

# Antebellum Unitarianism in New England: Contradictions and Possibilities

DAVID D. HALL

Unitarianism, a Protestant denomination that emerged in early nineteenth-century New England in response to the tempered Calvinism of the Congregationalist tradition, has a mixed reputation among historians of American culture. The inter-connected circumstances of the resurgence of evangelical Protestantism in present day America and the numerical decline of the so-called “mainstream” or liberal denominations have prompted historians to focus on the complexities of evangelicalism and, generally speaking, to ignore the history of liberal religion.<sup>1)</sup> Why study a denomination that, in the case of Unitarian Universalism, has a tiny number of adherents (estimated at 03 % of the population, most of them living in the northeast of the United States) at a moment when the membership in Pentecostal and evangelical groups numbers in the tens of millions? But of course numbers are not the sole measure of influence, a point borne out by the importance assigned to Unitarianism by historians as well regarded as Sydney E. Ahlstrom. On the other hand, in the very decades during which it emerged out of Congregationalism (1815-1840), Unitarianism had its detractors, most notably Ralph Waldo Emerson and George Ripley, both of whom served as ministers within the denomination before leaving it for other vocations. What is it about Unitarianism that explains such disagreements? I begin this attempt to answer that question by juxtaposing what historians in the twentieth century have said about

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1) An alternative to this generalization is Catherine Albanese’s attempt to install “metaphysical religion” as a substantial alternative to evangelicalism. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

the denomination with what its critics in the nineteenth century were noticing. Thereafter, I use what antebellum Unitarians said about Calvinism as a way of exploring what Unitarians liked and disliked within Protestant theology. As was noted by many Unitarians, theirs was a movement grounded on “sentiment” rather than on a reasoned, carefully constructed creed. It seems appropriate, therefore, to discuss a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow that captures some aspects of this “sentiment,” with children, flowers, and death as the key touchstones. Finally, it is necessary to explore what “liberal” meant in the antebellum period.

First, however, a few basic facts about the denomination. Unitarianism was not “founded” at a specific moment. Instead, it came into being gradually, able to do so because, in New England, the machinery for exposing and/or suppressing theological disagreements was almost non-existent thanks to the structure of Congregationalism, which conceded a significant degree of autonomy to each local congregation. Looking back from the vantage of 1820-40, historians have identified some of the stages or steps that gradually weakened the historic Calvinism of the colonists and, by the early nineteenth century, culminated in the public assertion of “Unitarianism.” The earliest of these steps or stages may have been dissatisfaction with the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Historically of considerable importance to English Puritans, this doctrine fell out of favor in the middle of the seventeenth century among moderate and conservative Puritans and, even more so, among Anglicans, because of the role it played in the making of radical sects such as the Quakers, who grounded their theology on the “immediate witness” of the Spirit. Too great an emphasis on the Holy Spirit was also blamed for any and all versions of “Antinomianism” on both sides of the Atlantic. Because the Holy Spirit was so closely linked with the absolute sovereignty of God and was also a co-equal member of the Trinity, any curtailing of its role also affected the nature of the Godhead.

A second step came in the early eighteenth century, when English rationalists and liberals began to question the doctrine of original sin. In

orthodox theology, the total depravity of humankind made it impossible for men and women to contribute anything to their own salvation. Once the doctrine was called into question, the door was open to introducing moral merit and free agency, although which came first, free agency or less sinfulness, is uncertain. Soon, the traditional “satisfaction” theory of the Atonement came apart, done in by the disappearance of original sin and therefore the assumption that God had to sacrifice his son in order to “satisfy” divine justice. And, if all humans were created with a certain amount of moral freedom, then all must be eligible to be saved. Via reasoning of this kind, “universalism” emerged to take the place of the doctrine of a limited atonement.<sup>2)</sup>

All this was underway by 1775 in New England and even earlier in England, where disputes about the status of Christ within the Trinity had broken out in the second decade of the century. Of special importance was John Locke’s *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695), the English philosopher’s attempt to reconcile “reason” and “revelation” at a moment when radical Deists were denying all biblical claims to direct revelation and, in particular, denying the validity of the miracles attributed to Jesus in the Gospels. Locke wanted to simplify Christianity to a few truths or moral principles; for him, Christianity was as much or more about ethics as it was about judgment and salvation. Finding little to admire in the apocalyptic and prophetic books of the Old and New Testament, Locke wanted “reason” to serve as a principal authority in matters of religion. He took this position in part because of the “Antinomian” (Holy Spirit-centered) movements that emerged during the period of the “Puritan Revolution.” It should not surprise us that, when the transatlantic revivals known in America as the “Great Awakening” erupted in the 1740s, many ministers feared that they were reliving the excesses of the Puritan Revolution and questioned whether the exuberance of the “New Lights”

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2) Conrad Wright, *The Beginnings of Unitarianism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), remains the best study of the eighteenth-century controversies that preceded the nineteenth-century founding.

had anything to do with authentic Christianity. Circumstances of this kind, together with what the historian Henry F. May referred to as the “Moderate Enlightenment,” go a long way toward filling in the genealogy of early nineteenth-century Unitarianism.<sup>3)</sup>

Thereafter, in New England, the emergence of Unitarianism becomes a story of disputes *within* congregations. Early in his career as minister in Northampton, Massachusetts, Jonathan Edwards was drawn into one of these local disputes when he and most of the ministers in his part of the colony tried to stop the congregation in Springfield from choosing a young minister named Robert Breck, who, in a trial ministry elsewhere, had clearly signaled some new lines of thought. Edwards lost this struggle thanks in part to the flexibilities built into the Congregational system, but fights continued to break out; indeed, the great-great-grandfather of the author of this essay was involved (on the orthodox side) in such fights in the middle of the nineteenth century. Factually and sociologically, it is tantalizing that, of the hundred or so oldest churches in Massachusetts (those closest to the sea coast), almost nine-tenths of them passed over into Unitarianism, one of them First Church Cambridge (founded 1636), where in 1831 the “orthodox” minority withdrew, taking with it the church’s minister, Abiel Holmes, and forming the Shepard Congregational Street on Garden Street, a few blocks away. Fast forward to 1865, when Unitarians finally organized themselves as a denomination and fast forward again to 1961, when Unitarians merged with (or, more accurately, absorbed) the remnants of another version of liberal religion, Universalism, and became the Unitarian Universalist Association. Well before this date—probably before World War II—the “Christian” aspects of Unitarianism were giving way to what was being described as “Humanism.”

What, then, about antebellum Unitarianism? It has enjoyed a robust reputation among twentieth century historians of religion, culture, and politics. Sydney Ahlstrom, who taught American religious history at

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3) Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

Yale for many years and was widely respected as a historian, regarded antebellum Unitarianism as nothing less than an “American Reformation” in its scope and importance. Aware of less friendly judgments (some of these follow in this essay), and aware, as well, of historians who questioned the intellectual depth of the movement, Ahlstrom insisted that the antebellum spokesmen for Unitarianism were “genuine moral and spiritual leaders” and endorsed the movement itself as “the modern cutting edge of Protestantism.” This was no small praise, as was his assertion that “the laity whom they [the ministerial leaders] influenced became a moving force in the social order,” providing a “beneficent and enduring influence in a dozen realms.” In effect, Ahlstrom positioned Unitarianism as the parent of progressive forces, both social and theological, in our culture.<sup>4</sup> His Harvard teacher Perry Miller was less emphatic. As was true of Miller’s work on seventeenth-century Puritanism, his comments on Unitarianism vacillate between strong approval and strong criticism. He combined both of these positions in his famous essay—admittedly speculative—entitled “From Edwards to Emerson,” an amazing experiment at connecting Anne Hutchinson, Jonathan Edwards, and Ralph Waldo Emerson under the umbrella of “mysticism,” which Miller likened to a spiritual wine that transformed them into exuberant witnesses to the presence of the Holy Spirit. Unitarianism is praised in this essay for having rolled back “the heavy stone of dogma [that is, Puritan orthodoxy] that had sealed up the mystical springs in the New England character.” Alluding in another part of the essay to a story that appears in Emerson’s “Historic Notes of Life and Letters in New England,” an anecdote about a dinner party arranged by William Ellery Channing to discuss great issues that are never actually discussed because the guests prefer partying to serious discussion, Miller took back much of his praise, likening Unitarianism to “a pure, white, dry claret that went well with dinners served by the Harvard Corporation,”

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4) Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 400-401. See also Ahlstrom and Jonathan Carey, eds., *An American Reformation: A Documentary History of Unitarian Christianity* (Middletown, CT.: Wesleyan University Press, 1985).

a wine “guaranteed not to send them home reeling and staggering,” i.e., a wine in keeping with Unitarian themes of “decorum, law, and self control.”<sup>5)</sup> In the mid-1990s, the legal historian Elizabeth B. Clark endorsed the argument that liberal Protestantism, and specifically the Unitarians, had played a crucial role in the emergence of a new appreciation of “rights” for women and others who suffered from oppression, such as chattel slaves.<sup>6)</sup> But perhaps the strongest endorsement of Unitarianism comes from literary historians adding up the antebellum writers who belonged to this denomination or were raised within it. According to Lawrence Buell’s calculations, between 1815 and the Civil War “something like one-quarter of all creative writers of any significance were at some time in their lives Unitarians, including fully half of the region’s [New England] writers who might arguably be called ‘major’.” Although the publishing industry in Unitarian-dominated Boston was outclassed by the publishing industry in New York, the more provincial city was nonetheless an important site of literary productivity—second only to New York in some respects, and first in others.<sup>7)</sup> The evocative references to the “flowering” of New England and the “golden day” of antebellum literary creativity, to cite two books by important cultural critics of the early twentieth century, Van Wyck Brooks and Lewis Mumford, make the same point: liberal religion prepared the

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- 5) Perry Miller, “From Edwards to Emerson,” in *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 196. The Emerson essay was “Historic Notes of Life and Letters in New England.”
- 6) Elizabeth B. Clark, “‘The Sacred Rights of the Weak’: Pain, Sympathy, and the Culture of Individual Rights in Antebellum America,” *Journal of American History* 82 (1995): 463-93, esp. 464-65; that Clark took note of “evangelical” contributions and, by doing so, softened her emphasis on Unitarianism, arose out of discussions with her husband, the writer of this essay.
- 7) Lawrence Buell, *New England Literary Culture From Revolution Through Renaissance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), chap. 2; Lawrence Buell, “The Literary Significance of the Unitarian Movement,” in Conrad E. Wright, ed., *American Unitarianism 1805-1865* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1989), 163-80 (quotations, 164). Buell takes away some of this emphasis on Unitarianism by noting the importance of European writers who introduced Emerson and company to Romanticism; in any fuller weighing of influences, the Europeans may deserve a larger place than Unitarianism per se.

way for writers such as Emerson and Hawthorne.<sup>8)</sup>

When we turn back to nineteenth-century appraisals of antebellum Unitarianism, however, the tone shifts. It does so strikingly in testimonies and reflections by two men who participated in early Unitarianism, Ralph Waldo Emerson and George Ripley, and in a memoir of "Boston Unitarianism" by a younger son of the movement, Octavius Brooks Frothingham, whose father served for many years as minister of First Church Boston. What Emerson has to say, the Emerson who knew Unitarianism at first hand having studied at Harvard Divinity School and, for a brief period, ministered within the denomination, is registered in the "Divinity School Address" of 1838, his belated appraisal (1880) of the ferment of the 1830s and 1840s, "Historic Notes of Life and Letters in New England," and entries in his journal, most especially the notorious characterization of Unitarianism as "corpse-cold." In the "Divinity School Address," he signaled his new-found "Transcendentalism" and its repudiation of the historic Christ by saying harsh things about the denomination of which he had been part before resigning his ministry in 1831. Speaking as a severe critic of the Unitarianism of his father's generation, Emerson insisted that religious truth was gained by "an intuition" that "cannot be received at second hand." There follows the famous statement about the miracles attributed to Jesus in the gospels. It may seem odd that Unitarians insisted on the truthfulness of these miracles, but they did, regarding them as firm evidence of Jesus' more than merely human stature. But in 1838 Emerson was in full revolt against "historic Christianity" and in search of what he described in the "Divinity School Address" as a "new revelation." Little wonder, then, that he singled out all evidence from history about Jesus as irrelevant—and worse, for this kind of evidence blocked the evidence derived from "consciousness" or "soul" or pure mind. Hence the sentence that made his Harvard teachers

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8) Van Wyck Brooks, *The Flowering of New England, 1815-1850* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1936); Lewis Mumford, *The Golden Day: A Study of American Experience and Culture* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1926).

so angry: "What a distortion did his [Jesus'] doctrine and memory suffer ... the word Miracle, as pronounced by Christian churches, gives a false impression; it is Monster." In "Historic Notes," Emerson said little about Unitarianism specifically, but the ways in which he described the radicals of c. 1840 Boston clearly exclude the Unitarians. These radicals do not respect the "ties and ligaments once supposed essential to civil society." "Fanaticks" for freedom, they "rebel against theological as against political dogmas." Theodore Parker makes a well-deserved appearance in this essay, the Parker who, spurned by the Unitarian Association as too daring for them, practiced his unique style of ministry in a new congregation set up by his admirers.<sup>9)</sup>

For me, George Ripley is a more interesting figure than Parker, who was never much of a biblical scholar despite the claims he made to erudition. An early member of the Transcendentalist group and an important intermediary in arranging American printings of German Romantic writers, Ripley quit the ministry in 1841 and became the principal organizer of the utopian community known as Brook Farm. In a letter to his congregation explaining why he was resigning, Ripley recalled the hopefulness of the Unitarian movement in the 1820s. He remembered those years as a time when "questions of dogmatic theology were in every one's mouth" and "the plainest and most elementary instructions on the duties of the Christian life were everywhere welcome." These bonds between minister and people culminated in the vision of an ethical revival and regeneration: emancipated from the burden of Calvinist orthodoxy, the Unitarians dreamt of enacting a moral revolution. As Ripley put it, the movement had "awakened the brightest hopes in regard to the practical influence of religion in the community," specifying "the spread of the pure, disinterested, and lovely spirit of charity ... [and] the visible exhibition of freedom and holiness in the lives of those who had been born

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9) Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature Addresses and Lectures* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1921), 126-27, 128-29; *Lectures and Biographical Sketches* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1921), 340-41, 325-27.

from above." Now, some fifteen years later, Ripley felt he had to be honest with his congregation. No such moral revolution had occurred. Instead, liberal religion in the form of Unitarianism had subsided into formality and coldness. Its promise betrayed, Ripley felt he could not remain in the pulpit, especially since he was determined to speak out on "subjects which, by the general consent of our churches, are banished from the ordinary meeting of our public assemblies on the Lord's Day."<sup>10</sup>

The same disenchantment is voiced in Frothingham's memoir of *Boston Unitarianism* (1890). A younger son of the Transcendentalist movement, of which he wrote the first substantial history, and himself an interesting religious radical, Frothingham wanted to capture a long-ago time and place, the Boston of c. 1830 as seen through the ministry of his father Nathaniel in First Church, the most historic of all the churches in New England. The main points the son makes about the father are the latter's insistence on identifying himself as a Christian and his assumption that Christianity is mainly about moral character. According to the son, the father avoided disputes about theology and never carried into his pulpit the combat between the orthodox Trinitarian and the liberal "Unitarian" wings of the Congregationalist tradition. Taking Christianity for granted, the father was "absorbed in the endeavor to apply Christianity to personal character, taking men and women one by one and trusting to their influence for the regeneration of society." But as the son is at pains to point out, this angle of vision was extremely conservative. The regeneration of society seemed to begin and end with a small circle of "cultivated" men and women. Beyond them lay "humanity at large," for whom Nathaniel Frothingham had "no active sympathy. There was pity but little fellowship." In the person of his father, therefore, Frothingham provides a case history that substantiates George Ripley's criticism. To dream of moral revolution but to limit it to the cultivated few and ignore all those who really suffer—what kind of moral revolution was this? For the younger Frothingham, his father's generation never freed themselves

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10) Octavius Brooks Frothingham, *George Ripley* (Boston, 1882), 14-17.

from a “conservatism” at once intellectual, cultural, and social.<sup>11)</sup>

Is there any way of reconciling these opinions of antebellum Unitarianism? Does each contain part of the truth about the denomination? Are we in the presence of a truly paradoxical movement?

Perhaps not. The paradox of liberals or liberators who are also conservative is not especially striking or dramatic if we take these early Unitarians on their own terms. As Channing argued in “Unitarian Christianity” (1819) and as Nathaniel Frothingham insisted throughout his long life, being a liberal was a *means or way* of being authentically Christian—despite what the orthodox were saying. The image or idea of the Unitarians as smashing through intellectual chains may also be an exaggeration. For Miller, this image was justified because the ancestral Calvinism of the Unitarians was a “grim faith” or, as he said in essays and books of the 1930s and 1940s, marked by “determinism.” In point of fact these statements distort the actual substance of Calvinist theology. Rhetorically, however, they justify the praise he lavished on the liberals for breaking free of Calvinism. Miller knew, of course, that Emerson and Theodore Parker were the true radicals, Emerson in particular because of his post-Christian perspective on religion. Post-Christian is most definitely what the Unitarians were not. The less daring or “liberal” we make them out to be, the more easily they fit within the category of “conservative.”

My reassessment works—up to a point. It is weakened, however, by the vehemence of the Unitarian assault on orthodox theology. Channing and his allies were most definitely out to destroy what they regarded as a pernicious, crippling, system of theology. It is useful, therefore, to recall the main lines of their criticism, as a way of looking more closely at the theological commitments of these liberals. What was wrong with Calvinism? The term appears in the Boston minister William Ellery Channing’s “The Moral Argument against Calvinism” (1823); the minister turned historian George Ellis, and the polemics of Unitarian academic

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11) Octavius Brooks Frothingham, *Boston Unitarianism 1820-1850: A Study of the Life and Work of Nathaniel Langdon Frothingham* (New York, 1890), 37, 159.

Andrews Norton. For Ellis and Channing, the base line for understanding Calvinism was established by the Five Points associated with the Synod of Dort and the Westminster Confession. Norton, a much more bookish man than either Ellis or Channing, returned to Calvin's *Institutes* and other works to make the liberal case.

Theologically, the three agreed on what was wrong with the historic faith of their New England ancestors: a low estimation of human nature, given the imputation of Adam's sin to all humankind; the paralyzing consequences of divine sovereignty as embodied in the doctrine of election; the (to them) barbarous notion of sacrifice, i.e., the death of Jesus on the cross, to satisfy an angry God; and the dismissal of human capacities for doing good. The alternative was as simple as imagining a benevolent God who wished mankind well, who respected powers of choice or free will, and who acknowledged as Christian all those who performed the duties of the Christian life—in short, a God shorn of any behavior that the Unitarians were characterizing as “arbitrary.”

Channing in “The Moral Argument against Calvinism” and an earlier sermon (1819) on “Unitarian Christianity” laid down the main lines of criticism. Rehearsing the character of God, he insisted that “our best ideas of goodness and justice” deny the Calvinist emphasis on divine sovereignty. Rehearsing the relationship between human nature and morality, he described orthodoxy (Calvinism) as holding that “under the innocent features of our childhood is hidden a nature averse to all good . . . a nature which exposes us to God's displeasure and wrath, even before we have acquired power to understand our duties.” Free agency was a crucial premise of Channing's alternative. Without such agency, he wondered, how can we be held responsible for our mistakes? “We believe, that no dispositions infused into us without our own moral activity [a reference to the Dortian concept of “irresistible grace”] are of the nature of virtue.” The darkest side of Calvinism was its denial of such agency, coupled with the unrelenting “cruelty” of its God. Summarizing his objections, Channing contrasted the meaning of parent or father under Calvinism with its meaning under Unitarianism. “Were a human parent

to form himself on the universal Father, as described by Calvinism, that is, were he to bring his children into life totally depraved, and then to pursue thym with endless punishment, we should charge him with a cruelty not surpassed in the annals of the world."<sup>12)</sup>

Others picked up on the theme of God as unspeakably cruel or, as George Ellis put it, a despot who reveled in frightening human kind. "Calvinism owes its perpetuity to the influence of fear in paralyzing the moral nature. Men's minds and consciences are subdued by terror, so that they dare not confess . . . the shrinking, which they feel, from the unworthy views which this system gives of God." Or, the great error of the Calvinist tradition was to confine religious truth within a system or creed. Treating "system" as a negative word and singling out the ambition to organize all of theology into an official creed, Unitarians played the card of simple biblical truths that, more than century before them, Locke had employed in *The Reasonableness of Christianity*. According to Ellis, Unitarianism and modernity itself were dethroning all dogmatism in religion, "that dogmatism which insists upon confirming the power of the Gospel to a metaphysical system of doctrines." Persistently, therefore, the liberals spoke of "the dogmas of John Calvin" and, in writing about Jonathan Edwards, dismissed him as a "Calvinist metaphysician," a double burden to bear given the implication that to be "metaphysical" was to be detached from practical, living Christianity. When the liberals described their own theological method, they boasted of relying on "reason," although the deeper point was that "Unitarianism has no dogma, except in the quality of denying a dogma."<sup>13)</sup>

Andrews Norton, who prided himself on being the most aggressive of the liberals, carried these lines of attack to an extreme: "false religion" (aka Calvinism) manifested itself in "persecutors, zealots, and bigots," these

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12) William Ellery Channing, "The Moral Argument against Calvinism," in *The Works of William E. Channing, D. D.* 6 vols. (New York, 1848), 1: 222, 238; Channing, "Unitarian Christianity," *ibid.*, 3: 93, 85.

13) George E. Ellis, *A Half-Century of Unitarian Controversy* (Boston, 1857), 142, 130.

being the inevitable consequence of a religious system stemming from “ages of ignorance” and wholly at odds with the modern temper. But his particular contribution to the onslaught on Calvinism was to return to the sources. Outraged when someone on the orthodox side insisted that “there never was a sect, or body of men” who *endorsed* the ideas Unitarians were attributing to them, Norton demonstrated otherwise in “Views of Calvinism” (meaning, what Calvinists themselves were saying), an essay he published in 1822. He quoted from the obvious sources: the Larger Catechism of Westminster and the Confession itself; the acts of the Synod of Dort; the Belgic Confession; passages from the seventeenth-century English theologian William Twisse (someone cited from time to time by Norton’s Puritan ancestor John Norton in *his* theologizing),<sup>14</sup> Calvin’s “Short Formula of a Confession of Faith,” the *Institutes*, and most deliciously, passages from Jonathan Edwards’ treatises and sermons, particularly “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” Using these texts, Norton could easily document the doctrine of original sin, its consequences for moral ability among humans, and the assertion that new-born children were immediately under sentence or reprobation. A long quotation from Calvin to this effect was followed by a Latin quotation (on the “horrible doctrine” of predestination) and Norton’s epitaph for such a doctrine: “*Decretum quidem horribile, fateor*. Calvin was not given to human relenting.”<sup>15</sup>

A careful reader of these critiques of Calvinism (be it Calvin’s Calvinism or the Calvinism of Jonathan Edwards, which were not the same thing) may be surprised by the absence of any discussion of the Trinity. The character of God was in play, but not, it seems, the nature or identity of the Holy Spirit and Christ. Yet the name of the movement implies a focus on Christology: Jesus (or the Christ) no longer co-equal or the same in substance with God and the Holy Spirit although in some

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14) John Norton, *The Orthodox Evangelist* (Cambridge, Mass., 1657).

15) Andrews Norton, *Tracts concerning Christianity* (Cambridge, 1852), 113, 115, 168, 190.

manner divinely commissioned. Are we misled, therefore, by the name of the denomination? We are, if it seems to suggest a strong engagement with the Arian and Socinian critiques that arose within early Christianity and the orthodox response to those critiques. Few, if any, of the leading Unitarian intellectuals spent much time revisiting the Christological controversies within the early church. William Ellery Channing's "Unitarian Christianity" (1819) is typical of the more customary approach, a close reading of the Gospels that employs common sense to reconcile the various assertions by Jesus and the authors of the Gospels about the Messiah's identity. A modern reader of this sermon-treatise may end up feeling that Channing is as anxious about Deism (which denied Jesus any divine origins or role) as he is about the Trinity, for he defends the divine "something or other" of Jesus and extols his importance to the Christian life and Christian church. As he said of himself elsewhere, "For years I have felt a decreased interest in settling the precise rank of Jesus Christ. The power of his character seems to me to lie in his spotless purity, his moral perfection, and not in the time during which he has existed."<sup>16</sup> This indifference to Christology seems to justify Sydney Ahlstrom's judgment that "Ideas on man were far more determinative than the ideas about the Godhead which later won them the name 'Unitarian'."<sup>17</sup>

Or, we could take Channing and his contemporaries at their own word: for them, "religion" was at odds with "creeds" or system. The question then becomes, what was their understanding of religion or the religious? The question deserves a much fuller answer than I can provide in the space of this essay. But any such answer must acknowledge three aspects of Unitarian *religiosity*. One of these was Channing's vision of a larger "reformation" of which his own Unitarianism was merely a phase, an unfolding of the spiritual capacities of humankind that would eventually replace *all distinctions* (theological, structural ...) of the kind

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16) William H. Channing, *A Life of William Ellery Channing* (Boston, 1882), 444.

17) Ahlstrom, *Religion in America*, 392.

that divided Christendom with a truly universal faith.<sup>18)</sup> By the close of the nineteenth century, some Unitarians were suggesting that other “world religions” were part of this universal faith. Channing may not have spoken for most of his fellow Unitarians, but his vision of the future helps to explain the double identity of Unitarianism as denomination (with boundaries, rules, structures) and as movement (ever growing, elastic ...). A second aspect was the Unitarian emphasis on morality or the moral self. Self-improvement or, to borrow a phrase from Channing, “self-culture,” is a theme that unites Brook Farm and Emerson’s reflections on the self with classic antebellum Unitarianism. What we may overlook is the disciplining aspects of self-culture. Inheriting from the Moderate Enlightenment a distrust of the “passions” and religious “enthusiasm,” Unitarians espoused a sober moderation in all things, coupled (here and there) with the leaven of sentimental-style emotions.<sup>19)</sup>

A third aspect of religiosity or religion brings us, finally, to the Unitarian role in the flowering of American literature. As Lawrence Buell, has pointed out, the Unitarian insistence on softening the traditionally Puritan/Calvinist distinction “between ... sacred and profane letters, between piety and conduct,” together with the Unitarian focus on “character formation,” enabled the antebellum members of the denomination to regard “art and literature as perennial aids” of religion itself.<sup>20)</sup> To make this point another way: having discarded traditional modes of constructing a theology and defining religion, these men (and women) took up literature or the literary as a better means of expressing a sensibility that genres such as poetry, fiction, and hymns were suited to capturing or encouraging. Consider the example of Nathaniel

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18) Channing, *Life*, 438. For the “world religions” aspect, see Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality* (San Francisco: Harper/San Francisco, 2005).

19) For these aspects and a careful description of “Burkean” aspects of Unitarianism, see Daniel Walker Howe, *The Unitarian Conscience: Harvard Moral Philosophy, 1805-1861* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970).

20) Buell, “Literary Significance,” 164-65.

Frothingham. He may never appear in a history of American literature, but the memoir his son wrote about him asks us to recognize his literary aspirations as evidenced in the many hymns he wrote. Somewhat better known (although only to specialists, perhaps) are the literary efforts of Henry Ware, Jr., which included a novel about Jesus, and the novels and stories written by Catherine Maria Sedgwick.

Far better known in his own day was Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and an early poem of his, "The Reaper and the Flowers" (1836), although easily ignored as sub-literary, is a near perfect example of how Unitarian themes in particular, a "sentimentalist" alternative to "grim" Calvinism, passed over into poetry. I quote:

There is a Reaper, whose name is Death,  
 And, with his sickle keen,  
 He reaps the bearded grain at a breath,  
 And the flowers that grow between.

"Shall I have naught that is fair?" saith he;  
 "Have naught but the bearded grain?  
 Though the breath of these flowers is sweet to me,  
 I will give them all back again."

He gazed at the flowers with tearful eyes,  
 He kissed their drooping leaves;  
 It was for the Lord of Paradise  
 He bound them in his sheaves.

"My Lord has need of these flowerlets gay,"  
 The Reaper said, and smiled;  
 "Dear tokens of the earth are they,  
 Where he was once a child.

"They shall all bloom in fields of light,

Transplanted by my care,  
 And saints, upon their garments white,  
 These sacred blossoms wear."

And the mother gave, in tears and pain,  
 The flowers she most did love;  
 She knew she should find them all again  
 In fields of light above.

O, not in cruelty, not in wrath,  
 The Reaper came that day;  
 'T was an angel visited the green earth,  
 And took the flowers away.

Sentiment as theology, theology as sentiment: here, in the space of a brief poem, Longfellow enacts for the reader the reversing of Calvinist assumptions about sin and judgment, with the "grim reaper" giving way to a Christ who reassures all mothers that their children are spared sin and judgment and therefore will live forever in paradise (heaven). Tears and flowers (and whiteness) take the place of traditional theological categories, and sensibility the place of creeds and catechisms. If Unitarianism remains a paradoxical movement, how better to illustrate those paradoxes than by citing a poem that captures both the appeal of the movement and its curiously anti-intellectual approach to theology.

**Abstract**

Unitarianism in New England originated as a Protestant denomination in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Long regarded as a significant influence on antebellum American writers, Unitarianism has also had its critics, most famously Ralph Waldo Emerson. This essay explores the paradoxes of a movement at once liberal and conservative, focusing in particular on its theological identity and how literature became a vehicle for cultivating a certain kind of religious sensibility.