



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK

The Secret Six: Violence and Nonviolence in Unitarianism and Universalism

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Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct action campaign that was “well timed” in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word “Wait!” It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This “Wait” has almost always meant “Never.” We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that “justice too long delayed is justice denied.”...

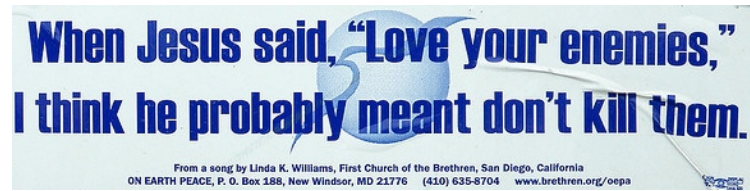
I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to “order” than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: “I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action”; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom....

—The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” (1963)

Dr. King's powerful “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” draws on the teachings of Jesus, Gandhi, and others to build a compelling argument for creating social change through *nonviolent* direct action. And there is a strong case that following the way of Jesus—who taught lessons such as “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you (Matthew 5:44)” — requires choosing the way of *nonviolence* over the path of violence. As a bumper sticker I once saw said, “When Jesus said, ‘Love your enemies,’ I think he *at least* meant don't kill them.”

As part of my move from Progressive Christianity to Unitarian Universalism, I have read

a lot of UU history. And one of my biggest surprises was learning that of the “Secret Six,” who



helped fund and supply John Brown’s 1859 raid on the federal armory Harpers’ Ferry, *five* were Unitarians, two were Unitarian *ministers*.

Accordingly, I would like to briefly survey the history of our Unitarian and Universalist predecessors who supported *nonviolent* activism exclusively as well as others who supported *violence* when they felt it was justified. First, let’s consider an example from the *Universalist* half of our heritage. Hosea Ballou was the major leader of the second generation of American Universalists. At the beginning of the War of 1812 with England,

President Madison called for a national day of prayer in support of the war. Ballou who seldom spoke on political matters from the pulpit, nevertheless answered Madison’s call with a strong sermon in support of the president’s policies. While the majority of the congregation agreed with their minister, the wealthy shipowners in the church, whose businesses had been badly hurt by the war, strongly objected and in time withdrew their support. As a result, the church’s financial position became so weakened that Ballou was forced to open a private school to provide his family with a second income. (Howe 29)

The lesson here, however, is potentially more interesting and important than simply that the church and state should not have anything to do with one another. I invite you to consider that where Ballou potentially went wrong was in serving as a *mouthpiece* for the state. In contrast, Martin Luther King, Jr. said in his book *The Strength to Love* that:

The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the **conscience of the state**. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool. If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority (59).

From another end of the spectrum, Hosea Ballou's distant cousin Adin Ballou published a book in 1846 on *Christian Non-Resistance* (which is related to MLK's nonviolent activism) about his belief in the need to radically follow Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount: "Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile" (Robinson 126; Matthew 5:39-40).

Next, to consider another famous contrast of positions on war and peacemaking from the *Unitarian* half of our heritage, a serious conflict developed during World War I between the Unitarian minister and pacifist John Haynes Holmes and the active Unitarian layperson William Howard Taft. (Yes, that's the same Taft who was U.S. President and later Chief Justice of the Supreme Court.) Holmes was the "foremost American interpreter of Gandhi's views," and preached a famous sermon about Gandhi in 1921. (Keep in mind that Martin Luther King, Jr., who became another famous American promoter of Gandhi's social ethics, wasn't born until 1929.) Holmes *opposed* U.S. involvement in World War I, whereas Taft was a strong *supporter* of the war. Taft's term as President of the United States ended in 1913 just before World War I started in Europe in 1914. From 1915 to 1925, Taft became president of the General Conference of the Unitarian and other Christian Churches.

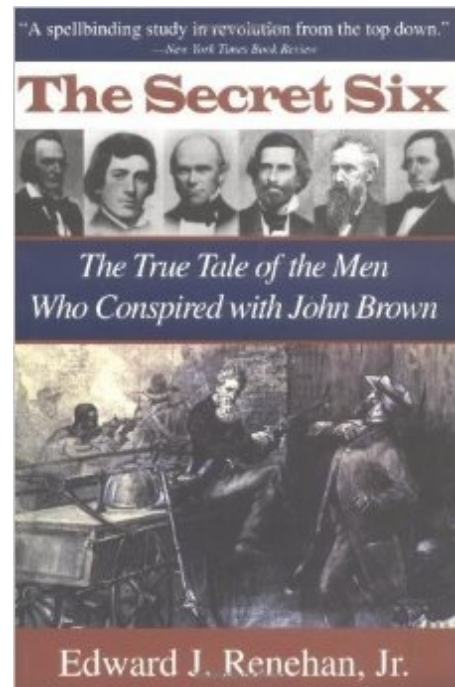
The public conflict between Taft and Holmes happened in 1917 as part of the U.S. entering the war. At that year's Unitarian Conference, Taft declared, "It is the duty of our church to preach the righteousness of the war and the necessity for our winning it in the interest of the peace of the world." Holmes dissented that, "So long as I live I will have nothing to do with this war or any war, so help me God!" In the end, Taft's resolution in support of the war passed 236 to 9. Furthermore, the board of the American Unitarian Association voted to "deny financial aid to any church whose minister was not in support of the war effort." In turn, Holmes withdrew his ministerial fellowship from the AUA and led his congregation in changing their name from the "Unitarian Church of the Messiah" to the "Community Church of New York." After the war, Holmes did eventually reconcile with Unitarianism (Buehrens 131). However, you can see even from these few episodes that there are prominent lines of demarcation in our history *supporting nonviolent activism* as well as others *supporting violence when deemed justified*. (Decades later,

the controversy over whether to support or protest Vietnam War also resulted in major controversy in many UU congregations.)

Just this past week, more than a 100 religious activists, including many Unitarian Universalist laity and ministers, were arrested as part of a nonviolent protest at the White House to call attention to the need for immigration justice. And generally my inclination is toward the social ethics of Martin Luther King, Jr., who emphasized that, **“The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy.** Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it... Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.” In that spirit, the nonviolent activist A.J. Muste said, **“There is no way to peace. Peace is the way.”** In other words, one must use peaceful *means* to have any hope of reaching a lasting peaceful *end*; otherwise, violent means (despite the best intentions) lay seeds that will eventually undermine “peace” imposed through the threat or force of violence.

Of course, at the same time that “Martin” was preaching peace, “Malcolm” was teaching that justice must be reached “By any means necessary.” To be fair, though, what Malcolm X meant was that he was a *realist*. If racial justice could be accomplished without violence, that was ideal. But he held violence as an option in reserve (*Autobiography* 373-274), as did the early Nelson Mandela, who also supported violence as an option if nonviolent means were exhausted. Or to quote Theodore Parker, one of the two Unitarian ministers among the Secret Six: “liberty is an end, and sometimes peace is not the means toward it” (Renahan 66).

Keep in mind historically that the supporters of using *violence* to end slavery in the years leading up to the Civil War were much closer historically to the Revolutionary War than we are to the Civil War. Only 84 years had passed from 1776 to 1860, whereas more than 160 years has passed from the Civil War to today. Members of the Secret Six saw themselves as



extending the (violent) fight for freedom begun at during the American War for Independence.

To give two examples, Samuel Gridley Howe (a Unitarian and one of the Secret Six), “was the great-nephew of Bunker Hill’s Captain Gridley and the grandson of a Boston Tea Party ‘Indian.’” Theodore Parker (another of the Secret Six and a Unitarian minister), “was the grandson of the famed Captain Parker, who commanded the Minutemen on Lexington Green. It was Parker’s grandfather who uttered the much quoted words, ‘Don’t fire unless fired upon, but if they want to have a war, let it begin here’” (Renahan 39-40).

Another way of framing this debate is the old adage that, “**One person’s terrorist is another’s freedom fighter.**” And John Brown certainly saw himself and his use of violence to fight the evil of slavery as on the side of truth and righteousness. Before he was sentenced to be executed (which he saw as his martyrdom), he said to the judge,

I believe that to have interfered as I have done in behalf of God’s despised poor, I did no wrong, but right. Now, if it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life for the furtherance of the ends of justice, and mingle my blood with the blood of my children and with the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights have been disregarded by sick, cruel, and unjust enactments, I say, let it be done.
(Russo/Finkelman 204)

And although history has shown that Brown was delusional in some disturbing ways and had some serious flaws that he tried to cover up, I also take seriously Dr. King’s criticism that we heard earlier of

the white moderate, who is more devoted to “order” than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: “I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action”; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man’s freedom....

Say what you will about Brown and the Secret Six, but when pressed they were *not* moderate; for better or worse, they chose a much more dangerous, radical, and risky path.

Along these lines, one of the most helpful and challenging books I have read that confronts the issue of wrestling with whether one is playing the equivalent role in our own time

of that Dr. King called the “white moderate” is the contemporary Unitarian Universalist professor Sharon Welch’s important book A Feminist Ethic of Risk. The passage that haunts me from that book is the following:

It is easier to give up on long-term social change when one is comfortable in the present — when it is possible to have challenging work, excellent health care and housing, and access to the fine arts. **When the good life is present or within reach, it is tempting to despair of its ever being in reach for others and resort merely to enjoying it for oneself and one’s family....**

Becoming so easily discouraged is the privilege of those accustomed to too much power, accustomed to having needs met without negotiation and work, accustomed to having a political and economic system that responds to their needs....

Responsibility is equated with action that is more likely to succeed, thus identifying responsibility with action that is, by definition, supportive of the *status quo* (41, 104)

With the benefit of hindsight, we can today see the ways in which the Secret Six were naïve in supporting John Brown’s raid on the federal armory at Harpers Ferry, which had almost no chance of succeeding. At the same time, the Secret Six did risk their comfort and privilege to support Brown’s armed insurrection because they had come to believe both that nonviolent, legislative means of ending slavery had shown they had no chance of succeeding and that the evil of human chattel slavery in the United States must be ended, including by means of violence if necessary. And the historical consensus is that Brown’s raid — even though it failed — did catalyze the movement toward Civil War, causing many to view Brown as a martyr.

Earlier, I mentioned Samuel Gridley Howe, the most well known Unitarian layman in the Secret Six and a graduate of Harvard Medical School, who became famous for his groundbreaking effort in educating the blind and deaf. Howe’s wife, Julia Ward Howe, was also well-known for many reasons, including founding Mothers’ Day (originally intended by her as a day for peace and against war, which she condemned for killing far too many mother’s sons). And her 1870 public call for a Mothers’ Day for Peace was partially inspired by what she

witnessed during the Civil War. Indeed, somewhat ironically Julia Ward Howe was also known for writing “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” whose lyrics are written to an earlier song, “John Brown’s Body,” written by Civil War soldiers.

Some of the lyrics of the earlier song, “John Brown’s Body” include the following. As you read them, imagine the original setting in which these words were sung — by Union soldiers gathered around campfires:

(To hear a performance of these lyrics, go to
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o60QcLZ3QI8&t=16m35s>)

John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in the grave,
But his soul goes marching on.
Glory, glory, hallelujah,
His soul goes marching on.
John Brown died that the slaves might be free,
His soul goes marching on.

Julia Ward Howe’s version, set to the same tune (which traditionally was included in Unitarian hymnals) includes these words:

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored,
He has loosed the fateful lightening of His terrible swift sword
His truth is marching on.
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah! His truth is marching on.
I have seen Him in the watch-fires of a hundred circling camps
They have builded Him an altar in the evening dews and damps
I can read His righteous sentence by the dim and flaring lamps
His day is marching on.
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah! His truth is marching on.
In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,
With a glory in His bosom that transfigures you and me:
As He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free,
While God is marching on.

That is powerful and historic song with moving and difficult lyrics. And I don’t have any easy conclusion. There is no simple resolution to the tension between waging war and making peace in the Unitarian and Universalist traditions. Headlines remind us daily that the struggles of violent and nonviolent social change are as viscerally and existentially real today in Israel and Palestine, Syria, and Ukraine as they were historically in the Civil War, World War I, and the

Civil Rights Movement.

Part of the tension from our perspective today with the lyrics of “John Brown’s Body” and “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” — and one of the reasons that song is no longer in our hymnal — is that they have add a strong religious fervor to the use of violence, equating God with only one side of the battle. At the same time, I have heard the UU historian Mark Morrison Reed persuasively argue that by leaving hymns such as “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” out of our hymnals, we risk erasing the history of Unitarian and Universalist involvement in the abolitionist struggle for freedom.

I will end for now with the final stanza of another song, this time by Bob Dylan:

So now as I’m leavin’ / I’m weary as Hell
The confusion I’m feelin’ / Ain’t no tongue can tell
The words fill my head / And fall to the floor
If God’s on our side / [God] will stop the next war.

Sources

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- Edward Renehan, *Secret Six: The True Tale of the Men Who Conspired with John Brown*
- Peggy Russo and Paul Finkelman, eds., *Terrible Swift Sword: The Legacy of John Brown*
- David Robinson, *The Unitarians and the Universalists*