

## Handout

### *The Choosers Are Chosen*

One of the more helpful UU publications of recent years has been the small but power-packed book by Forrester Church and John Buehrens, originally called *Our Chosen Faith* and then reissued as *A Chosen Faith*. The center word in this title puts forth what I think is the pivotal issue for religious liberals of all eras: choice.

*Choice* implies the *freedom* to choose, which right away differentiates us from many other religions. The freedom we have to authentically choose the belief system that feels right to us is a great gift. For centuries, most people have been severely restricted in this pursuit, if not viciously persecuted for thinking differently. Free religion like ours was all but unavailable not so many years ago. It is still remarkably invisible to many people even today in this avowedly free country.

I imagine that many of you have fielded sneers and disbelief about “our chosen faith” from others who cannot conceive of, enjoy, or accept Religion Without an Enforced Dogma. Well, don’t let anyone compromise your spiritual self-esteem! Ours is actually a *huge* faith—a profound faith we have in each other and in our religious willingness to be on a path together without authoritarian theology. I think it takes great faith to be on such an authentically open-ended and demanding journey.

An alternative to affirming our liberal freedom to choose might be to adopt a posture such as that of a woman who was a firm believer in divine predestination. She believed that all earthly events are already ordained by God and we have no choices at all; we are powerless to do other than live out our part in that Holy Plan. One day she fell down a short flight of stairs, suffering only minor bruises. After composing herself, she announced, “Well, thank God that’s over with.”

Our movement has definite Christian roots, and some significant branches too. The Christians we call our ancestors were not, however, always popular themselves in traditional settings. Early in my studies for the UU ministry, I got quite an earful of affirmation for our so-called heretical ancestors, largely in a fascinating course called *Heresies as Alternative Choices*. (The word *heresy* in Greek—*hairetikos*—means “able to choose.”) When I later took a semester of Early Church History over at a Franciscan Seminary, I heard the Catholic party line, which of course thoroughly dismissed and condemned many of the same folks.

But it remains the case that we religious liberals can trace our theological ancestors right back to the first centuries after Jesus, when many competing interpretations of his and other teachings were available. Origen of Alexandria, for instance, was the most brilliant theologian of the third century who promoted a very popular view of universalism: salvation for all. (This belief eventually provided the name for many of our churches: All Souls. When Forrester Church and

John Buehrens originally wrote *Our Chosen Faith*, they were ministers at the Unitarian Church of All Souls in New York City.)

Modern Christians rarely acknowledge that this *choice* in favor of a belief in universal salvation actually held sway for many in those years near to Jesus. It was a good example of having boundless faith in the goodness of God and humanity.

However, so thorough was the later eradication of this viewpoint by orthodox authorities that we today hardly even know the name of Origen, who was the first prominent universalist, despite being vilified by the Church. More than a millennium would go by before the seeds of this choice would spring forth again.

Meanwhile, a fellow named Arius came to the Council of Nicea in the year 325 to argue that Jesus was *not* of the same essence as God. This council represented a notable turning point; it established the Nicene Creed and laid a foundation for the addition of the Trinity as doctrine. Needless to say, Arius lost his case and was declared an enemy of the now-Christianized Roman Empire. Out of the Council of Nicea came the establishment of the Bible as the only approved scripture. All other ideas were then declared heretical.

For offering a choice that Jesus was not the same as God, Arius and his followers were persecuted as *antitrinitarians*. Again, as with universal salvation, this idea of Jesus' humanity was essentially crushed, to reemerge a thousand plus years later, although even today those who deny the divinity of Jesus are still being condemned as "Arians."

Both of these early heresies are directly related to our name, *Unitarian* (as in, not trinitarian) *Universalism* (as in universal salvation). It is important to me to recognize that Origen and Arius had legitimate belief systems in those first centuries after Jesus. Unfortunately, what we know of their teachings comes mostly from the writings of those who condemned them, because all evidence of their own work was torched. But they lived important lives of free thought. They *chose* their authentic faith in the face of great opposition and danger.

So many uninformed people today consider our religion to be a recent invention or historically shallow, sometimes even confusing us with the Unity or Unification Churches, which *are* both relatively new entries. I am not amused by this common mistake. Our clumsy double name has a long and substantial heritage of offering choices to Christians of conscience. The faith of Origen, Arius, and other early free thinkers was expansive and impressive, and I try to remember and articulate their stories when I'm faced with someone who diminishes my faith.

Continuing a very broad sweep of denominational history, the modern origins of Unitarianism and Universalism are in the Protestant Reformation of sixteenth-century Europe. *Choice* again is the key word that revived this movement and redevelopment of liberal religious thought, even though the persecution of heretics ("those who would choose") was even more violent this time around. That people would stick to their alternative viewpoints in the face of such cruel opposition makes their stories come alive all the more for me.

Michael Servetus was a Spaniard with medical and legal training who came of age as the Reformation was brewing in the first decades of the 1500s. His considerable intellect could not accept the doctrine of the Trinity as biblically based (which is isn't), and he wrote a well-reasoned refutation in 1531 called "On the Errors of the Trinity." Servetus' intention was to find productive common ground for Christians, Muslims, and Jews. But to his eye, the doctrine of the Trinity was

very problematic and exclusive. For his effort he was chased around Europe for two decades during the Inquisition and finally burned at the stake by order of John Calvin.

Servetus, whose name has been taken by some of our U.S. churches (for example, Vancouver, Washington), was a noted author and so his violent death got wide attention, but he was not the first of his era to be so treated for the unitarian heresy. A decade earlier, in Poland, Katherine Vogel was forced onto the fiery stake for freely and regularly confessing a belief in the unity of God. She was eighty years old at the time, and her chosen faith was so bounteous as to be dangerous to the powers-that-were.

Meanwhile, an Italian who lived much of his life in Poland gave his name to a strand of the heresy. Faustus Socinus studied the Bible intently and became a calm, well-respected advocate of the unity of God. Socinus became the leader of one of the first groups of unitarian believers—called *Socinians*—during a short period of religious freedom in Poland, the likes of which that country has not known since. The Jesuits eventually gained control of the country and viciously wiped away all traces of Socinianism. Faustus Socinus himself, at age sixty-five, was dragged from his home and killed by orthodox fanatics in 1604.

The largely untold history of these courageous heretics and their compatriots is inspiring and usually suppressed. I honor them as my spiritual ancestors. It is hard to imagine how slowly doctrinal changes were carved into the fiercely resistant religious landscape of these centuries, and how risky were the choices individuals made in the face of authoritarian power. Huge and violent debates were waged over theological distinctions, with lives hanging in the balance. I don't envy the reformers their task, but I'm sure thankful they carried on with it.

The first official movement named Unitarian emerged in Transylvania in 1568, when young King John Sigismund issued a formal decree of religious tolerance. This opened the door for antitrinitarians to use an uppercase "Unitarian" and think more positively. There have been Unitarians in that region ever since; (eighty thousand or so of them today). Since the 1980s, many North American UU congregations are in sister church relationships with Transylvanian Unitarian groups, offering important moral and financial support.

Unitarians and their free thought migrated (often under duress) to Western Europe, thriving in Holland and surviving in England despite continued harassment. Over in the pre-Revolutionary American colonies, such open-minded possibilities emerged as an alternative to strict, pious, unreasoning Protestantism.

Meanwhile, the seed of Universalism, planted by Origen many centuries earlier, sprouted in England but was almost nipped in the bud. Discouraged preacher John Murray barely escaped the British Isles and carried it westward, to eventually found the American Universalist movement. He first landed on the shores of New Jersey, where there is today a UU conference center called Murray Grove.

It is curious to observe how the two separate portions of our modern name developed in the Northeast. While each offered a very clear—and related—alternative to mainstream Protestant religion, there was a most notable class distinction: Unitarians were primarily the elite Bostonians, a learned aristocracy, pioneering cultural and social advances. Universalists, however, by and large, were out in the farmland, relatively uneducated, humble, working with their hands.

The Universalists held on to more traditional Christian theology and liturgy longer than did the Unitarians. Into the early nineteenth century, the new field of biblical criticism began to have a profound effect on theological discourse, offering even more radical choices, which the Boston (and Harvard) Unitarians were actively exploring.

A beloved minister of the Boston Unitarian movement, William Ellery Channing, led the charge toward a more rational religion by declaring that revelation was not sealed, that the insights of theology grow out of each generation's own experience as guided by Reason. He had "too much faith in the boundlessness of divinity to believe it's chiseled in one set of writings for all eternity." This was a very pivotal turn in the evolution of free religious thought.

Channing turned down the chance to be the first president of the newly formed American Unitarian Association in 1825, and the pace of change quickened. Soon he represented the old guard, many of whom still believed in the miracles of the Bible. Along came Ralph Waldo Emerson and his Transcendentalist peers, most of them out of Harvard Divinity School (a noted hotbed of Unitarianism). By their reasoning, the miracles of Jesus were now unacceptable as literal deeds.

Thomas Jefferson spoke very highly of Unitarianism, although he was not an active member. He had a similar disinclination to believe in miracles, and he carved up a Bible to leave out the parts that didn't make sense to him. What he pasted together has been republished by our Beacon Press as *The Jefferson Bible*.

In 1832 Emerson finally gave up his Unitarian parish ministry because he could no longer in good conscience believe in the Lord's Supper communion he was supposed to conduct at his church. Almost a decade later, another prominent Boston minister, Theodore Parker, went so far as to declare that the message of true Christianity transcended its carriers (i.e., Jesus!) and could be intuited by any individual without mediation by church hierarchy.

For this blasphemy, Parker was subjected to the closest thing to an American Unitarian heresy trial. However, he did not choose to relinquish his ministry, as Emerson had done. Instead, he stayed with the church and went on to wage theological battles against slavery and many other social ills of the day. Theodore Parker is a large character in our history; his words were adopted by President Lincoln to more famously promote a vision of "government of the people, for the people and by the people."

Over the course of the nineteenth century, the traditional framework of Christianity began to dissolve for those who believed they were exploring the forefront of religion. For instance, beginning after the Civil War, in the late 1860s, there was briefly an organization among Unitarians called the Free Religious Association, which left behind almost all Christian trappings. (One of its prime movers had the delightful name of Octavius Brooks Frothingham.) Also worth noting at this moment in time was the appearance of Charles Darwin's immensely influential *Origin of Species*. (Darwin had been raised in a Unitarian home.)

The Free Religious Association planted its early humanist seed and then faded. The years on either side of the turn of the twentieth century were slow going for both the Universalist and the Unitarian denominations, as they stayed nominally Christian. The Unitarians, however, concentrated on developing a

broader continental, even global base. In 1893 a Unitarian minister organized the very first meeting of representatives from many of the great world faiths. The Parliament of Religions, convened by Jenkin Lloyd Jones in Chicago, carried Unitarianism forth into waters that were not so much *non-Christian* as *more than Christian*. This global organization still exists today, over a century later, as the International Association for Religious Freedom, with triennial congresses of great value.

Meanwhile, the controversial heresies of the earlier nineteenth century had been noticed and, in some cases, even incorporated by adventurous mainline Protestant churches. One could now go to traditional churches and not have to face quite so much hellfire and damnation or trinitarian configurations. At the turn of the century, traditional Protestant churches were including enough similar theological material to draw back members who saw less of an alternative in the now less distinctive Unitarian and Universalist settings. The choices were no longer so clear. The UU heresies had, to some extent, won the day and been adapted into mainstream settings. The specific appeal of Unitarian and Universalist churches was diminishing.

Then came the first swellings of the contemporary humanist movement, launched by the publication of the Humanist Manifesto in 1933. This was a watershed document, signed mostly by Unitarian and a few Universalist ministers. It proposed an enormous faith in human ability, resisting all speculative theologies. From this point on, our religion veered further away from traditional Christianity. (The increasingly rapid pace of social and religious change might be evident in that it took only about fifty years for this humanist seed to resprout after the initial Free Religious Association, whereas it took 1,500 years to cultivate the pioneering work of universalist Origen and unitarian Arius.)

As part of this humanizing effort, in the late 1940s a new series of religious education curricula emerged that were destined to reshape the thinking of future generations. They were largely the work of Sophia Lyon Fahs, who gets my vote for the most influential UU of the twentieth century. (Maybe I'm biased because I was among the first generation of young people who responded to her approach.)

Fahs created curricula (the New Beacon Series) that for the first time placed Christianity in the context of other world religions. The birth story of Jesus was told alongside that of Buddha and Mohammed and Confucius. Bible stories were presented without mention that Christianity was a favored religion over all others. Children were engaged with material that drew on their *own* experiences, according to *their* developmental abilities; they were not just required to learn by rote the "word of God." It was a revolution that helped us, especially those of us from my generation on, to see Christianity as only one of a number of possible choices in which to ground our spiritual authenticity.

The Unitarian and Universalist circles finally came together in a 1961 consolidation, after discovering that they were each choosing more and more of the same path and could benefit from combining efforts. (It is worth noting too that the youth groups of each denomination had pioneered this development by merging seven years earlier.)

Since teaming up in 1961, UUs continue to chart new religious territory. Among denominations, we are far and away the most inclusive of women at all levels. Our welcome of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender persons has wit-

nessed for the inherent worth and dignity of all people. We have avowedly pagan groups exploring Earth-centered spirituality. Many of us are actively promoting a religious right to choose various medical options. Antiracism continues to stir us as a challenging goal. UU Christians are still pushing the boundaries of the theistic option. Our time has no shortage of issues that call out for courageous thought, articulate expression, and concerted action.

I'm among those who have been especially intrigued and challenged by the concept of interdependence that we now include in our religious principles. What does it really mean for me to be interdependent with you, with those who speak a different language, with the rain forests, with the whales? How does that realization affect my behavior? These are now religious questions of the highest order because the dual reality of living and dying exists for all the life with which I am interconnected. These are questions that require a fierce and thorough examination of modern diversity. Since I know the value of being able to choose, I must honor that ability in others too.

Today some of us contemporary UUs have chosen to stay in the movement that raised us, others have chosen to return after a sojourn away, and many others have chosen to enter with fresh voices and stories, bringing the vitality that diversity always produces. We are all at once lucky and cursed: lucky for the liberating freedom of conscience possible in nondogmatic religion, and cursed by the unending possibilities that demand our steady attention. It is no easy task to be unfettered by doctrine; we *have* to choose for ourselves. Our religion offers strong principles and tools for that task, but ultimately it is our own activity that makes the difference; it is our own choices that set the stage for our growth.

In a dynamic religious community, we sort things out together as life colleagues, sharing insights and struggles, learning from each other in relationship. This occurs in magnificently different ways in each UU group, yet it always seems to be happening. It has been said that our UU congregations are as unique as fingerprints, and as similar. I agree with Forrest Church when he reminds us that earlier Unitarians and Universalists placed a high value on individualism and freedom because they were fighting to lift the chains of oppression, theological and otherwise. Today we can choose from so many freedoms that the liberation we seek is not necessarily from bondage, but from *bondlessness*. Has the pendulum swung so far that we are now uprooted and alienated from each other amid our extreme freedoms?

Indeed, the frontiers of religion may now involve the harnessing of those hard-earned freedoms into more productive community-building, whatever that is going to look like in the first years of the twenty-first century. The truest, most egalitarian community on Earth is the community of Earth. I believe that honest religion of our time will be reflective of this fact.

I wish I could say just what this means, but we are still in the early throes of this latest surge of religious growth. It is an exciting, important time. People deep into the decades ahead will look back on the turn of *this* century and say . . . well, what *will* they say?

I hope Unitarian Universalist ministers giving sermons many years from now describing the latest sweep of their movement's history, will note the following:

- That an awareness of our fundamental interdependence took hold in this era
- That UU communities offered spiritual guidance for their members and maybe even the culture at large as we all lurched into a more responsible relationship with the rest of the planet
- That among this generation there was an animated spirit that ushered in a healthy and creative future

We come to this moment from a long line of innovators, free thinkers, and courageous pioneers who were simply doing the best they could in the spirit of religious pluralism. I'm proud of this lineage and humbled by the tasks before us. But, like William Ellery Channing, I have "too much faith in the boundlessness of divinity" to shrink from simply doing the best I can. That is the heritage of our chosen faith.

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