Unitarianism: Part of the Background of the Restoration

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Surrounding the Restoration of the gospel were many religious currents and denominations, one of which became known as Unitarianism. As will be seen, Unitarians were a reluctant denomination. Essentially, persons with Unitarian leanings in the United States did not seek separation from the Congregational Church, of which most were members. Rather, they merely sought the right to reason freely about the content of the Bible, the nature of God, and the character of New Testament Christianity that they sought to reclaim. Much of the thought of American Unitarians was a response to Calvinism rather than being primarily an outgrowth of the Enlightenment and the rationalist spirit that was more prominent in England. The American democratic spirit gave rise to people who were liberal in their views, meaning that they believed free inquiry after truth should not be constrained by creedal formulations and conceptions of God that coincided with neither human reason nor the Bible. These were people of deep faith in Jesus Christ. These were people who thought deeply and studied theology deeply. These were people who were compassionate and could not believe that God could be otherwise, since He had revealed His ultimate compassion in Jesus Christ.

This paper will sketch the gradual rise of Unitarianism in this country in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries. It will then examine the theological issues that arose as articulated by Henry Ware Sr.[1] and William Ellery Channing.[2] As we consider these positions, I will include a Latter-day Saint reflection to highlight both the similarities and differences in doctrine. Latter-day Saints may be surprised at the common ground they share with

these early Unitarians. The purpose, however, is not to break new historical or theological ground but rather to provide Latter-day Saints with an understanding of one piece of the tapestry within which the Restoration arose.

The Rise of Unitarianism in America

Unitarianism takes its name from an emphasis on the oneness of God in opposition to the doctrine of the Trinity, which held that there were three persons of equal rank within the Godhead, all of whom were of one essence or nature. The Unitarian challenge to Trinitarianism and other doctrines had a variety of sources, some of which were in England. While these may not have been the dominant impetus for the rise of Unitarianism in the colonies,[3] they certainly cannot be ignored. The roots of the movement, however, go further back than England, according to George Willis Cooke. He sees the emphasis on individualism in the Renaissance, the individual free inquiry of the Reformation, and the move toward toleration and rationalism in England during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as contributing to the rise of Unitarianism in America.[4]

English rationalists were definitely read in America. For example, John Milton (1608–74) celebrated reason and toleration in theological thought.[5] In his *De Doctrina Christiana,* published after his death, he denied the traditional Trinitarian formulation and the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo.*[6] William Chillingworth (1602–44) held the Bible as the central authority and maintained that persons had the right to use their reason to interpret it, unconstrained by creeds or other doctrinal tests.[7] As a result, Chillingworth denied traditional Trinitarianism.[8] John Locke (1632–1704) stressed the place of reason in human life even more vigorously. The very existence of God could be discovered through reason, and thus reason became the ultimate interpreter of scripture. Despite their emphasis on reason and their resulting doctrinal differences with established Christianity, none of the above saw themselves as separating from the existing churches. They were not sectarians.

Rationalism, however, was not an import from England to the already existing colonies. It arrived with the Separatists who established Plymouth Colony and the Puritans who founded Massachu-

setts Bay Colony. Individualism was important to them—so much so that it was only on the basis of individual experience that a person was admitted to full covenantal membership in the church. The churches were not based on creedal statements but rather on covenants.[9] The lack of creeds enabled individuals, as they became more liberal in their thinking, to remain comfortably within their churches. Hence, the liberal tendencies that were founded upon simplicity, rationality, and toleration in doctrine[10] and that finally led to the establishment of Unitarianism as a denomination, slowly arose in individuals and were not perceived as a threat to established churches.

The seat of much liberal theological thought was Boston, Massachusetts, and its environs. As early as 1691 the Reverend Samuel Willard, minister of Old South Church, Boston, preached a sermon in which he stated that there was no authority except the Bible, that persons had a right to individual interpretation of it, and that the church was ignoring Christ.[11] Against the backdrop of New England Calvinism, this was a significant departure from creedal Christianity. Similarly, when the Brattle Street Church of Boston was formed in 1699, its membership demanded that scriptural readings without comment be part of the services.[12] In the early eighteenth century, John Wise of Ipswich, Massachusetts, claimed that human beings had natural freedom and that "right reason is a ray of divine wisdom enstamped upon human nature."[13] In this belief, Wise reflected a growing liberal tendency that was to place reason on par with revelation. But not all were comfortable with these trends. As early as 1654, Edward Johnson, a Calvinist, was complaining that in Massachusetts there were Arminians (persons who believed in the freedom of the human will) and Arians (individuals who held that Christ was not coeternal with the Father).[14]

The New England religious landscape was changed somewhat in 1740, when George Whitefield, a minister of the Church of England, conducted a series of revivals in the colonies, some of which were in New England between August 18 and December 14, 1740.[15] After a visit to Harvard, Whitefield criticized the college because he found the students insufficiently devout in their faith. In addition, he felt they were not being adequately examined on their religious experience.[16] His comments were a reflection of the

growing liberality at Harvard, which was becoming more moderate, tolerant, and rationalist—so much so that the Calvinists withdrew in 1738 and focused on Yale.[17]

Besides creating a religious fervor in New England for a time, the First Great Awakening helped define the liberal movement in New England. First, most of the liberals objected to the revival methods because they elicited rampant emotionalism that was contrary to the liberals' rational tendencies. In addition, the rivals used fear as a tool to bring about conversion. Secondly, liberal ideas, such as an increasing emphasis on unaided human ability to respond to God (a form of Arminianism), were more frequently espoused by ministers against the Calvinism that fueled the revivals. Thus, the Calvinism of New England was being moderated.[18] But the movement was carried forward by individuals and without fanfare. Cooke says, "The progressive tendencies went quietly on, step by step the old beliefs were discarded; but it was by individuals, and not in any form as a sectarian movement."[19]

Cooke suggests that between 1725 and 1760 the liberal movement was driven by three basic premises. First, it sought to recover and restore primitive Christianity. This meant, second, that the Bible was a divine revelation and the sole source of religious teaching. No creeds were necessary and were in fact counterproductive. The liberals would have agreed with Latter-day Saints that the creeds were primarily the philosophies of men. And third, the liberal movement focused all their loyalty upon Christ, for He was and is the only avenue to salvation.[20] He was the one who was pre-existent, supernatural in character and mission, and creator of the world. Christ was not, however, the Supreme Being in the universe. There was only one God, the Father, to whom ultimate worship was due.[21] Following the First Great Awakening, two-thirds of the ministers in eastern Massachusetts were among the liberal party.[22]

A number of men walked the liberal path and showed it to others, most often to their congregations. One of them was Jonathan Mayhew (1720–66), pastor of West Church, Boston. Shortly after the Great Awakening, he became the first open opponent of Calvinism.[23] Mayhew was blunt in his views. He denied the traditional Trinitarian formulation because he found it "unreasonable, unscriptural and self-contradictory."[24] In 1753 he emphasized the

unity or oneness of God. In addition, he stressed the basic good-
ness of human beings,[25] the necessity of free inquiry, and the use of
individual judgment in religious matters, which meant that creedal
statements should not be used as tests of faith.[26] He stated, "There
is nothing more foolish and superstitious than a veneration for
ancient creeds and doctrines as such, and nothing is more unworthy
a reasonable creature than to value principles by their age, as some
men do their wines."[27]

Another strong figure was the Reverend Ebenezer Gay (1696–
1787), who became pastor of the Congregational Church in Hing-
ham, Massachusetts, in 1717. He was an Arminian, open to indi-
vidual inquiry in all religious matters and against creeds.[28] As with
all the liberals, reason was a dominant element in theological dis-
course, thus leading him to state in his 1759 Dudleian Lecture at
Harvard College, "The manifest absurdity of any doctrine is a
stronger argument that it is not of God than any other evidence
can be that it is."[29] This was his view of the doctrine of the Trinity,
but Gay, unlike Mayhew, did not preach doctrines that were con-
sidered controversial.[30]

One other person should be noted in this section: the Reverend
Dr. Charles Chauncy (1705–87), who was the pastor of First
Church, Boston, from 1727 to 1787. He was an Arminian and thus
rejected the doctrine of total depravity. He came to understand
rebirth not as a supernatural change but rather as the result of reli-
gious education. His most unique doctrine was that he believed in
universal salvation. He held that there would be a time following
death when salvation would be offered to every person.[31]

Around 1780 there was a resurgence of Calvinism in New Eng-
land. This growing movement laid the foundation for the ultimate
establishment of the Unitarian denomination, for churches and
church judicatories began to censure persons whose theology was
inappropriate by their standards. The previous "live and let live"
attitude gave way to fellowship predicated on right doctrine. Three
persons who suffered the consequences for liberal beliefs in the early
nineteenth century were John Sherman, Abiel Abbot, and Luther
Wilson. John Sherman was the grandson of Roger Sherman, a signer
of the Declaration of Independence. Sherman was a Yale graduate
who had been called in 1797 to pastor the First Church of Mansfield,

Connecticut. He began his ministry as a Calvinist, but after a careful study of the Bible he came to the conclusion that it did not contain the doctrine of the Trinity. He was taken before a church court, which suspended him from the ministry. As a consequence, he asked to be dismissed from the Congregational ministry and became the first minister of the oldest Unitarian Society in the state of New York at Trenton Village.[32]

Abiel Abbot became the pastor of the Congregational Church in Coventry, Connecticut, in 1795. He was one of the persons who voted to censure John Sherman, but as a result of that case he reviewed his own position on the issues. In 1809 he began to preach views more in accord with those of the liberals. In 1811 his right to preach was revoked, and he became an educator. In 1827, however, he returned to the pastorate at the First Church of Peterborough, New Hampshire.[33]

Finally, Luther Wilson, who became pastor in Brooklyn, Connecticut, in 1813, found himself to be theologically different from the senior pastor, Josiah Whitney, who held that the Trinity was an essential doctrine. Wilson was ultimately censured, although the majority of the congregation sided with him. He accepted dismissal and in 1819 became the pastor of a church in Petersham, Connecticut.[34]

Unitarian Theology

In this emotionally charged atmosphere of the early nineteenth century, Unitarian theology was clearly articulated, resulting finally in the separation of the Unitarians from the Congregational Church. This paper will examine Unitarian doctrines through the writings of Dr. Henry Ware Sr. (1764–1845), Hollis Professor of Divinity at Harvard, and Dr. William Ellery Channing (1780–1842), pastor of the Federal Street Congregational Church of Boston.

Henry Ware was the ninth of ten children. His father was a farmer in Sherburne, Middlesex County, Massachusetts. Though his father died when he was fifteen, Ware's older brothers recognized his scholarly bent and helped him become a student at Harvard, from which he graduated in 1785. Ware taught school for a year in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and then became the pastor of the First

Congregational Church in Hingham, succeeding the Reverend Ebenezer Gay. In 1805, after much debate, he was appointed the Hollis Professor of Divinity at Harvard.[35]

William Ellery Channing grew up in Newport, Rhode Island. His father was involved in politics, and his father-in-law, William Ellery, was a signer of the Declaration of Independence. As a child, Channing heard an itinerant preacher describe the pains of hell and began to wonder about the nature of God. In 1794, at the age of fourteen, he was admitted to Harvard. He graduated in 1798. Following graduation he went to Richmond, Virginia, to teach. During this time he struggled with physical desires, subjecting himself to various strict regimens to bring his body into subjection to his spirit. At the end of his time in Richmond, he was a physically broken person. For the rest of his life he would remain in poor health. In 1802 Channing received his MA from Harvard, and on June 1, 1803, he became the pastor of the Federal Street Congregational Church in Boston, the only church that he ever served.[36]

Together Ware and Channing defined the central doctrines of the Unitarian movement. We will examine, through their eyes, the doctrines related to scripture and creeds, divine unity, God's moral perfection, revelation, Jesus Christ, the Atonement, and grace and works.

Scripture and creeds. Unitarian doctrine of the early nineteenth century was rooted in the Bible. Channing states clearly the central importance of the New Testament: "We regard the Scriptures as the records of God's successive revelations to mankind, and particularly of the last and most perfect revelation of his will by Jesus Christ. Whatever doctrines seem to us to be clearly taught in the Scriptures, we receive without reserve or exception. . . . Our religion, we believe, lies chiefly in the New Testament. The dispensation of Moses . . . we consider as adapted to the childhood of the human race. . . . Jesus Christ is the only master of Christians, and whatever he taught, either during his personal ministry or by his inspired Apostles, we regard as of divine authority, and profess to make the rule of our lives."[37]

According to Channing, the first principle in the interpretation of the Bible (and this has already been seen in the introductory material) is reason. God spoke to human beings in language they

could understand. He spoke to them in their historical situations. He often used figurative language, which should not be confused with its literal meaning. Reason is essential to discriminating between the two. Things meant for the past should not be considered eternal truths in the present and the future, but again reason must be used to determine what is meant and for what point in time it was intended. In addition, known truths should be used by a reasonable person in interpreting the Bible. Channing sums up his hermeneutical principles in these words: "From a variety of possible interpretations we select that which accords with the nature of the subject and the state of the writer, with the connection of the passage, with the general strain of Scripture, with the known character and will of God, and with the obvious and acknowledged laws of nature. In other words, we believe that God never contradicts in one part of Scripture what He teaches in another; and never contradicts in revelation what He teaches in his works and providence. And we therefore distrust every interpretation which, after deliberate attention, seems repugnant to any established truth."[38]

He goes on to address those who criticize Unitarians for claiming the use of reason in scriptural interpretation by pointing out that everybody uses reason to some degree. His objection to his opponents is not that they use reason but that they use it badly by substituting obscure doctrines for those that are plainly taught in the scriptures, thereby "straining" the scriptures. There is no doubt, however, that there is a danger in relying on reason, because reason can err. Thus, reason is to be used patiently and carefully, for revelation is addressed to reasonable beings.[39] Channing concludes his thoughts on scripture by stating: "But God's wisdom is a pledge that whatever is necessary for *us,* and necessary for salvation, is revealed too plainly to be mistaken, and too consistently to be questioned, by a sound and upright mind. . . . A revelation is a gift of light. It cannot thicken our darkness and multiply our perplexities."[40]

Because of these strong roots in scripture, creedal formulations were unnecessary. Henry Ware asserted that Unitarians always supported the right of persons to have their own creeds. However, nobody had a right to impose his or her creed upon anyone else.[41]

Latter-day Saints would both agree and disagree with the above points. First, they would acknowledge that the Old Testament

period was a preparatory time and one in which Christ's coming was foreshadowed by the various rituals. However, from a Latter-day Saint perspective, the fulness of the gospel has been present upon the earth at various times since Adam. It is not merely evolving. Hence, the gospel can be found in the Old Testament, particularly in the writings of Isaiah, even though it is more clearly present in the New Testament. Second, there is no question that creeds are unnecessary. Third, all Latter-day Saints have both the obligation and privilege of studying scripture by themselves, but the hermeneutical principle should not be reason alone but rather the Holy Ghost, which gives the true interpretation. With the expanded canon, Latter-day Saints can reach out to clarifying passages in their other standard works. However, the ultimate authority lies with the prophet, seer, and revelator; that is, the President of the Church, and those who serve with him in the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Thus, when an authoritative interpretation is needed, it comes through revelation to the one who speaks to the whole church. The dynamic interaction between personal study and revelation and the ecclesiastical checks and balances lodged in the prophet are things which would have been anathema to Unitarians who focused on the individual and reason.

Divine Unity. When Unitarians speak of the Divine Unity, they simply mean that there is only one supreme Deity—the Father. They do not believe any other position is scriptural. "We understand by it that there is one being, one mind, one person, one intelligent agent, and one only, to whom underived and infinite perfection and dominion belong."[42] Thus, the Unitarian objection to the doctrine of the Trinity is that it undermines the oneness of God with its assertion of three persons with their own consciousness, all of whom are coequal, while being of one essence or nature. The language of the scripture and Jesus's language clearly show that there is one God, the Father, and that Jesus and the Holy Ghost are subordinate to Him. Each has a different role, and anyone with common sense knows that three distinct persons with different minds and wills are being spoken of, not one being. The language of the doctrine of the Trinity is simply not to be found in the New Testament.[43] Channing writes: "We do then, with all earnestness, though without reproaching our brethren, protest against the irrational and

unscriptural doctrine of the Trinity. 'To us,' as to the Apostle and the primitive Christians, 'there is one God, even the Father.' With Jesus, we worship the Father, as the only living and true God. We are astonished that any man can read the New Testament and avoid the conviction that the Father alone is God."[44]

From Channing's perspective, the doctrine of the Trinity is both irrational and unscriptural. As we have already seen, these two categories are the tests of any doctrine. Thus, the doctrine is clearly wrong. In addition to violating the principles of being rational and being biblical, the doctrine of the Trinity detracts from the worship of the one God by drawing people to Christ. Channing states:

> We also think that the doctrine of the Trinity injures devotion, not only by joining to the Father other objects of worship, but by taking from the Father the supreme affection which is his due, and transferring it to the Son. This is a most important view. That Jesus Christ, if exalted into the infinite Divinity, should be more interesting than the Father, is precisely what might be expected from history, and from the principles of human nature. Men want an object of worship like themselves, and the great secret of idolatry lies in this propensity. A God, clothed in our form, and feeling our wants and sorrows, speaks to our weak nature more strongly than a Father in heaven, a pure spirit, invisible and unapproachable, save by the reflecting and purified mind. We think, too, that the peculiar offices ascribed to Jesus by the popular theology, make him the most attractive person in the Godhead.[45]

It is interesting to juxtapose Channing's thoughts on the relation between the Father and Son with the Latter-day Saint understanding of that relationship. Latter-day Saints and Unitarians arrive at the same conclusion—that there is one supreme being in the universe, the Father—but they do so by different routes. Scripture and reason are the routes Unitarians use. They do not find the Trinity in the scriptures, nor do they find the idea of three persons of one essence rational. Latter-day Saints, on the other hand, base their assertion that there is one Supreme Being, the Father, on the First Vision, in which the Father and the Son appeared to Joseph Smith. There *the Father introduced His Son, who works under the Father's direction.* Both traditions believe in the Godhead of three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Ghost—and both affirm the *subordination* of the Son and Holy Ghost to the Father.

Channing's comment about the "attractive" Christ defines a clear difference between Latter-day Saints and Unitarians. For Channing, the Father is an invisible spirit and without form. To claim that He has form would make God like humankind, leading to idolatry, because He could feel our wants and sorrows. Christ does this through His incarnation and thus becomes so attractive to humanity, says Channing, that people worship Christ rather than the Father. On the basis of Doctrine and Covenants 130:22, which states, "The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man's," Latter-day Saints affirm the corporeality of the Father as well as the Son. By extension, not only has the Son experienced human life, but so has the Father. It is precisely because of this that the Father becomes so attractive to Latter-day Saints, for He has felt our wants and sorrows, just as has the Son. To Latter-day Saints, this is not a diminishing of the Father, but rather a recognition of one source of His compassion for us.

God's moral perfection and human nature. It is under this heading that the Unitarian opposition to Calvinism becomes most visible. Both Channing and Ware react strongly against the Calvinistic doctrines of depravity, election, and predestination as they consider the moral nature of God, for they believe that the character of God is reflected in human beings, who are created in God's image. What seems reprehensible to humans cannot be an accurate depiction of God. Channing notes that all Christians believe that God is infinite, just, good, and holy. Given that, however, he feels that many Christians have postulated a God who is above morality. God is so cloaked in mystery that nothing can be known of Him, and thus He can do anything He wishes, including damning the vast majority of the human race, because His ways are not humanity's ways. Channing, in response, says that we worship God not because He is supreme and almighty and His will is irresistible, but rather "because He created us for good and holy purposes . . . [and] because his will is the perfection of virtue."[46] While God is just, He is also good, benevolent, and paternal. The Calvinistic doctrines that portray a God who creates humans not in His own image, but as depraved beings, is not commensurate with the portrait of God displayed in the scriptures. Thus, Channing says:

Now, according to the plainest principles of morality, we maintain that a natural constitution of the mind, unfailingly disposing it to evil, and to evil alone, would absolve it from guilt; that to give existence under this condition would argue unspeakable cruelty; and that to punish the sin of this unhappily constituted child with endless ruin would be a wrong unparalleled by the most merciless despotism.

   This system also teaches that God selects from this corrupt mass a number to be saved, and plucks them, by a special influence, from the common ruin; that the rest of mankind, though left without that special grace which their conversion requires, are commanded to repent, under penalty of aggravated woe; and that forgiveness is promised them on terms which their very constitution infallibly disposes them to reject, and in rejecting which they awfully enhance the punishments of hell. These proffers of forgiveness and exhortations of amendment, to being born under a blighting curse, fill our minds with a horror which we want words to express.[47]

In other words, the sort of God who would do this is simply a monster unworthy of worship. This is not the God, however, revealed in scripture, and it is against the moral perfection of that God that all doctrines either about God or human beings must be weighed.

   Given the above, what then can be said about the nature of humans? Henry Ware gives the Unitarian answer to that question:

Man is by nature, by which is to be understood, as he is born into the world, as he comes from the hands of the Creator, innocent and pure; free from all moral corruption, as well as destitute of all positive holiness; and, until he has, by the exercise of his faculties, actually formed a character either good or bad, an object of the divine complacency and favour. . . . He is by nature no more inclined or disposed to vice than to virtue, and is equally capable, in the ordinary use of his faculties, and with the common assistance afforded him, of either. . . . He has natural affections, all of them originally good, but liable by a wrong direction to be the occasion of error and sin. He has reason and conscience to direct the conduct of life, and enable him to choose aright; which reason may yet be neglected, or perverted, and conscience misguided. The whole of these together make up what constitutes his trial and probation. They make him an accountable being, a proper subject to be treated according as he shall make a right or wrong choice, being equally capable of either, and as free to the one as to the other.[48]

Ware indicates that he will demonstrate the above view of humanity from observation, experience (which I take to mean reason), and scripture. His first step is to challenge, as did Channing, on the basis of reason, the Calvinist view that humans enter this world as evil beings.

> The doctrine, it is confessed, is repulsive. The mind naturally revolts at it. It *seems* at first, to all men, universally, to be inconsistent with the divine perfection. But the first impression is made upon us by the nature which God has given us; and I think we should be slow to believe that a nature, thus given to all, is intended to mislead and actually does mislead all, on so important a question. It is certainly an extraordinary fact, if a fact it is, that God should first give to man a corrupt nature, wholly averse to good and inclined to evil, and at the same time endow him with a moral discernment and feelings, which lead him instinctively to deny that God can so have made him, because inconsistent [*sic*] with justice and goodness; that is, that he has given him a natural sense of right and wrong, which leads him to arraign the conduct of the Being who made him.[49]

Ware acknowledges that there is a great deal of evil in the world, but asks whether it is a product of nature or of choice and environment. His answer is that it is the product of the latter. He suggests that persons should examine the good that human beings accomplish, just as they note the evil that they do: "Let all that is virtuous, and kind, and amiable, and good, be brought into the picture, and presented in their full proportions, and the former [evil] will be found to constitute a far less part of it, than we were ready to imagine."[50] Thus, there is good in human beings, a fact demonstrated by infants. They are innocent, simple, and pure. Goodness flows from them. Until choices change that innocence, children are without guilt. Jesus underlined this innocence when he placed a child in the midst of the disciples and told them that the kingdom of heaven was composed of persons like the children (Matthew 19:14). Ware's comment is that cited scriptural passages "most clearly imply, until turned from their obvious meaning, that young children are objects of the Saviour's complacency and affection; that their innocency, gentleness, and good disposition are the proper objects of imitation; that they are, what men are to become by conversion or regeneration."[51]

Thus, any corruption of humans does not originate with God but rather with the choices that humans make themselves. Such a position does not make God the author of evil but rather lays the blame for evil deeds upon the ones who do them: human beings, who are beings with moral agency and choice.[52]

There is little in the above that Latter-day Saints could not affirm. They believe that people are free of sin upon entry into the world and that only as they exercise their agency in making wrong choices does sin enter their lives. They have inclinations that could lead them in the direction of either good or evil, but until choices are made, humans are without sin. The additional doctrines available to Latter-day Saints are those of the eternal nature of intelligences and life in the premortal spirit world. With regard to the former, God does not create intelligences, for they are as eternal as He is. Hence, God does not create the potential for evil. That lies in the intelligences themselves. In the latter realm, choices have already been made in the premortal life. Humans do not come into this life quite as unmarked as the Unitarian tradition would hold with its doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo.*

Revelation and divine influence. As noted above, scripture is the record of God's prior revelations to humankind, the New Testament being the most authoritative portion for Unitarians. The New Testament reveals Jesus Christ, who is the master of Christians, and whatever He or His Apostles taught is viewed as possessing divine authority.[53] The Bible is, then, the foundational revelation for Channing and Ware.

Divine influence, however, may be much broader and indirect. God works in many ways upon Christians, ways of which persons may be wholly unaware, says Ware. "It will not, I presume, be pretended, that the direct influence of the spirit of God upon the mind is of such a nature, that men can be conscious of it at the time, so as to distinguish it with certainty from the natural operations of the mind under the influence of external circumstances, and the variety of motives, which are presented to it. . . . But without any immediate and direct influence upon the mind, the most important effects may be produced, and changes brought about within us, by a variety of instruments and means, in a manner

analogous to that, in which all the great purposes of God are accomplished in the natural and moral world. . . . Yet not a direct and immediate agency is to be perceived. Instruments and means are employed, but the hand that employs them is unseen."[54]

Given the above, it would seem that direct guidance by Deity, or what Latter-day Saints would term "continuing revelation," was lacking in this early Unitarian thought. It appears, however, that Ware simply wanted to affirm that God works in all sorts of ways in the world. Those ways transcend the specific election of individuals as advocated by Calvinists. While much of what God accomplishes is due to His indirect and unseen influences, Ware does not exclude direct guidance to individuals. He states:

> Unitarians generally do not reject the notion of a direct and immediate influence of the spirit of God on the human mind. They believe that there may be circumstances of great trial, strong temptation and peculiar difficulty, that call for extraordinary assistance, and that those who have manifested a disposition to make a good use of the ordinary means afforded, will have further aid suited to their exigencies, and sufficient by a proper use to answer to their necessities. They suppose also that any extraordinary assistance will be granted only to those, who ask it; that it will be granted to previous good disposition, and a sense of need and dependance. That God will give the holy spirit to them who ask, to them who have already right feelings, are sensible of their weakness and wants, and ask the mercy of God to supply them.[55]

It appears, then, that from a Unitarian perspective God does involve Himself directly in human affairs, but generally after people have sought to assist themselves through the normal means available to them. In addition, God responds to the prayer of faith among those who have been faithful.

Latter-day Saints would normally place less stress on God's general workings and affirm a more constant, personal influence from God upon individuals; that is, continuing revelation. Extreme trials are not the only times God speaks to people directly. Having said this, however, Latter-day Saints would agree that answers do not come to individuals without worthiness, seeking, prayer, and effort. This is the message of Doctrine and Covenants 9:8–9. When confronted with a problem, we are to use the best tools at our disposal,

work out a solution in our own minds, and then submit that con-
clusion to God for His affirmation or rejection.

Unity and divinity of Jesus Christ. In Unitarianism, two concerns
seem to be related to the nature of Christ. The first is whether He
is a being of two minds. Channing asserts that Christ has only one
will, an idea contrary to the teachings of traditional Christianity.
Channing states: "We believe in the unity of Jesus Christ. We
believe that Jesus is one mind, one soul, one being, as truly one as
we are, and equally distinct from the one God. We complain of the
doctrine of the Trinity, that, not satisfied with making God three
beings, it makes Jesus Christ two beings. . . . This corruption of
Christianity, alike repugnant to common sense and to the general
strain of Scripture, is a remarkable proof of the power of a false
philosophy in disfiguring the simple truth of Jesus."[56]

Thus, the Unitarian understanding of Jesus having only one
mind and will is comparable to the Latter-day Saint understanding
of the nature of Christ. His premortal spirit enters a body and He
is born as Jesus of Nazareth with one will. In addition, the clear
Unitarian doctrine that God and the Son are distinct beings coin-
cides with the Latter-day Saint understanding derived from the
First Vision that the Father and the Son are two separate beings.

The second issue upon which orthodox Christians (primarily
Calvinists) challenged Unitarians was over whether they believed
Jesus to be divine. Clearly in Unitarian theology the Son is subor-
dinate to the Father, and if this is so, then in what sense is He
divine? Channing states:

> We believe firmly in the divinity of Christ's mission and office, that he
> spoke with divine authority, and was a bright image of the divine per-
> fections. We believe that God dwelt in him, manifested himself
> through him, taught men by him, and communicated to him his spirit
> without measure. We believe that Jesus Christ was the most glorious
> display, expression, and representative of God to mankind, so that in
> seeing and knowing him, we see and know the invisible Father; so that
> when Christ came, God visited the world and dwelt with men more
> conspicuously than at any former period. . . . Whilst we honor Christ
> as the Son, representative, and image of the Supreme God, we do not
> believe him to be the Supreme God himself. We maintain that Christ
> and God are *distinct beings,* two beings, not one and the same being.[57]

It would seem from the above statement that the divinity of the Son in Unitarianism is a reflected divinity, rather than an inherent divinity. Hence, one can see why this statement would seem inadequate to persons who believed in the doctrine of the Trinity and therefore held that the very essence of God was present in the Son. Latter-day Saints would certainly agree that Christ and the Father are two distinct beings but would hold a higher view of Christ's divinity. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever (see 1 Nephi 10:18; 2 Nephi 2:4; Moroni 10:19; D&C 35:1). While Christ's intelligence is clothed with spirit form by the Father, we do not know of a time when He was not the second member of the Godhead. In Him, there is inherent, not merely reflected, divinity.

The Atonement. The essence of the Atonement lies beyond words. It is for this reason that so many different linguistic images are used in the New Testament—sacrificial language, juridical language, the language of reconciliation, the language of ransom, and the language of substitution—to attempt to express it, at least in part. When we come to the language used by Unitarians about Christ's work, we must realize that their expressions, like all other attempts to explicate this central element of the Christian faith, fall short of the whole.

The Unitarians begin with the presupposition that Christ's work is rooted in the mercy of God. Christ's work is not a response to God's wrath or justice. It is instead an outgrowth of His love. Channing says: "We earnestly maintain that Jesus, instead of calling forth, in any way or degree, the mercy of the Father, was sent by that mercy to be our Saviour; that he is nothing to the human race but what he is by God's appointment; that he communicates nothing but what God empowers him to bestow; that our Father in heaven is originally, essentially, and eternally placable, and disposed to forgive; and that his unborrowed, underived, and unchangeable love is the only fountain of what flows to us through his Son."[58] Thus the concept of a substitutionary atonement that answers God's justice is set aside in Unitarian theology. "We maintain, further, that this doctrine of God becoming a victim and sacrifice for his own rebellious subjects, is as irrational as it is unscriptural. We have always supposed that atonement, if necessary, was to be made *to,* not by, the sovereign who has been offended."[59]

Rather, Unitarians express Christ's central work in terms of bringing humans and God together or of reconciling the two. Henry Ware states the Unitarian position in these words: "Christ delivers us from punishment not *directly* by his sufferings. It is not that his sufferings are in any sense a substitute for ours. It is not that satisfaction is made by his sufferings to divine justice, so that the sinner escapes. . . . But his sufferings are the means of delivering us from punishment, only as they are instrumental in delivering us from the dominion of sin. They are the grounds of our forgiveness, only as they are the means of bringing us to repentance, only as they operate to bring us to that state of holiness, and conformity to the will of God, which has the promise of forgiveness, and qualifies us for it."[60] He further says:

> Christ was our redeemer by those miracles which proved him to be a messenger and teacher from God; by those instructions and that example, which were to remove our ignorance, and deliver us from the slavery of sin, and bondage of corruption; by those high motives to repentance and holiness, which are found in the revelation of a future life and righteous retribution; and especially by the confirmation his doctrine and promises received, and the persuasive efficacy given to his example, by his sufferings, his voluntary death, and his resurrection. He was our redeemer by doing and suffering all, that was necessary to effect our deliverance from the power of sin, to bring us to repentance and holiness, and thus make us the fit objects of forgiveness and the favour of heaven.[61]

Thus, the work of Christ was to change human beings and their attitudes toward God by leading them to repentance and a new life acceptable to God. Christ did not actually change the nature of the relationship between humans and Deity, but rather He influenced humans to change the relationship themselves. He is the model of selfless giving before God, which leads others to a life like His. Channing summarizes the Unitarian position as follows:

> Whilst we gratefully acknowledge that he came to rescue us from punishment, we believe that he was sent on a still nobler errand, namely, to deliver us from sin itself, and to form us to a sublime and heavenly virtue. We regard him as a Saviour, chiefly as he is the light, physician, and guide of the dark, diseased, and wandering mind. No influence in

the universe seems to us so glorious as that over the character; and no redemption so worthy of thankfulness as the restoration of the soul to purity. Without this, pardon, were it possible, would be of little value. Why pluck the sinner from hell, if a hell be left to burn in his own breast? Why raise him to heaven, if he remain a stranger to its sanctity and love? With these impressions, we are accustomed to value the gospel chiefly as it abounds in effectual aids, motives, excitements to a generous and divine virtue.[62]

Latter-day Saints would wholeheartedly affirm that the plan of salvation is rooted in the Father's mercy. The Father sent Christ because the Father wills His children to be saved, because He loves them. That love, expressed in Christ's life and death, leads people to repent and change. Jesus is assuredly the light of the world and a guide in the midst of darkness. But He is more than that. He offers himself to preserve God's integrity, for the Father does not give commands that are meaningless. God calls His children to a particular way of life before Him, and when those children disobey His commands, that disobedience cannot be overlooked. His justice, or His personal integrity, requires a penalty. But His mercy provides a substitute in Jesus Christ, who, out of love like the Father's, is willing to receive our punishment that we might go free. The conditions are that we have faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, repent of our sins, and receive the ordinances of the Church under the hands of authority. Mercy is thereby in force, but it does not rob justice of its necessary penalty. The balance between justice and mercy seems to be lost in the Unitarian view of the Atonement.

Grace and works. The doctrine of election was utterly repulsive to Unitarians such as Ware and Channing. Briefly stated, the doctrine assumed that all persons inherit the sinful nature of Adam and Eve. Thus, they are born with a depraved nature, such that they are incapable of doing any good or of turning to God. From among these depraved persons, with no contribution from them, God in His sovereign majesty elects some persons to salvation to show His mercy, and the remainder He damns, thereby demonstrating His divine justice. Ware reacts strongly: "Following the light of our reason, and the natural impulse of our feelings, we find it impossible to imagine, that the Author of our being, the common Parent of all, can regard and treat his offspring in the manner, which the doctrine in

question attributes to him. . . . A man who should do what this doctrine attributes to God, I will not say toward his own offspring, but toward any beings that were dependent on him, and whose destiny was at his disposal, would be regarded as a monster of malevolence, and cruelty, and caprice."[63]

If, Ware asks, God creates human beings in this situation, one of depravity from the moment of birth, how can anyone, especially God, condemn them for being what they are? Such a position would be out of harmony with the moral integrity of God himself. Ware says, "It represents him [God], as arbitrary and partial in his distributions; making a distinction the most momentous that can be imagined in his treatment of those, between whom there was no difference of character or of desert as the ground of the distinction; from his mere sovereign will and good pleasure, ordaining *these* to eternal blessedness and glory, and appointing *those* to endless and hopeless misery."[64]

To those who would cite John 17:2 and John 6:37, 39 as support for the doctrine of election,[65] Ware responded by citing John 16:27, which says, "For the Father himself loveth you, *because ye have loved me,* and have believed that I came out from God" (emphasis added). His interpretation is as follows:

> Here the love of God is represented, not as the cause, but the consequence, of the faith and love of the disciples, and the plain and obvious meaning of the texts in question, in their connexion with this is, that they were given to Christ, not by an arbitrary selection of them from the mass of Jews, without any thing in their character and disposition leading to the choice; but, because they were seen to be fit subjects for the kingdom of God, ready to receive the faith of the Gospel when offered to them, having already something of the christian disposition and character, already manifesting an obedient temper, as expressed (ch. xvii. 6,) they were already children of God, and were given to Christ, and came to him because they were God's in a sense, in which the rest of the world were not; and were then chosen, and ordained to partake in the final benefits of the Gospel, because of their faith and fidelity. This interpretation renders the whole discourse, and the following prayer, consistent throughout in the several parts, and consistent with the moral character of God, and the moral state of man, as a free and accountable being.[66]

Thus human beings, according to Ware, must cooperate with God. They are not passive recipients of His grace but active coworkers. "We indeed attach great importance to Christian works, or Christian obedience, believing that a practice or life conformed to the precepts and example of Jesus is the great end for which faith in him is required, and is the great condition on which everlasting life is bestowed. . . . We believe that holiness or virtue is the very image of God in the human soul,—a ray of his brightness, the best gift which He communicates to his creatures, the highest benefit which Christ came to confer, the only important and lasting distinction between man and man."[67]

This is not to say, however, that humans have the capability to save themselves through their own merit or works. Cooperation does not set aside the need for the saving work of Christ. "Still, we always and earnestly maintain that no human virtue, no human obedience, can give a legal claim, a right by merit, to the life and immortality brought to light by Christ. . . . We always affirm that God's grace, benignity, free kindness, is needed by the most advanced Christians, and that to this alone we owe the promise in the gospel, of full remission and everlasting happiness to the penitent."[68]

Latter-day Saints would agree with the above position. There is no question of our works saving us, but the human being, who is not depraved or infected by original sin, can and does choose God when confronted by Him. People respond in faith to God's proffered grace. An extension of that response becomes lives of discipleship and obedience to the Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, as guided by the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

Unitarians and Latter-day Saints have much in common but also have their differences. Both deny the authority of creeds, turning instead to the scriptures as authoritative. However, Latter-day Saints hold a higher vision of the Old Testament than do the Unitarians, as well as having an expanded canon. In addition, the ultimate authority for Latter-day Saints is the living prophet, a distinct difference from the Unitarians.

Both traditions agree that there is one God, the Father, who is supreme. Latter-day Saints place a heightened emphasis, however, on the divine nature of both the Son and the Holy Ghost, even though they see both as subordinate to the Father. Unitarians stress the moral perfection of God and measure all doctrines about both God and humanity against this standard. God is good and would not produce a depraved creature, incapable of a free response to God. Thus, doctrines about humanity's depravity deny the image of God placed in human beings. It is irrational and unscriptural to presume that such a corrupt creature could come from the Creator. Latter-day Saints would essentially agree with this position, for they too hold that human beings are born without sin and that they have the ability and agency to respond positively or negatively to God when summoned by the Spirit. This summons and encounter with the Spirit is perhaps less constant in Unitarian thought than in Latter-day Saint thinking. Unitarians tend to think in more general terms about divine influence, while Latter-day Saints tend to stress the personal, direct nature of revelation.

The largest difference focuses on the nature of the Atonement of Christ. Unitarians deny the substitutionary nature of it, stressing instead its tutorial nature, which leads to repentance and a changed life. Latter-day Saints clearly stress that the Atonement is Christ's self-offering to satisfy God's justice and integrity. Both traditions, however, affirm that humans can actually respond to God's grace in Jesus Christ, and must respond out of their free will. Part of that response is faithful discipleship and obedience to God and Christ.

Thus we see that while direct influence on The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints from Unitarians was not a reality, many of the beliefs of Latter-day Saints were prefigured in the Unitarian tradition.

NOTES

[1]Henry Ware, *Letters Addressed to Trinitarians and Calvinists, Occasioned by Dr. Woods' Letters to Unitarians* (Cambridge, MA: Hillard and Metcalf, 1820).

[2]William Ellery Channing, "Unitarian Christianity: Discourse at the Ordination of the Rev. Jared Sparks" and "Objections to Unitarian Christianity Consid-

ered," in *The Works of William E. Channing, D.D.* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1886), 367–84, 401–8.

[3]Andrew P. Peabody, "Early New England Unitarians," in *Unitarianism: Its Origin and History* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1890), 156; Earl Morse Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism in Transylvania, England and America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952), 380.

[4]George Willis Cooke, *Unitarianism in America: A History of its Origin and Development* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1902), 1.

[5]Cooke, *Unitarianism in America,* 10.

[6]F. L. Cross, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church,* 1958, s.v. "Milton, John," 902–3.

[7]Cooke, *Unitarianism in America,* 10. See also Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church,* s.v. "Chillingworth, William," 272.

[8]Cooke, *Unitarianism in America,* 12–13. See also Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church,* s.v. "Locke, John."

[9]Cooke, *Unitarianism in America,* 16, 19, 26.

[10]Cooke, *Unitarianism in America,* 14–15.

[11]Cooke, *Unitarianism in America,* 26–27.

[12]Cooke, *Unitarianism in America,* 29.

[13]Cooke, *Unitarianism in America,* 31.

[14]Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism,* 381. Johnson wrote a book called *Wonder Working Providence* in 1654 in which the above assertion was made.

[15]Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1992), 94.

[16]Cooke, *Unitarianism in America,* 41.

[17]Cooke, *Unitarianism in America,* 42–44.

[18]Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism,* 384.

[19]Cooke, *Unitarianism in America,* 48.

[20]Cooke, *Unitarianism in America,* 48–49.

[21]Cooke, *Unitarianism in America,* 56.

[22]Cooke, *Unitarianism in America,* 47.

[23]Cooke, *Unitarianism in America,* 45.

[24]Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism,* 388.

[25]Cooke, *Unitarianism in America,* 63.

[26]Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism,* 387–88.

[27]Cooke, *Unitarianism in America,* 64.

[28]Cooke, *Unitarianism in America,* 58–59.

[29]Cooke, *Unitarianism in America,* 60.

[30]Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism,* 385.

[31]Cooke, *Unitarianism in America,* 66–69.

[32]Peabody, "Early New England Unitarians," 169–72.

[33]Peabody, "Early New England Unitarians," 173.

[34]Peabody, "Early New England Unitarians," 174–75.

[35]Daniel Walker Howe, *The Unitarian Conscience: Harvard Moral Philosophy, 1805–1861* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), 314.

[36]Jack Mendelsohn, Channing: *The Reluctant Radical* (Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1971), 17–55. See also Howe, *The Unitarian Conscience,* 311.

[37]Channing, "Unitarian Christianity," 367.

[38]Channing, "Unitarian Christianity," 369.

[39]Channing, "Unitarian Christianity," 369–70.

[40]Channing, "Unitarian Christianity," 370–71.

[41]Ware, *Letters,* 9–10.

[42]Channing, "Unitarian Christianity," 371.

[43]Channing, "Unitarian Christianity," 371–72.

[44]Channing, "Unitarian Christianity," 371.

[45]Channing, "Unitarian Christianity," 372–73.

[46]Channing, "Unitarian Christianity," 376.

[47]Channing, "Unitarian Christianity," 377.

[48]Ware, *Letters,* 20–21.

[49]Ware, *Letters,* 22–23; emphasis in the original.

[50]Ware, *Letters,* 25–26.

[51]Ware, *Letters,* 31.

[52]Ware, *Letters,* 17–44.

[53]Channing, "Unitarian Christianity," 367.

[54]Ware, *Letters,* 110–11.

[55]Ware, *Letters,* 124.

[56]Channing, "Unitarian Christianity," 373.

[57]Channing, "Objections," 402; emphasis in original.

[58]Channing, "Unitarian Christianity," 379.

[59]Channing, "Objections," 403; emphasis in original.

[60]Ware, Letters, 93; emphasis in original.

[61]Ware, *Letters,* 92.

[62]Channing, "Unitarian Christianity," 380.

[63]Ware, *Letters,* 59–60.

[64]Ware, *Letters,* 62–63; emphasis in original.

[65]John 17:2: "That he should give eternal life to as many as thou has given him." John 6:37, 39: "All that the Father giveth me shall come to me, and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out. . . . And this is the Father's will, which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day."

[66]Ware, *Letters,* 66–67.

[67]Channing, "Objections," 404.

[68]Channing, "Objections," 404.