

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, NY
“Samuel Johnson”
 By Samuel Trumbore March 18, 2007

Sermon

I wince a little inside when people ask the inevitable question, “Oh, so you’re a Unitarian Universalist minister. So what do you people believe anyway.” Not that I don’t have ready answers – I do. Not that I’m doubtful about the power and value of our faith. No, that’s not the problem.

My hesitation comes from the challenge of telling the story of our religious tradition. Telling the story of a merging of two religious traditions less than a half century old. Telling our story that *has not* been adequately brought into language, practice and action. The story of the Spirit of Life and Love that brought us together, unites us, and leads us into the future.

What handicaps me, I’ve realized in the last few years, is not knowing enough about the historical Unitarians and Universalists who have also tried to put our shared story into words.

Oh, I’ve studied the stars, Unitarian founder William Ellery Channing, Universalist founders Hosea Ballou and John Murray, Transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller and Theodore Parker. I know a little bit about a number of other notables in our history. In seminary, we tended to concentrate on the big names, trying to understand their theological innovations that made us different from the Trinitarian Christians from whom we separated. After the civil war till World War I, many have focused on the social reform movements that swept through our congregations, particularly temperance and women’s rights. But in parallel, largely ignored, was a huge theological change led by the Free Religionists that didn’t take root until the twentieth century that I’ll address more next week.

I rediscovered the Free Religionists when I was doing research on the relationship between Buddhism and Unitarianism in the second half of the nineteenth century. One of the people I discovered who gave Eastern religions a favorable reading was a minister named Samuel Johnson. This morning I’d like to share my enthusiasm for him and for his vision of Universal Religion. I hope the Spirit of Johnson’s faith will inspire your own search for truth and meaning as it has mine.

Born in 1822, Johnson came of age in the heyday of Transcendentalism. His good friend, Samuel Longfellow, called him a natural, second generation Transcendentalist. He writes in his biography of Johnson, after his death in 1882:

...a born idealist; the cast of his mind [was] intuitive rather than logical. He instinctively sought spiritual truths by direct vision, not by any processes of induction; by immediate inward experience, rather than by any inference from outward experience. God, Right, Immortality, were to him realities of *intuition*;

that is, of direct *looking upon*; shining their own light, spiritually discerned, the affirmations of the soul. (p. 14)

I don't have much detail about his early life growing up in Salem, Massachusetts, before meeting Longfellow. Johnson came from solid, blue-blooded, New England stock. His father was a respected physician. His mother "of an old Salem family."

A playmate described him as:

a healthy-natured, active boy, entering with zest into all boyish games; with a quick eye for anything ludicrous, or that would raise a shout of laughter; indeed, though gentle, affectionate, and utterly guileless, a leader in sports even to the point of daring and sometimes of danger; with all the enthusiasm in these things that marked him as a reformer in later years."

Longfellow speculated he probably spent time at the Old East Indian Museum in Salem. Sea captains had brought back curiosities that found their way into the museum from the orient, foreshadowing his later study of Eastern religion. He also had a strong interest in science that began in his youth, particularly geology and mineralogy.

Longfellow reports one of the strong influences on Johnson was the good and happy home in which he grew up and never really left. "In that home, he received the most devoted affection by his family, found the love of books, flowers, music and a simple rational piety of the Unitarian stamp."

Once completing his primary education, at 16, he was off to Harvard. A classmate remembered:

Johnson's face and person in those college days would attract attention anywhere. A dark, but warm and rich complexion; hair black as ink, and always worn long; a large, full, dark eye; a tall figure; an eager, headlong swinging gait in walking, the head projected as if in quest of some object (perhaps the truth?) before him in the distance; a full, deep, and sincere voice; a bright smile, a hearty and musical laugh.

Always a popular fellow and easy to get along with, he wasn't too visible in social circles due to his passionate study of ancient and contemporary literature, science and philosophy. He credits his religious inspiration, growth and development beginning with reading classic, ancient Greek and Latin texts. Were we to visit his room in Divinity Hall, we'd see him studying hard, enjoying a life "where everything is so monotonous, yet so interesting." His reading, rather than a burden, to him, was recreation. As you might imagine, his marks were always at or near the maximum, graduating second in his class. Given his natural faith and academic aptitude, it was only natural for him to continue his studies at the divinity school and prepare for the ministry. His Transcendentalist religious feeling comes through vividly in this excerpt from a letter to his sister about this time:

Is not this a strange world, that runs thoughtlessly on through all this living, speaking loveliness, which seems to point every moment toward the God whose hand is forming and fashioning all before all eyes? How few there are who seem to have any but a theoretical belief that there is something at work around us besides the trees, the flowers the clouds, and the sun! We see them at work, and ask no further, we ask not who makes them work, who gives them all their loveliness and liberty and life... What should we do but fall down and adore before this visible creation of an invisible and all-pervading Being?

Johnson's thinking continued to evolve in seminary becoming less Christian and more Transcendentalist. When he graduated, he moved out into the world to search for a pulpit -- with mixed results. You see, he had aligned himself with the radical Transcendentalist, Theodore Parker who was refused Unitarian pulpits due to his unorthodox theology. This didn't help him in the search process, even though he was developing a reputation as a fine preacher. A devoted friend from the newly formed society at Harrion Square said of him:

I have never known one superior, and few equal, to Mr. Johnson in the impression he made of moral and spiritual elevation. Every intellectual perception, even the clearness and force of his diction, seemed to owe its vigorous and persuasive quality to a baptism in the fountain-head of moral rectitude. The moral sentiment to him was the very impress of God's face on the soul...when he uttered ... prophecies or warnings, it was with the look and accent of one who believed that he had been with the Most High, and had [a] message to report; which he did with the simplicity, the veracity, and sweet audacity of a child uttering his Father's words.

After a year of preaching at a new society in Lynn, he was called in 1853. Originally a Unitarian Society, Johnson would not serve it under *that* name, due to his larger religious vision. So they reorganized themselves as the Free Church of Lynn. Johnson would not accept ordination, as "the inward call to preach and the outward call of those who wished to hear, were, to him, sufficient seal of the ministry of religion to which he had devoted himself." He didn't administer any sacraments. The religion he preached was natural religion without "ecclesiastical, special and supernatural claims."

His congregation received him well for seventeen years. He continued to reside in his Salem home commuting the almost six miles back and forth to preach and visit the families that attended his congregation. "I could not preach to my people," he said, "if I did not know them in their homes."

Besides his congregational service, he frequently spoke out on the public platform against slavery and for the temperance movement, and for women's "enlarged freedom." Wherever he spoke, he advocated for individual liberty and free thought.

What he is perhaps best known for was his traveling lectures on Oriental religions that began sometime around 1855. He was reading all the latest books being produced by European scholars and interpreting them for American audiences. Though he never left

New England, he was probably one of the foremost scholars of Asian philosophy and religion in America at the time. He didn't publish his first volume on the religions of India and their relation to Universal Religion until 1872.

I found this book deep in the stacks at Harvard Divinity School during my sabbatical. I was pleased to discover that in the introduction to this book, we get a mature look at Johnson's faith. A faith from which I believe Unitarian Universalism can draw inspiration for our times.

Johnson was writing during the post Darwin time period, flush with an overwhelming enthusiasm for science. Religion was being measured by the scientific yardstick and found wanting. Johnson, an amateur geologist, avid hiker and voracious reader of all the latest scientific publications, shared some of their critique of revelation-based religion. He wanted to free religion of the "supernatural." But he retained a powerful sense of what he called, the infinite that can be known in the finite, or humanity. One might cautiously call him, a scientific transcendentalist, or an intuitive realist. He called his faith, Universal Religion.

He defines religion as: the natural attraction of mind in its finiteness to mind in its infinitude. Basically, we finite humans are identical with all being and what is beyond all being. Our identity creates a natural attraction to what is greater than our individuality. This natural attraction we might experience as sentiment, conviction, struggle, solace, inner peace or driving faith. This natural attraction isn't something we create ourselves but is already in us as our most inward identity. This infinite mind made finite in us we recognize and appreciate as wisdom, justice and love, as our best and highest, as our liberty that is neither within us nor without but eternally real. The natural attraction drives our growth and development as individuals, as a society, as a species, as a life form.

Through personal experience, Johnson knew this attraction intimately. He recognized it as completely natural, while at the same time, profoundly spiritual and completely free. He found it in all the religions he studied at different levels of recognition and development. No one traditional faith or belief system had a lock on it. He wrote:

The Chinese Buddhist priest prays at morning that the music of the bell which wakens him to his matins, "may sound through the whole world, and that every living soul may gain release, and find eternal peace in God." The [Bodhisattva] vows "to manifest himself to every creature in the universe, and never to arrive at Buddhahood till all are delivered from sin into the divine rest, receiving answer to their prayers." What else, or wherein better, is the claim of the Christian or the Jew?

For Johnson the key to unlocking the mysteries of existence required opening oneself beyond the particular: In his words:

It is only from this standpoint of the Universal in Religion that [individual religions] can be treated with an appreciation worthy of our freedom, science and

humanity. The corner stones of worship, as of work, are no longer to be laid in what is special, local, exclusive, or anomalous; but in that which is essentially human, and therefore unmistakably divine. The revelation of God, in other words, can be given in nothing else than the natural constitution and culture of [humanity]...

Because we are identical with what we are attracted to, there is no sense of a separation of the sacred from the profane. There wasn't a need for the divine to enter or withdraw from human affairs. The point of contact between the finite and the infinite, constantly available to us, for Johnson, is the intuition. That intuition knows no race, class, level of education or life experience. Every one of us, has the potential, to be in contact with it and reach beyond the finitude of our daily lives. And in every religion we see its artifacts.

This natural attraction does not have a start or an end. Rather it is an "endless progress which no distinctive name, symbol, authority, or even ideal, can foreclose."

Doesn't this sound a lot like what many Unitarian Universalists believe today? How we recognize and name what Johnson calls the infinite varies considerably. Johnson's wide appreciation of the world's religious traditions certainly resonates with what I read and hear from many Unitarian Universalists. But in Johnson's time, this was a radical message. More common was the attitude of James Freeman Clarke who wrote a book about the same time called "Ten Great Religions." Clarke appreciated them all but saw in Christianity the summation and the perfection of them all. Johnson makes no such pronouncement. The truth is not in the tradition but alive in the practitioner reaching toward the infinite.

I find in Johnson's Infinite Mind, a conception between theism and atheism that many contemporary Unitarian Universalists may find useful. This Infinite Mind is big enough to contain the magnificence of the Universe, yet intimately accessible through intuition. It seems compatible to me with evolution, yet not limited by it.

Johnson was remarkable in the depth and the breath of his study. He published two books on Oriental religion, the first on India and the second on China. He died before he was able to publish his third on Persian religion.

Johnson wasn't the only one thinking about a new way to do religion based on the advances of science, Biblical archeology, and the wider awareness of different religious traditions. We will meet some of those religious innovators next week (sermon titled Free Religion) as we get to know some of the leaders of the Free Religious Association.

Benediction

In an essay titled, Living by Faith, Johnson writes:

I have seen persons less affected by the glory of a great sunset in the Alps than some other gentle soul was in watching the growth of a few window plants and

protecting them from too much sun. Think how Alvan Clark worked for a quarter of a century, grinding away in his Cambridge workshop, to make lenses so delicate as to secure the fine balance of refractive power which gives best vision with largest magnifying power, and so at last brought out the object-glass of the telescope that showed Sirius to be two revolving stars! Ah, you have to bend yourself to find apprehensions, to delicate, tender touches, if you are to get the vision that shall show you what unimagined spiritual movement is going on in the souls that surround you, strewn here as stars are in space.

May we be touched by the infinite Mind so we may witness, recognize and appreciate its mark in the finite all around us.

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