

THE FIRST UNITARIAN SOCIETY OF MILWAUKEE

# THE FIRST CHURCH STORY

By

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# The First Church Story

The Rev. Dr. Andrew C. Kennedy

“Infidelity!” thundered the Rev. Dr. Claybaugh, a Presbyterian minister and professor in the theological department at Miami University in Ohio back in the early 1860s. “Infidelity,” he thundered,

is gaining strength and growing bolder. There is unequivocal evidence that the number of avowed unbelievers and profane scoffers at serious religion is much increased within a few years. As their numbers increase, so do their boldness and daring impiety....

But we are much mistaken if we compute the infidel strength by those only who...scoff at the Bible, celebrate the birthday of Tom Paine, and toast the French Revolution. For there are others in the same cause, equally zealous and far more dangerous – the patrons and votaries of the Universalist, and Unitarian, and other kindred heresies. On these, Thomas Jefferson, bitter infidel as he was, smiled with the same gracious aspect with which he smiled on Tom Paine. Jefferson understood the matter well – he knew that infidels, Universalists, and Unitarians were all laboring in the same field.<sup>1</sup>

So inveighed the Rev. Dr. Claybaugh 150 years ago. Bringing such so-called heresy with us from the East Coast, on August 18, 1841, the following notice appeared in the *Milwaukee Courier*. It read:

## To The Unitarians In Milwaukie

*Those citizens of Milwaukie friendly to the organization of a Unitarian congregation in this town, are requested to meet in Roger's Building on Thursday evening next, at early candle light.*

Arrangements were evidently set in motion at this meeting “at early candle light”<sup>2</sup> for the Rev. Joseph Harrington, minister of the First Unitarian Society of Chicago, to come north to Milwaukee for a series of twelve sermons, which were to be given in the courthouse (then located on Cathedral Square) over a two week period.<sup>3</sup>

Harrington came, he spoke, and he was well received.

Despite the fact that there were only about 3000 people settled here in 1841, there were already seven other denominations that had regular services and ministers. But it would still be another five years before Solomon Juneau's booming trading post would officially be called Milwaukie, and another seven years before Wisconsin would become a state.<sup>4</sup>

American Unitarianism was in its infancy, as well. After finally breaking with the more conservative New England Congregationalists in 1819 with William Ellery Channing's bold, so-called “Baltimore Sermon,” the American Unitarian Association was officially organized in 1825. It was not an instrument of effective evangelism, however, and sixteen years later, in 1841, when the Unitarians were getting organized here in

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<sup>1</sup> Claybaugh, Joseph, “The Spirit's Standard,” as quoted by Bruce, W. G. in “The Quintessence of Bigotry,” *The Star in the West*, an old Universalist newspaper, September 19, 1868.

<sup>2</sup> This was several years before Milwaukee's first public clock was erected above Abner Kirby's jewelry store; hence the significance of meeting “at early candlelight.”

<sup>3</sup> Accounts vary as to whether Harrington came up from Chicago before or after the *Courier* notice. More research might well be able to resolve this ambiguity.

<sup>4</sup> McArthur, Annabel Douglas, *Religion in Early Milwaukee* (publisher unknown, 1946), pp. 11-13.

Milwaukee, there were very few Unitarian churches west of the Alleghenies. Indeed, as far as I can tell, there were none in what we now know as Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan or Indiana. There was one Unitarian church in Iowa and there were several in Illinois, including Harrington's church, the First Unitarian Society in Chicago. That society (in Chicago) had been organized in 1836 — just six years before ours.<sup>5</sup>

So, in short, ours is one of the oldest Unitarian churches in our movement, especially outside of Massachusetts.

## II

Indeed, as we imagine being among those pioneering Unitarians in the early days of Milwaukee, we might legitimately wonder just what it was that they believed, and, moreover, just what it was that so incited the ire and fire of orthodox ministers like the Rev. Dr. Claybaugh to condemn us as “infidels” and “heretics.” Indeed, what, we might wonder, was so dangerous, so threatening about our Unitarian predecessors that caused the Presbyterians down the street at Immanuel Presbyterian Church to hold what was then called an “indignation meeting” when they learned in 1856 that we wanted to purchase a building of theirs?

Well, the answer to these questions revolves around the fact that the early Unitarians believed that God was a loving and benevolent God, not a stern and vindictive judge. We tended to believe that people are inherently good, not depraved, and that we were not condemned as a human race by the supposed sins of Adam and Eve long ago. Some may hold this view, but this is not our view. Indeed, we believed (with the Universalists), that all people (universally) would one day be saved, and that a loving God would never condemn anyone to eternal punishment. That's just too long! That's just too mean. A good God wouldn't do that. And, finally, we believed that both the Bible and human reason more convincingly supported the idea of the unity of God rather than the trinity of God. These, then, were some of the key Unitarian and Universalist “heresies” during the first half of the nineteenth century.

Around the time of the Civil war, however, new issues were coming to the fore, which turned the heat up even more upon the early Unitarians and Universalists. Two developments in particular tended to accentuate our differences with some of the more evangelical and conservative Christians of the day. First was the publication in 1859 of Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species*. And, secondly, a related phenomenon was the growing scientific and literary credibility of what was then called, and is still called, “Higher Criticism” of the Bible.

Let me say a few words about Higher Criticism, which is still a significant contemporary spiritual issue for a lot of people — even 150 years later.

Higher Criticism refers to what was then a new approach in literature to the study of literary texts. Instead of just picking up a text and reading it literally, this new approach (which is commonplace today) carefully considered a text's authorship and its historical context in order to reach an appropriately informed understanding of the text at hand. Well, what happened is that scholars then took these modern literary techniques and applied them to the Bible. They began, in other words, to treat the Bible as a piece of literature. And, thus, the same literary techniques that indicated, for example, that the works long attributed solely to Homer were actually the work of several authors, not just one, when applied to the Bible, effectively shattered, or at least threatened to shatter, a lot of the traditional assumptions the orthodox Jews and Christians had held for thousands of years about the Bible's authorship. Let me explain in a little more detail.

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<sup>5</sup> This statement deserves more research because it is not well supported. What I did was to check the current Unitarian Universalist Directory, looking for societies organized in or before 1841. Clearly, however, there could have been some churches which were organized before 1841 but which have ceased to exist since then (and, thus would not appear in a current Directory).

Detailed comparisons made of the vocabulary of the books of the Bible clearly demonstrate that the Book of Isaiah, for example, was written by at least two different people at two distinctly different times in history (which is why, even today, Biblical scholars talk about “First Isaiah” and “Second Isaiah”). This is an example, then, of applying literary Higher Criticism techniques to the Bible.

Thus, the upshot of all of this, 150 years ago, was that the notion that God was once, long ago, whispering directly, word-for-word, into the ear of an earnest man named Isaiah, who was furiously writing it all down, was no longer tenable. Indeed, the infallibility, or “inerrancy,” of the Bible — an idea fairly basic, after all, to many, but certainly not all, orthodox Christians — was sharply and cogently called into question with the techniques of higher criticism.

Moreover, it was not just the doctrine of literal inspiration which was at stake here. For if the Biblical books were acknowledged to be human products from various times and places, then the contents of those humanly written books — the reported miracles of Jesus and many of the key events of his life, death, resurrection, and ministry — might be suspect, as well. And open to investigation.

No wonder, then, that the likes of The Rev. Dr. Claybaugh were so upset with the early Unitarians and Universalists. For the Unitarians and the Universalists, fired with the tonic of freedom of religious belief, readily accepted the tools and findings of the so-called “Higher Criticism” of the Bible. And, thus, we were at least an implicit threat to many of the more orthodox faiths — not because we wanted to be, but simply because of our faith in science and reason, and the conclusions to which those disciplines took us — a faith which was not, after all, universally shared.

So, in short, intellectual and spiritual freedom — even though they sometimes led to charges of heresy — were absolutely key to the First Church story — just as they are today.

### III

At the same time, in those early days of the 1840s, 50s, and 60s, the First Unitarian Society of Milwaukee was a relative powerhouse of business and entrepreneurial leadership here in Milwaukee. So, even if our predecessors were spiritual or religious rebels — and they were — they apparently were not socio-economic rebels. Hardly, in fact! For example, when this church was formally incorporated in 1859, there were just three trustees: Edward P. Allis, the preeminent industrial entrepreneur of the Allis-Chalmers Manufacturing Company on the South side; William H. Metcalf, a fabulously successful shoe manufacturer; and H. H. Butten, a prominent physician. Our treasurer at the time was C. F. Ilsley, president of the Marshall and Ilsley Bank. Our secretary at the time was William Strickland, a director of the Phoenix Insurance and Banking Company. And in that same year, 1859, one of our earlier trustees, William A. Prentiss, was then mayor of Milwaukee.

Clearly, these were establishment figures of considerable significance. Indeed, a new study just published by the Milwaukee County Historical Society (edited, by the way, by one of our choir members, Jim Marten) shows that this church, between 1857 and 1894, had a disproportionate number of Milwaukee’s business and cultural elites. Indeed, Laura Rominger, the author of this new study, argues from tax and other records that First Church comprised a disproportionate one-twelfth of Milwaukee’s key business and cultural leaders.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> According to Laura Rominger’s study, in 1857, “Unitarians comprised nearly one twelfth of Milwaukee’s super-elite — the most prosperous .34 percent of Milwaukee’s investors and business owners of the city’s approximately 45,000 residents.” Rominger’s study is awkwardly titled, “To belong to this church was an introduction into ‘Best Society’”: Elite Values and Liberal Christianity in Milwaukee’s First Unitarian Society, 1857-1894.” It was published in 2006 in Marten, Jim (ed.), *Milwaukee History: The Magazine of the Milwaukee County Historical Society*, Vol 26, Fall-Winter 2003, p. 56.

So, our First Church predecessors clearly were spiritual or religious rebels, but, at the same time, they were not socio-economic rebels. Rather, they were deeply involved in the Milwaukee business and cultural establishment.

Nevertheless, from the very beginning, we can find unmistakable evidence that, as a congregation, we did then – as we do now – try to make a difference in our community and in the larger world. This, I would suggest, is another important part of our First Church story – our persistence in trying to make a difference in the world around us.

Just as our spiritual predecessors prized their spiritual and entrepreneurial freedom, so, too, we were known for being among the first to take a progressive, “scientific” approach to society’s various social problems. This, again, sometimes set us apart from the day’s orthodox Christians, who often tended to see most of society’s social ills as outgrowths of personal immorality and sin. Consequently, they tended to promote various spiritual remedies to these sins. Many evangelicals still take this approach. But the early Unitarians defined many of the day’s social problems in material and educational rather than in moral terms. Thus they made society’s various social ills subject to rational and scientific study and diagnosis rather than, as some would have it, simply leave them to the churches to solve as moral or spiritual problems.<sup>7</sup>

So, while our social justice efforts did not tend to challenge the underlying economic assumptions of society, they nevertheless applied the day’s most advanced techniques and analyses to those problems, stressing education, training, and opportunity – just as we tend to do today.

Indeed, as we scan the decades from the present-time all the way back to our founding in the 1840s, we can see a notable history of activism and progressive social reform. Again, we see a congregation trying to make a difference in the world. It is recorded, for example, that ours was one of the first churches in the area to establish a “soup house” back in the 1850s and, later, to help establish the community’s first Orphan Asylum. During the Civil War, our children donated money to buy chickens for the soldiers – just as, in that same tradition in the last couple of weeks, our children have raised over \$2,000 for UNICEF. Our Women’s Alliance in 1898 established a school on Jones Island to teach sewing to the poor German immigrants who lived there. Over the years, we helped found the local Humane Society, the Visiting Nurse Association, the Children’s Free Hospital, and the Protestant Home for the Aged. Over the years, we have brought to our local church such prominent spokespersons as Booker T. Washington in 1896, and, later, the national Urban League President (and a Unitarian) Whitney M. Young, Jr. We’ve had others here, too, like Pete Seeger and more recently Bill Schulz of Amnesty International, who may be coming back in January. Over the years, Unitarian philanthropy has included support for libraries and public schools, music and the arts. Several Unitarians helped to establish what was called the Young Men’s Association in 1848, a literary institution that later grew into the Milwaukee Public Library.

In a stunning Thanksgiving sermon preached on November 24, 1859, entitled “The Irrepressible Conflict” (referring to the coming Civil War), our minister at the time, the Rev. Nahor Augustus Staples, vigorously articulated his opposition to slavery. Soon afterwards, it was printed and was widely distributed across the country.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, over the years, our freedom of the pulpit has entertained a wide range of progressive causes – from temperance reform to civil rights, from abortion rights to gay marriage to opposition to our current war in Iraq.

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<sup>7</sup> Rominger, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

<sup>8</sup> In fact, while I could not find a copy of this sermon in our church archives, I finally did find a copy in the Rare Books and Special Collections Division of the Library of Congress in Washington, DC: Staples, Nahor A., “A Sermon on the Irrepressible Conflict” (Milwaukee: Strickland & Co., 1859), a copy of which is now filed under the ministry of Nahor Staples in the archives of the First Unitarian Society of Milwaukee, which is now held by the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee.

## IV

In short, as we scan the decades from the present-time all the way back to our founding in the 1840s, I would suggest that the First Church story is one that has long prized two key things from the very beginning: unbridled intellectual and spiritual freedom, on the one hand, and an engaging history of activism and progressive social reform, on the other hand.

If this be blasphemous “infidelity,” as the Rev. Dr. Claybaugh long ago insisted, then let it at long last flourish, here and now, and forevermore!