

“The Christian Tug of War in Liberal Religion: 1880-1900” or, “Nature Prevails”

The Religious Transformation of the late 19th and early 20th centuries as expressed in theology, art and architecture, by **Mark Harris**

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An important historical transition took place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This change was fomented philosophically with the advent of the Romantic movement in literature and in culture as it was first expressed in the 1830s in America.

Yet the results of this movement were not realized until the years following the Civil War.

One of the trailblazers of this change, **Ralph Waldo Emerson**, was able to see some of this transition during his lifetime. Emerson, of course, helped to articulate a vision and provide some of the materials to create our first national literature. But he was also a harbinger of major theological shifts by his identification of God with nature, and his rejection of traditional scriptural revelation in favor of immediate and personal intuition of deep spiritual truths.

I would like to suggest today that we can identify this shift in the lives of two important Unitarian leaders in the late nineteenth century, one of whom has a name identified with the historical Tiffany window that adorns the Amherst meeting house. Both that man, **Octavius Brooks Frothingham**, and another even more significant denominational figure, **William Channing Gannett**, figure significantly in this shift with Unitarianism. On Sunday mornings, we sometimes sing the words of Gannett, one of our most important hymn writers, and one of those favorite reflects this theological change when he said, “It” sounds along the ages, and refers to “it” as coming from such diverse sources as the breathing from Buddha’s tree, and the words of the oracles of Concord. It is clearly a more universal and diverse spirit than that of the Hebrew prophets and Jesus Christ.

The fields of labor for both of these people were outside New England, with Gannett further afield, mostly in the Midwest. Initially this could be a cause for alarm for some traditional Eastern liberals, who once promoted the idea that the Unitarian faith represents “the Fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, and the neighborhood of Boston.” But Gannett and Frothingham both had Boston pedigrees.

As a boy, Gannett was christened by the great **William Ellery Channing**, the spiritual founder of our faith, and also given his name, and made his godson. His last name came from his father, **Ezra Stiles Gannett**, Channing’s successor at what is today the Arlington Street Church in Boston, often considered the mother church of our denomination. Frothingham’s father was **Nathaniel Langdon Frothingham**, the minister of First Church Boston. What could be more pure-blood Unitarian than all this?

Gannett and Frothingham both went considerably beyond this heritage, though. To Channing’s liberal Christianity they said *we must be broader*, and to their fathers’ conservative social and institutional vision they said *we must live a faith that strives for justice, and stretches to ever-new horizons of the spirit*.

A religious radical and founder of the Free Religious Association, Frothingham was born in 1822, and had early intentions on a career in ministry, and so he continued on at **Harvard Divinity School**, where he described life as being “half-monastic.” After that he was called to the North Church in Salem, Massachusetts. He began his career as a theological conservative, but he was swept up by the influence of **Theodore Parker** and **Transcendentalism**, and both his theology and politics were radicalized. He said, “Not only was religion brought face to face with ethics, but it was identified with ethics.” His parishioners were disturbed by his new found faith, especially after he preached about their failures to aid the escaped slave Anthony Burns, and he refused to serve communion. Frothingham found himself uncomfortable in Salem.

A search for a new congregation led Frothingham to a new society that was founded in Jersey City, New Jersey, beyond the confines of Boston. This group was highly motivated to consider social questions, and gave Frothingham complete freedom of the pulpit, and also supported his disinterest in serving the Lord's Supper. After five years, he moved on to minister to a new society, Third Unitarian, in New York City. Here he enjoyed a 20-year ministry of immense popularity from 1859-79. At first **Henry Whitney Bellows** did not realize the degree of radicalism that had developed in Frothingham's thought, and Bellows had supported the creation of this congregation. After it became the "church of the unchurched," espousing a vague non-Christian theism, Bellows had nothing to do with Frothingham.

Frothingham convinced the church to assume independent status in the wake of the formation of Bellows's **National Conference of Unitarian Churches** in 1865.

[Bellows's] structured association of congregations was founded upon principles that they were disciples of Lord Jesus, and all the churches needed to be explicitly Christian. In fact, despite the presence of Transcendentalism in the air for more than 30 years, the Unitarians still had Christianity in their blood.

The new transfusion began with the establishment of what was known as the **Free Religious Association (FRA)**, which Frothingham helped form; he was its first president from 1867 when it was founded to 1878. He and others ruminated on the idea of creating a new organization which would promote complete spiritual freedom from irrational doctrines and traditional authorities. The majority of the FRA wanted to establish a new group, but they did not want to break with Unitarianism. They were never very successful organizationally, but they had a profound effect on transforming the denomination to a more universal and humanistic basis.

At their organizational meeting one of the speakers was none other than **Ralph Waldo Emerson**. Francis Ellingwood Abbot, one of the other FRA's founders, said free religion was a transfer of loyalty from Christ to Christ's principles: truth, righteousness and love.

The new faith was meant to reconcile religion and science. The constitution was adopted calling for an association that would: "promote the interests of pure religion, to encourage the scientific study of theology, and to increase fellowship in the spirit." Frothingham's theology had evolved from Transcendentalism to what he called Rationalism, a completely scientific view of faith. Here we see the influence of Darwin's theories of evolution, and a faith explicitly informed by scientific methods of inquiry. He expressed his theology in *The Religion of Humanity* (1872), and wrote the only complete history of Transcendentalism by someone involved in the movement, *Transcendentalism in New England* (1876). He died on November 27, 1895 in Boston.

If Frothingham had a profound effect theologically, Gannett was able to work institutional change as well as help express this religious transition in architecture and art. His most lasting contribution was in unifying the theological basis of our faith in the statement, "Things Commonly Believed Among Us." Before he even became a minister, Gannett learned first hand of the struggle for social justice when he went to South Carolina in 1861 and worked with impoverished and starving recently freed slaves. Sent by the New England Freedman's Society to the Sea Islands, Gannett had to manage plantations so that freedmen could work and produce a product that could be marketed. He started a school, and remained involved for four years in this comprehensive effort to completely change a way of life.

Most of his years of ministry took him beyond the neighborhood of Boston, except for when he came home to take care of his father and served in East Lexington. These included ministries in Milwaukee, St. Paul, Hinsdale (IL), and Rochester, New York, where again his social vision was prominent when **Susan B. Anthony** became his parishioner, and he worked with her on suffrage issues and locally to convince the then all-male University of Rochester to admit women. To raise the funds to secure the admission of women, Gannett and his wife pledged their house. This social vision that was especially strong among those who believed faith must be more ethically based was expressed after the turn of the century in the Social Gospel movement.

How many of you have ever read the magazine *House Beautiful*? Where do you suppose they derived that term?

When Gannett settled in the West, he began a close association with a minister named **Jenkin Lloyd Jones**, who was born in Wales to a Unitarian family. Jones had this nephew by the name of **Frank Lloyd Wright**, the famous architect. Together Wright and Gannett collaborated on a volume called *The House Beautiful*, based originally on an essay by Gannett. The idea behind it was the “domestication of the Infinite” in “a building of God.”

Gannett said the beautiful home could reflect nature’s simplest harmonies - good books, good company, simple and useful furniture, lovely flowers, and that with the togetherness of family life, there was a representation of God’s all-inclusive creation. I am going to suggest that there is a religious and artistic connection between the evolving theology of Unitarianism, and the artistic representations of the faith embodied in both Frank Lloyd Wright’s work, and that of Louis Tiffany. Right now there is a continuing exhibit at the Portland, Maine Museum of Art called “Frank Lloyd Wright and the House Beautiful.” Wright designed total living spaces which were a reflection of nature – floor-to-ceiling windows brought in the out of doors, and in office space, he anticipated the modern atrium with light-filled central courts. His open floor plans echoed the natural prairies of the Midwest; the landscape was brought inside. This free-flowing open plan also redefined how the defined lives of the Victorian era could be made out to a boundless future of possibility, which was also reflected in his low flat roofs. This bringing of nature into his designs was also reflected in his palette, which was dependent upon organic colors. He was trying to create designs to soothe the soul, and bring it into harmony with nature.

Religiously speaking, Wright was seeking a spiritual freedom in Unitarianism which went beyond the confines of traditional Christianity, just as his designs were an attempt to free up the closed, separate rooms of Victorian houses, with the open space of modern living.

Marjorie Leighy, who lived in a Wright house, said the idea was, “Liberation from things releases deeper imaginative, intellectual, and creative processes and there comes to be a unity among the many compartments of life.” This resulted in a perception that “God is in all and all is of God.” (*Globe* review of Exhibit, 8/26/07). Whatever, you think of Frank Lloyd Wright, and not by any stretch was he a nice person, we must acknowledge the late 19th and early 20th century revolution he wrought in architecture and in design. Whether you like the results, we also acknowledge that he brought to architecture a sense of larger purpose primarily inspired by his sense of nature and place. He was also the son of a Unitarian minister, and well steeped in the philosophy of the Transcendentalists. He believed that better designed environments make a better quality of life for all. In addition to opening up space for living, he also based his House Beautiful design upon an idea of organic architecture, a unity that reflected one aesthetic whole, like the branching veins of a leaf reflect the branches of a whole tree.

This link between Wright’s House Beautiful, Unitarianism as it became more universal and humanistic, and the stained glass of Tiffany is how the glass reflected a theology based in natural religion, and nature itself, and thus an evolving, more inclusive, freer faith that moved beyond the confines of a dogmatic Christianity.

Elizabeth Johnston De Rosa has written on “Louis Comfort Tiffany and the development of religious landscape memorial windows.” She says that these windows, which were produced in the late 19th and early 20th century, shared an emphasis on peaceful, tranquil settings with lots of floral scenes, and forests with brooks running through them or lakes flanked by rolling hills. These designs reflected two important trends. Liberals were redefining Christianity, especially from the traditional Biblical stories reflected in older stained glass works. These new windows reflected a universal sentiment that went beyond specific theology. This universal sentiment was best reflected in the beauty of the earth and its people, who were inherently good.

The windows also reflect a continuation of a theme first voiced in the rural cemetery movement, which began in 1831 with Mt. Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge and Watertown; and thus philosophically

we circle back to one of the first instances of Romanticism expressed in the culture. Unlike the Puritans, death was no longer imaged by the romantics as something to be feared with skulls and bones, but rather it was expressed in weeping willows on the gravestones and in the beautiful embrace of nature rather than in ugly decay and the fires of potential damnation. Cemeteries became park like, and people could go there and walk and talk with their dead relatives who were nearby in natural surroundings. So there was reassurance in nature in the boundless unity of life and death. Liberals were typical patrons for these windows, creating memorials for their loved ones, just as they had created the rural cemetery movement decades before. What is also interesting about these windows, and Wright's architecture, is that we sometimes say that there has never been an expression of Protestantism or even Unitarianism in art. Yet these paintings in glass were precisely religious works reflecting Unitarian and other liberal theology that was based in the wholeness of nature, and a more universal spirituality that was beginning to move beyond the confines of Christianity.

Jenkin Lloyd Jones and William Channing Gannett also believed in making the church more home like. They were both put off by a cathedral style of architecture that was ostentatious but useless. Religiously it also served, in their minds, authoritarianism and superstition. Their ideal church was a humble abode, more like a secular hall, that was useful seven days a week to teach culture, provide community service and offer mutual care. Gannett designed just such a functional home for his congregation in Hinsdale. They were trying to domesticate churches, just as Wright domesticated architecture -- that is, open, sparse, not ornate or ostentatious.

This also signaled a new vision of ministry in the churches that served people in many social, educational and emotional ways. It was especially adopted by women who entered the ministry in increasing numbers in the late 19th century, including the Iowa Sisterhood, of whom Gannett was especially supportive. Gannett saw a new vision of society that was reflected in some ways in the Progressive movement, and in religion in what became known as the social gospel. Although his own sister opposed him in the suffrage battle, preferring that women not be corrupted by politics, Gannett formed alliances with the women ministers on suffrage, and in the confrontations that took place in the Western Unitarian Conference, which was founded in 1852. Gannett and others wanted a wider interpretation of free religion than one which would restore the patriarchy of Christian hegemony to Unitarianism. They were ready to defend the faith through "Truth, Righteousness and Love." Between the affirmation of the simplicity of faith and the social usefulness of home and church, together Gannett and the women ministers stood behind a Unitarianism which represented what they called, "the larger thought." This alliance later moved the president of Meadville seminary to say that a company of women had ruined the Western Unitarian Conference, because they had been controlled by Gannett.

If anything, Gannett was trying to stop the controlling by the Christians, who thought they were preserving the true basis of Unitarianism as embodied in the Boston religion. Gannett, like most Unitarians in the West then, wanted his faith to embody in words and actions an openness to new horizons of faith, where there was a meaningful sense of belonging to a larger notion of God and humanity, a oneness in all creation. Gannett had been an early supporter of the Free Religious Association, which as you heard, was formed in response to those who wanted to restrict Unitarianism to a Christian focus. It was a forerunner of humanism. Gannett felt religion had to be completely noncreedal and anti supernatural.

The controversial "Issue in the West" was framed in pamphlet form by Gannett and Jones's chief opponent, Jabez Sunderland. Prior to 1886, Jones had been secretary of the Western Unitarian Conference, where he organized churches in the name of "Freedom, Fellowship and Character in Religion." To some this sounded like free religion. In 1886 Sunderland succeeded Jones and questioned whether Western Unitarianism was ready to give up its traditional character, and always be moving on to new truths. He said that others, like Gannett, were creating a new order of Unitarianism based on principles rather than belief in anything that would commit them to theism or Christianity. He worried that the radicals were forcing them to move off historic Unitarianism to a religion of pure ethics.

Gannett saw this as an effort to exclude those who do not take the name Christian or Theist, and he offered a resolution which said there would be no dogmatic tests, but that the conditions of fellowship would be “Truth, Righteousness and Love.” At the end of the annual meeting of the conference he offered a prayer for understanding, but the Christians responded by organizing a rival conference when they were rebuffed in their hope for a Christian basis of faith.

This issue of the theological basis of Unitarianism came to a head the following year, when Gannett proposed, “Things Commonly Believed Among Us” at the conference meeting. The Christians feared that the radicals were trying to deprive them entirely of God and Jesus. The radicals feared the Christians only wanted uniformity of belief. Yet both sides were able to overcome their fears, and have a conversation about the meaningful common ground they shared in this free faith. The Christians could have Jesus. The radicals would not be forced to be Christian. Gannett’s statement was adopted by a large majority at the 1887 meeting of the conference, but true unity was not achieved until 1894, when the National Conference found common ground with the declaration that there could never be authoritative tests of faith, and that the denomination must be completely noncreedal.

“Things Commonly Believed” had provided the basis for this unity. David Robinson calls it one of the most moving and accurate statements of faith among Unitarians. For being over 100 years old, it is remarkable for the way in which it makes room for so many shades of belief, and even its use of names for God such as the one-in-all, or that “love with whom our souls commune.” It foreshadowed some of the debate over God that would often surface in the 20th century.

In his day, many traditionalists called Gannett dangerous, but time has proven him a worthy example of achieving denominational unity without resorting to set beliefs or traditional words in worship as a standard for everybody. He knew that Unitarianism had a distinctive approach to faith which can make it a difficult transition for those who want fixed beliefs as guidelines. But when we realize that our true unity is in our faith in the process, in the principles of openness and understanding, and in our belief in the oneness of creation, we have the basis for a glorious faith. Religion literally means to rejoin, to reconnect us to each other and our universe, and what could be more religious than a faith which teaches the oneness of faith and the oneness of humanity? What more could make us feel we truly belong to each other and the earth?

So the Transcendental vision of the ethical impulse of faith and the rejection of tradition, the moving beyond Christian dogma to a more universal and humanistic standard, was achieved. Darwin and scientific inquiry had played their part in the transition. Biblical criticism played its role, too. The discovery of other world religions opened up more universal paths to truth. Finally, those Transcendental religious principles were embodied in the art works in glass of Tiffany, and eventually in the architecture of Wright, universal expressions of faith in artistic representations. One could also see this vision realized in landscape architecture as well, as many of these leaders had liberal and ministerial connections.

“Things Commonly Believed Among Us” by William Channing Gannett was an attempt to define a universal faith based on natural, ethical principles. In part he wrote: “We trust the unfolding Universe as beautiful, beneficent, unchanging Order; to know this order is truth; to obey it is right and liberty and stronger life;” and finally he wrote: “We worship One-in-All - that life whence suns and stars derive their orbits and the soul of man (and woman) its Ought, - that Light which lighteth every man (and woman) that cometh into the world, giving us power to become the sons (and daughters) of God, - that Love with which our souls commune.” To say our “ought” or our reason for being came from suns and stars was a radical change from the great and powerful Jehovah of Puritan New England. That God was just as parochial as the narrow Christian faith. The new God and the new faith must express the universal all.

If you wish to know the sources used in creating this lecture, please contact Mark Harris at minister@fpwatertown.org