

Without Regard to Theological Difference
a talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden
First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis
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INTRODUCTION

Our theme for October is heritage, and I will be talking this month about the past, the present, and some possible futures for First Unitarian Society.

When I consider the history of ideas or institutions, one of my questions is: What is the through-line? What is the "Why?" that has kept a concept or an institution together.

In the case of First Unitarian Society, what has been of central importance for the people who have sustained it from 1881 till now?

I spend my time on this with you because human life is so short; human memory is so short. It is so likely that we will lose valuable, even defining, moments of our history, and our history is what makes us . . . us.

#Micro-history, yes. Because looking at the *details* of larger events reveals the *human* in the events. And, by so looking, we discover that it was not giants upon the earth who create our world. It is and always has been people just like you and me. Don't forget!

Last week I stuck with the abstract concept of change as one of the through-lines: People at First Unitarian Society have believed in *change*: personal, religious, social.

#In the terminology of theology, this ability to change both self and society is called human agency: It answers the question: What can a human being *do* in this reality?

Speaking from the point of view of theology, this is a central question that divides human religious thinking between those who agree with *us* that human beings can change historical reality; and those who believe that fate or destiny are bound up in the immutable, unchangeable will of a god in absolute charge of everything.

The growing concern among several (liberal) Protestant denominations in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries was that being religious meant making the

Kingdom of God or the Beloved Community *appear on this earth in this time* rather than in the next. This growing concern created what became known as the Social Gospel Movement. That was the beginning of the split between liberal denominations and fundamentalist denominations in the United States.

ENTER: First Unitarian Society!

ONE: Without Regard

According to the Articles of Incorporation (1881), the purpose of FUS is:

to form an Association where people without regard to theological differences may unite for mutual helpfulness in intellectual, moral, and religious culture, and humane work.

"Without Regard to Theological Differences."

Now: #There is more than one way to disregard theological differences. Which ways offer possibility and potential rather than restriction? That's what the religious liberals of the late-nineteenth century were asking. It's not a bad question whatever century it is!

In the late-nineteenth century in the US, in the region now called the mid-west, there was a whole lotta "unitin'" goin' on. Fact is, the Euro-Americans who first moved West were more interested in cheap land than their religion. Very few were saying, "Oh, wait, let me check if that territory has a Unitarian church." Or Presbyterian or what have you.

So, they meet up in the middle of nowhere and a major part of American social life of the time was church. But . . . no church. No money to build a church. So . . . We'll all pitch in and build United Church and we'll divvy up the meetin' times.

Bigger groups moved to their own buildings with time, smaller groups had to stick together. Such as the Universalists and the Unitarians.

My question: "Without regard to theological differences."

What did that mean in 1881?

What does it mean in 2023?

To answer both questions, perhaps, I want to consider the year 1905.

TWO: An Agnostic Clergyman

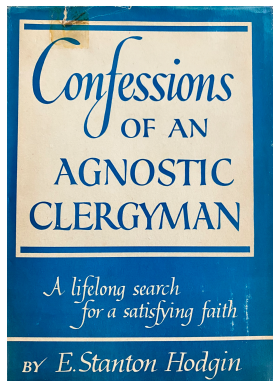
Edwin Stanton Hodgkin was born in Vermillion, South Dakota in 1868. He was a minister in Humboldt, Iowa, Helena, Montana, Minneapolis, Minnesota, Los Angeles, California and New Bedford, Massachusetts. He died in 1956.



Not long ago one of our Archives Committee members ran across this book:

E. Stanton Hodgkin. *Confessions of an Agnostic Clergyman: a Lifelong Search for a Satisfying Faith*. Beacon Press. Boston: 1948.

Needless to say, we acquired the book for the archives.



E. Stanton Hodgkin was invited to candidate at FUS in 1905. The first minister of the congregation, Henry Simmons, had recently died.

Hodgkin wrote of the people of FUS at that time that they were "on the march—people unsatisfied with the present order and strenuously searching for something new." (p. 120)

Back to that through-line of change-making!

For a little background, in 1905 the American president was Teddy Roosevelt. The population of the city of Minneapolis was 46,887, roughly 10% of today's population.

Speaking of the Minneapolis of 1905 Rev. Hodgkin wrote:

Those who wanted a liberal church—with the emphasis on church—could readily find a home in one of the Universalist societies. (NB: *there were four at the time.*) There were, however, a goodly number who were not theological nor

ecclesiastical but were nevertheless religious, and who desired religious nurture.

These drew together into a distinctly secular organization called the Liberal League. This was the forerunner of the Unitarian Society that has not lost its secular character in the more than sixty years of its existence (*NB: writing in 1947*).

So pronouncedly non-ecclesiastical in character was the society when I first appeared on the scene, that some of the members would not enter the auditorium until after the short preliminary service was over.

When I introduced a simple responsive service it was vigorously opposed by a few, although it was wholly ethical in character, two-thirds of it being selections from the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose bust occupied a niche in one corner of the auditorium.

The only time in my ministry that I seemed to lean toward conservatism was during my stay in Minneapolis . . . (p. 130)

Now notice a few things about these observations.

A small thing but an important through-line: Notice that he uses the term "auditorium." From the first, FUS has not had a "sanctuary." And the telling remark:

the Unitarian Society that has not lost its secular character in the more than sixty years of its existence (*NB: writing in 1947*).

A bit of a deeper dive:

What is this "religious" he speaks of when he says—"a goodly number who were not theological nor ecclesiastical but were nevertheless religious, and who desired religious nurture."

wholly ethical in character

Sounds like a reference to Ethical Culture, doesn't it?

Back to those Articles of Incorporation (1881)

to form an Association where people without regard to theological differences may unite for mutual helpfulness in intellectual, moral, and religious culture, and humane work.

intellectual, moral, and religious culture, and humane work.

Let's think about what "religious culture" means because in contemporary English that's an odd phrasing. Which says to me that the people who wrote it were attempting to incorporate a new idea that they hadn't quite grappled with yet.

"Religious culture."

THREE: "Religious Culture"

A.

#I know I'm always going on about the changes in how words are used over time, but it's important at times to find the original intent—unlike some of our Supreme Court justices, I try to find the original meaning of terms not to restrict their use in the present but rather open up the further meanings that are often lost over time.

The term "culture" took on radical new meaning in the late-nineteenth century. Earlier in time, the term had been used in the sense of "cultured." As in "high culture," *haute couture*. The new discipline of anthropology was broadening the term with the new understanding that different groups of people develop different "cultures," with the additional—newly dawning idea among liberals—that different human cultures are not more or less "cultured" but rather already have a fully-developed and sophisticated "culture."

In 1881, the people of FUS were congregating for the purpose of "mutual helpfulness" in looking at "religious culture." Meaning—I think—basically what we mean by the term "philosophy of religions" nowadays.

Herein lies a fundamental (pun intended) difference between the Unitarian thread that is one of the through-lines of First Unitarian Society: a fundamental skepticism about revealed religion: "revealed" meaning that it's the "word of god."

Universalists at the beginning of the twentieth-century still held Christian and Hebrew scriptures in high regard; many Unitarians began to think that all scriptures—from Christian to Confucian—were the products of the fertile human mind.

This is part of my thinking concerning our religious education here. Over time, we adopted the Unitarian Universalist curricula. But our families don't tend to think like most Unitarian Universalists, many of whom think that scriptures contain truths that go beyond human truths. #From an old-line Unitarian perspective, there is no beyond-human truth. There can certainly be *superior* human thinking, but there's nothing but humans doing the thinking. It's the "din of conversation" among human beings.

It's an important distinction.

B.

The people who formed the original congregation did not join for the purpose of "religion" but for "religious culture." Again, these were secular freethinkers.

"Religion" for them meant the Lutheran state churches of Germany and Scandinavia, the Roman Catholic Church—large institutions.

That was "religion." But "religious culture"—that meant the broader, universal experiences and emotions that human beings have in relation to the mysterious, unknown, the transcendent, the larger universe. Walt Whitman's *Kosmos*.

"Religious culture" is about the emotional and ethical responses human beings have to the world around us.

The philosopher John Dewey summarized this in his 1935 book *A Common Faith*, which I'm confident that Rev. Hodgkin read between the time he was at FUS (1905) and the time he wrote his memoir (1947).

#John Dewey, a founding Humanist, believed that "religious" feelings and experiences are not exclusive to any particular tradition of religion and can be found in various aspects of human life, including art, nature, and even in our day-to-day experiences. I'm teaching a graduate seminar at United Theological Seminary just now, "Humanist Aesthetics and Practices," and this is the sort of thing that we talk about.

#John Dewey taught that the "religious" aspect of human thought ought to be nurtured and celebrated, because it contributes to a shared sense of community and understanding among people, regardless of their specific beliefs concerning religion. A point of true multi-faith practice.

The freethinkers of 1881 would become the Humanists of 1916 and 1935 who celebrated a "common faith" based on shared human experiences and values rather than on specific religious doctrines.

As I put it nowadays: People matter more than ideas. Rev. Hodgkin phrased it this way:

I prefer to sweep aside all these vain expostulations, wizardly institutions, genuflexions and entreaties, leaving in place of them something much more meaningful and expressive—silence.

Yes, that's some of the good-'ol freethinker coming out:

vain expostulations,
wizardly institutions,
genuflexions and entreaties,
leaving in place of them something
much more meaningful and expressive—silence.

CONCLUSION

What are the takeaways from this brief look at one minister and one document from the Society's past?

One conclusion is that the Society is itself a study in the evolution from 19th century Freethought to 20th century Humanism and 21st century _____—"blank." Something. Something perhaps called Humanism. Perhaps called Freethought. Perhaps called something else.

After all, it isn't up to me to fill in that blank. It is up to the collective wisdom of the people who choose to join in this voluntary association called First Unitarian Society.

Is there a through-line?

Yes. Several:

- The people of FUS have always insisted upon the secular ahead of the religious.

- To put it bluntly, the people of FUS have always insisted that the secular *is* religious. And time is bearing this out—when we talk about “decolonizing” religion, we are talking about removing considerations of some religions being more “right” or more special than others—a mistake from the get-go.
- The people of FUS have remained of two minds concerning formal ritual. Fact is, mashed potatoes with garlic: some people like it and some people don’t. It’s personal taste. And that remains a challenge when it comes to ritual, because ritual is demonstrably positive in some aspects.
- The people of FUS have always insisted upon deep, systemic social change (I’ll talk more about that in the coming weeks). One aspect of that has been that, from the beginning, the people of FUS have assumed gender equality. This and the insistence upon systemic social change is what Rev. Hodgkin was referring to when he wrote that FUS members were, quote, “on the march—people unsatisfied with the present order and strenuously searching for something new.” (p. 120)
- And back to my topic last week: #We believe in change for ourselves, and we believe that everyone should have the opportunity to change. That’s a far off dream in this nation. Yet it is the hope and purpose our forebears strove toward, and we must live *with* and live *for* that hope and purpose: Everyone must have the opportunity to change as suits their choices for a life of freedom.
- #We here assert that religious and philosophical traditions are created by human beings and, therefore, religious and philosophical traditions are at their best when they best serve the human need for meaning and purpose in this world, now.
- #At First Unitarian Society we insist that a life of meaning and purpose is a life of service to the common good.

#In the decade that I have served FUS, the number of people meeting the description of religious “Nones” has grown exponentially—now 30% of Americans are religiously unaffiliated and roughly half of that number are atheist/agnostic/ or questioning.

Those people are and always have been the people who gather at First Unitarian Society. In 1881 and 1905 and 1950 we were a few. Now, we are many. When I became a Humanist in the 1970s, fewer than one percent of the US population identified as atheist/agnostic. Now, more than 15% do.

Not huge numbers but growing numbers.

We *most* honor the FUS past when we search for the essences of what created and has sustained the congregation through the years. By so doing, we avoid the anxiety that often accompanies considerations of the future. We are *creating the future* as we search for and honor the essences of the people who have gathered ~~here~~ since the 1870s to form this living congregation.

First Unitarian Society is unique. It was unique when it began in 1881. It was unique when it voted to call a Humanist minister in 1916. It is unique in having carried the banner of nineteenth century secular freethought through the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, a time in which our traditions are needed by more people than ever.

The through-line. Perhaps Rev. Hodgkin got it when he wrote this:

Striving and straining for complete answers to life's unanswerable questions,
pursuing theological promises of perfection,
is like following the will-'o-the-wisp that lures us off
into the bogs of oblivion. (234)

Since 1881 and before, the people of FUS have been at the cutting edge of religious thought.

Just as in the case of human beings, a congregation *is* what it *is* because it *has been* what it has been.

Today, we invite all likeminded, independent thinkers to join us in our search for life, and life abundant, for all, "a shared life in a shared world."

SOURCES and Further Reading

Hodgkin archives in South Dakota.

E. Stanton Hodgkin. *Confessions of an Agnostic Clergyman: a Lifelong Search for a Satisfying Faith*. Beacon Press. Boston: 1948.

_____. *The Faith of the Reformers (a sermon collection)*.

Mark L. Johnson and Don M. Tucker. *Out of the Cave: A Natural Philosophy of Mind and Knowing*. Kindle Edition

The FUS mission statement today:

As a congregational humanist community, we at the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis foster a free search for knowledge and meaning, strive for justice, and serve one another, the Twin Cities, and beyond.