

## Ethics and Magic: Two Liberal Modes of Social Change

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One hundred years ago, Clarence Skinner declared that Universalism was at the forefront of social revolution. The “traditional Protestant church,” he said, was dying and deservedly so, because “the individualism which called it into being [was] dying.” But Universalism was uniquely suited to “meet the demands of the new age, because it is the product of those forces which created the new age.” Universalism had prepared the way for a social rather than individual gospel, Skinner explained, by teaching that all people had a common destiny of salvation. “Never was there such a bold proclamation of brotherhood as this; never such implicit faith in the solidarity of the human race. It is the largest, most astonishing evidence of the new social consciousness.” Universalist beginnings, he said, were “linked with the stormy days of political and industrial revolution,” and Universalist “prophets” had been “stoned in the streets” for daring “to challenge the olden tyrannies of ecclesiastical authority.”<sup>1</sup>

Skinner’s Unitarian friend John Haynes Holmes had a similarly revolutionary vision but a different sense of his denominational heritage—classic Unitarianism, in his view, was a faith of individual virtue as far removed from a true social vision as its evangelical opponents. In its emphasis on character development, Holmes explained, “liberalism, like orthodoxy . . . is essentially an individualistic religion. . . . We desire to save ourselves.”<sup>2</sup>

Contemporary Unitarian Universalists, in my experience, remember our heritage in much the same way as Skinner and Holmes. We think of our Unitarian forebears as *intellectual* radicals, perhaps, but as too committed to individual diversity and never-ending dialogue, and too enmeshed in economic privilege, to commit to social radicalism. It was the Unitarians, after all, who forced Holmes out of the denomination because of his staunch opposition to World War I, while the Universalists made the equally pacifistic Skinner dean of one of their seminaries. A generation earlier, it had been the Universalists who embraced women’s ordination more fully than any other denomination, while among Unitarians, women ministers received support primarily from the rebellious Western Unitarian Conference. The Universalists, we like to think, are the REAL radicals in our family tree.

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<sup>1</sup> Social Implications of Universalism, 5-6, 11, 38.

<sup>2</sup> Revolutionary Function, 10-11.

But when we look beyond our denominational walls and consider how non-UU historians have told the story of religion and social justice in the United States, the situation changes dramatically. Suddenly, Unitarians are everywhere and Universalists disappear. Histories of abolitionism and women's rights are chock full of Unitarians, even if they are not always identified as such: Maria Weston Chapman, Lydia Maria Child, Samuel Joseph May, Theodore Parker, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Julia Ward Howe, Antoinette Brown, Lucy Stone, Susan B. Anthony. Unitarians play leading roles in the standard histories of pacifism in nineteenth century America, and in the story of John Brown's very non-pacifist raid on Harpers Ferry. The utopian socialists at Brook Farm, most with Unitarian backgrounds, are far better remembered than their more enduring Universalist counterparts at Hopedale. The twentieth century story of racial justice is also dripping with Unitarians, from NAACP founding members John Haynes Holmes and Mary White Ovington, to civil rights martyr James Reeb, Urban League chairman Whitney Young, and student-activist-turned D.C. mayor Marion Barry. Apart from Adin Ballou, Universalists are either not mentioned or not identified as Universalists in histories of American radicalism. You would be hard pressed to find anyone, not a Unitarian Universalist, who has ever heard of our beloved Clarence Skinner.

So, then, why have Universalist radicals so often disappeared from the broader story of American radicalism? Here's my hypothesis. In United States history, there have been two very different paths to social justice. Especially in the nineteenth century, Unitarians typically followed one path; Universalists followed the other. And while US historians have paid attention to both paths, they have tended to notice the *religious* dimension only of the first path. The other path, the one that Universalists took, has been regarded as "secular" if not "anti-religious." And so Universalists have disappeared from the story.

The first path, the one typically taken by early Unitarians, centers on ethics. It is the story of people who've asked, "How *should* we use the power that we have?"

The path more typically taken by early Universalists centers on empowerment. It is the story of people who've asked, "How *can* we get more power?"

The ethics question comes naturally to highly educated ministers who serve prosperous congregations, or who are sent by prosperous denominations to serve impoverished communities. Since ministers of this sort have done lots of important social justice work, it is easy to imagine that their story is THE story of religious radicalism in the United States. But it is not.

The empowerment question, by contrast, comes naturally to people who feel excluded from powerful institutions, including powerful *religious* institutions. Because these folks often start by attacking those religious institutions, their style of radicalism can be perceived as “secular” or “anti-religious.” But often it simply stems from less institutionalized forms of religion.

Both Unitarians and Universalists have contributed to “ethical” radicalism, and both Unitarians and Universalists have contributed to “empowerment” radicalism. But, especially in the nineteenth century, Unitarian contributions primarily fell on the side of ethics and Universalist contributions fell primarily on the side of empowerment. And because historians have generally seen ethics as religious and empowerment as secular, they have found it easier to notice the Unitarian radicals.

In saying this, I do not mean to reinforce the old half-truth about privileged Unitarians and working class Universalists. As you probably know, early Universalists were, on average, neither especially privileged nor especially oppressed. And since most people are privileged in certain respects and oppressed in others, there is no sure way to predict who will be attracted to ethics and who to empowerment. Freemasonry, for example, is an empowerment-oriented spirituality that is generally associated with the ritual self-empowerment of middle-class white men—though it is worth noting that Black Freemasonry emerged prior to the historic black churches, and to some extent created the power that was used to build those churches. It is also worth noting that there was a very substantial overlap between the founders of Freemasonry and the founders of Universalism in America.

There is another reason why Universalism had an early and enduring affinity with empowerment: the fact that it was born in opposition to established churches. As individuals, Universalists may or may not have been socially privileged, but as Universalists they most certainly lacked the privilege that goes with state-sponsored religion. Early on, this was significant because, at the beginning of US history, churches were the most powerful institutions in society. The federal government was weak, there were few large universities, no multinational corporations or labor unions. Churches were the only institutions with a mass constituency—and those that enjoyed tax support had a built in advantage in mobilizing that constituency.

The only established churches that survived the American Revolution were the Puritan churches of New England—the churches that would soon go their separate ways as Unitarian and Orthodox Congregational. These were also the churches that served the prosperous merchant classes

of Boston and New York City. These churches produced the nation's most hidebound conservatives, but they also produced idealistic ministers determined to use the privileges of establishment for the broader good. These were the folks who created Bible societies, mission societies, temperance societies, and some of them turned those societies in radical directions. Along with the Quakers, these folks built the white abolitionist movement and the most significant peace movements of the early nineteenth century. To the extent that the women's rights movement grew out of abolitionism, they deserve credit for it as well.

But other social change movements had a very different starting point. For these movements, criticism of established religion was the starting point. If religious establishments were as oppressive as European monarchies, what about other forms of concentrated power? What about the ancient power of husbands over wives? What about the new power of capitalists? Such questions gave rise to the American labor movement and its socialist and anarchist offspring, and to some of the earliest expressions of women's rights radicalism in the US. The people drawn to these movements were religiously diverse. Some belonged to small, intense "sects" that feared the greater prestige of the established churches. Some were Freethinkers—sweeping critics of biblical religion who often gathered on Sunday mornings to share their alternative spiritual vision. And a great many were Universalists. Beginning in the 1820s, Universalists gravitated to a host of empowerment movements—Owenite and then Fourierist socialism, labor organizing, spiritualism. Some of them left Universalism behind in the process, some did not.

Unitarian Universalists have the great good fortune to have inherited both a Unitarian tradition that emphasizes the ethical use of privilege and a Universalist tradition that emphasizes empowerment. This distinction also, I believe, helps explain the shifting fortunes of our Unitarian and Universalist heritages during the last century. As you all know, in the decades just before consolidation, Unitarianism was growing rapidly and Universalism was shrinking, and as a result Unitarianism seemed to be the dominant partner at the time of consolidation. But this was in large part because American circumstances lent themselves to ethics: the economy was growing, more and more people were streaming into higher education, which had always been closely tied to Unitarianism, and radicals were increasingly calling for ethical critique of American power. Think of the Port Huron statement, which spoke directly to the ethical concerns of people raised in privilege. In the past generation, of course, the situation for many Americans has reversed: people no longer expect to have more prosperous lives than their parents, or to live in the most powerful

nation on earth. I think this is why so much of the ferment among younger UUs focuses on recovery of the Universalist heritage.

This is also, I believe, the reason that so many young people who have been alienated from mainstream “religion” are drawn to paganism, shamanism, African diasporic traditions, and other intensely ritualistic forms of spirituality. Like early Universalism, these are all traditions that emphasize empowerment more than ethics. More obviously than early Universalism, these are all traditions that might well be described as “magical.” And this, I believe, is an important clue to the character of empowerment-oriented spirituality: it is more closely related to magic than to conventional definitions of religion.

By “magic,” I do not necessarily mean anything unscientific or supernatural. Echoing contemporary neopagans, I generally define magic as the attempt to change the world by changing one’s own consciousness. Magic is thus different from experimental science, which seeks to change the world by bracketing out consciousness, and from monotheistic religion, which often counsels believers to passively accept the will and grace of God. Understood in this way, magic can include anything from consulting a horoscope to going on a vision quest to attending a feminist consciousness-raising group. In all of these activities, a disempowered person gains power by gaining a story.

Magic, I contend, is one of the most powerful forces for social transformation in the world today. Because the word “magic” has a negative (or frivolous) connotation, the connections among various practices of magical empowerment are often invisible, as are the historical influences linking Renaissance magic to early Universalism, early Universalism to spiritualism and theosophy, and those nineteenth-century new religions to early twentieth-century socialism and later twentieth-century ecology. In my presentation, I will identify some of the connections, and reflection on some of the particular gifts that magic can bring to work for social change.