Religion is a life and not a performance; that deed and not word is the thing; that true worship is not clad in ecclesiastical haberdashery, ritual, or dogma. We do not mistake glibness in catechism for real appreciation of religion; and my favorite – the church is not a factory for the manufacture of emotional piety. He could deliver those same words today, and we would all nod affirmatively although he would probably not use his allusion to haberdashery.

Our social justice outreach program represents Eliot's reference to deeds over words exactly. And piety has never been a strong suit of this congregation, either. But unless you are familiar with Unitarian history, you might not appreciate that fact, because Unitarianism has historically wrestled with its ecclesiastical identity never quite sure where it fit on the theological spectrum. And this non-dogmatic faith has always confounded those who felt we could not hang together as a denomination unless there was some sort of coherent belief system which could only be wrought from a unified endorsement of a doctrine.

Our liberal enclave here in Salt Lake during the closing years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was undoubtedly well apprised of the endless controversies in Unitarian theology which threatened our very own extinction as a religious denomination. Unitarians have not only consistently shot themselves in the foot, but it was always remarkable how quickly they could reload. To give you a sampling of something you would never expect to hear from any Unitarian pulpit anytime, anywhere, is the conservative Unitarian segment which had pretty good clout, trying to tie our denomination to a firm doctrinal commitment as stated thus: "A belief in our Lord, Jesus Christ, our Saviour, the son of God and His specially appointed Messenger and Representative of our race; gifted with supernatural power, approved of God by miracles and signs of wonders which God did by him, and thus, by Divine authority, commanding the devout and reverential faith of all who claim the Christian name..."

The 19<sup>th</sup> century theological divisions created a virtual tsunami in our faith, potentially destroying the non-dogmatic, religious freedom we so enjoy today.

We cannot forget that when this church was founded, the Civil War was scarcely 25 years in the past. The actual Civil war years were a difficult time for Unitarian congregations; they were practically non-functioning. And so immediately following the war, Henry Bellows was convinced that a newly organized Unitarian system of churches would have an opportunity to supplant evangelical Protestantism as the dominant religious force in the new nations. Bellows went about his tasks of organizing Unitarians as effectively as possible. The American Unitarian Association at that time was merely an association of individuals, not a body of churches. So Bellows urged that a convention be called in which churches would be represented by delegates to work on church related matters. He succeeded, and the first convention met in New York in 1865, a precursor actually to what we call today, General Assembly. At that time, each church at the convention was entitled to one ministerial and two lay delegates.

But the immediate issue that rose to the surface was what to call the convention. Bellows had proposed what I personally think was very good, namely that this new organization be called The Liberal Church of America which would hopefully attract liberals from other denominations. But the extremely disparate representatives fought vigorously on both sides of the theological spectrum, finally agreeing that the conference be known as the Christian Churches of Unitarian Faith. That name made it through the process with the important caveat for the liberals that the organization would have no creed.

Those were interesting times. About 30 years before the founding of this church, Unitarians and virtually all denominations were confronted by the intellectual challenges posed by Darwinism. About 20 years before the founding of this church, biblical criticism was first being exercised in Germany but made its way to this country by about the late 1870's. And about 10 years before the founding of this church, comparative religion became a new and exciting discipline. This was a time of great religious ferment, where Unitarians wanted to achieve consensus of some kind. But the various existing ideologies under one umbrella with no test for faith and no dogma to exclude un-likeminded people, made for some very divisive features.

Although in those days nobody identified him or herself as a Buddhist Unitarian or a scientific humanist, the fissures along the spectrum of belief broke down as follows, and they had labels:

The evangelical Unitarians placed Jesus as the focus of their religious emotions. They rigorously opposed the radicals who were diluting the uniqueness of Jesus.

The rationalists who were into Christian apologetics. For them, Christianity was validated not by inner religious experience which was the trademark of Transcendentalists, but by the historical evidence of the divine mission of Jesus as attested by miracles. Both the evangelicals and the rationalists wanted to establish a Unitarian creed which Bellows was successfully able to circumvent.

Then there was the broad church group, led by Bellows, a Unitarian effort which resembled the best in bipartisanship. Obama would have been proud of Bellows and all who called themselves Broad Church. They recognized the elements of truth in all the different Unitarian sections and believed in the

possibility of welding them all together. It is probably easier getting Republicans vote with Obama than it would have been getting radicals and evangelical Unitarians to agree on ANYTHING.

And finally the radicals who were the free spirits in the denomination and who refused to acknowledge Christianity any special rank among religious traditions. They were defined by the radical social justice ministry of Theodore Parker, the abolitionist who even abetted John Brown at Harper's Ferry. The radicals dismissed anything supernatural and doctrinal. The Unitarians were hanging together by the barest of threads with many of the radicals pulling away entirely and forming the Free Religious Association which wielded much influence until 1900, particularly in the western United States, and morphed into the Humanist movement.

In 1882, or just eight years before Eliot turned our town onto Unitarianism, the Broad Church which was the strongest of the factions began to let go of some of the supernatural tenets of their position and framed Christianity more like this: The name Christian does not rest on any theory whatever about the nature or office or person or doctrine of Christ. It rests simply on the fact that we are Christians by habit or inheritance, unless we deliberately choose to renounce that name in favor of some other.

Unitarianism began to feel more like a Christian cultural identity that unless we were rabidly opposed to it, why not just relax and identify with Christianity to the point where you are comfortable. By the time we reach the founding of this church in 1891, the underlying issue nationally about identifying Christianity in exclusive terms had abated somewhat, but the radicals and the evangelicals were still defining the debate. When this church was established, we were immediately engulfed in a national debate referred to as "The Western Issue." The radical wing of the Western Conference termed their theological position as establishing an "ethical basis." The Western Conference defined Unitarianism in terms of freedom, fellowship, and character in religion with no reference to either theism or Christianity. The debate hinged on the accusation that these western Unitarians refused to come to grips with theological principles or state their beliefs positively. Although no creed was suggested, it was recommended nonetheless that the western churches at least agree on a platform that would sound like this: Our religious duty comes from Jesus: Love of God and love to man. It did not pass in the west. So the Unitarians more nationally were putting out lengthy brochures with the title: "Is Western Unitarianism Ready to Give Up its Christian Character?" Unitarians nationally will willing to make a concession by changing the Western Platform by eliminating Jesus, that the Western Churches had simply to agree to the idea of Love of God and love to man.

This was rejected by the Western Conference by a vote of 34-10, but they offered a resolution: That the Western Unitarian Conference conditions its fellowship on no dogmatic tests, but welcomes all who wish to join it to help establish truth, righteousness and love in the world.

And here we now stand 118 years later, and probably would have passed the same resolution as our Western sister churches did in 1885, just six years before this congregation came into being.

What does Unitarianism in Salt Lake look like today? We still hope, as did Bellows in 1865, that liberalism will nullify evangelicalism. We are still challenged intellectually by Darwinism in this age of Intelligent Design. We are still making biblical criticism relevant to those who choose to root their biases

in scripture against the gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgendered population. And we still bring comparative religion to the table as we wrestle with a legislative power on the hill that refuses to acknowledge religious pluralism in Utah. Our very first minister here in 1891, David Utter, quickly drew fire for his lectures around town on the topics of biblical criticism and comparative religion.

In many respects the issues remain the same today as they appeared 118 years ago, namely establishing love in the world where many orthodox belief systems are hurtful in excluding certain types of the population. We want to establish love in the world through our commitment to social justice, not with words but deeds, and also articulating as best we can the voice for peace.

A major difference between our work today and the work of our forebears lies not in defining who we are as Unitarians and side-stepping dogmas and creeds and platforms. Our challenge is something inconceivable a few generations back: To become deeply involved in the urgent matter of saving our planet. We also face a more pleasant challenge which is preparing this congregation for the growth of progressive thought along the Wasatch Front.

We have embarked on a capital campaign in a difficult economic time because we desire to accommodate this generation and future generations of Unitarians in a home that will be a model of environmental sustainability. For all the nervousness about economic uncertainty, this congregation is determined to keep the momentum of growth alive. Indications are that the dream facility we aspire to might be less expensive than initially presented because construction prices have tumbled. The word on the street is build now if you possibly can manage it, and we are trying real hard. The first 70 pledges recorded have already placed us well over the halfway point of our goal.

I am filled with pride and joy when looking at the continuum of Unitarian vitality and influence in this town from 1891 to the present and to a future waiting to unfold. We have held together through countless wars and many economic recessions and have always taken comfort in the warmth of this religious community and in the joys and celebrations in fellowship with one another. This church has probably meant different things to the different generations who gathered here, depending on the issues of the day. But I feel a distinct kinship with the past, and wish they could somehow catch a glimpse of our church today and the direction in which we are going. Our church wields a highly disproportionate influence in this town for our numbers, only because we are moving to a more inclusive and progressive agenda as a nation. Our forebears would never understand the lingo – that Salt Lake County voted blue in the last election. But once explained to them, they would rise from their graves and rejoice.

By the time this church celebrates 120 years, there will be clear evidence of our drive to a larger and sustainable church. By the time we celebrate the sexy 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary, we will have cause to celebrate a remarkable feat in this town. From the words of the Denver minister to a new band of liberals: “We are not clad in ecclesiastical haberdashery or dogma or doctrine,” to the building of a 350 seat sanctuary that will allow us to include the worship arts in ways we never thought possible and house the growing liberal spirit in a diverse city, we will have carried forth the proud legacy that Unitarians in Salt Lake City have worked so hard and so lovingly to create. The future is ours.