

# *Belief*

*Thomas Christopher*

*Welcome and Announcements*  
*The Bowl Sings*  
*Prelude*  
*Chalice Lighting*

We light this chalice today, dedicating ourselves to Freedom, Fellowship, and Character in Religion.

*Opening Words*  
*Our mission*  
*Hymn: Die Gedanken Sind Frei, #291*  
*For All Ages*  
*Hymn*

Go now in peace, go now in peace,  
May the spirit of love surround you  
Everywhere, everywhere you may go.

*Offertory*  
*Sermon, part I*  
Voices:

NARRATOR—TC  
A. P. PUTNAM—Mary Leonard  
J. L. DOUTHIT—Julie Leonard  
E. S. GANNETT—Michael Corrigan  
J. T. SUNDERLAND—Frank Abbott  
WILLIAM CHANNING GANNETT (2)—Sean Redmond  
CHAIR—Jane White (President of the U U Fellowship)  
VOICES—Louise Love and Pat Guilbeault  
WILFRED CANTWELL SMITH (2)—Becky Ruth

NARRATOR

There was a statement of Unitarian beliefs prepared once, a bit over a hundred and twenty years ago, which stands as the finest such statement ever adopted. I'd like to tell you something about the politics leading up to it.

Here's what Rev A. P. Putnam said about us before the British and Foreign Unitarian Association in London in June of 1883:

## A. P. PUTNAM

[American Unitarianism]... has become a medley of doubts and denials, petty criticisms and secular teachings... [It] never ceases to make war on the miraculous elements in the New Testament... [It] finds fault with Christ Himself or silently leaves Him out of account... especially in its Sunday School literature... [It] neglects the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper... [And it] sinks the Bible to the level of books of other religions.

If the Unitarian Church in America is to have any great and glorious future, it must cease from its mere criticisms and dead negations, its everlasting platitudes against forms and creeds, its insufferable cant and conceit, its senseless screams for liberty - of which, God knows, we have already had enough! We must retrace our steps and rejoin the Great Church of God with its many banners and Christ the Captain of its salvation.

## NARRATOR

The London Unitarian periodical, *The Christian Life*, send a copy of Putnam's speech to every Unitarian minister in the U.S. Although Putnam's speech was phrased as an attack on the entire American Unitarian denomination, it was applied most especially to us out here in the West. The Western Unitarian Conference had its headquarters in Chicago and included the Unitarian churches of the Ohio valley, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, and beyond.

The Western Conference and its periodical *Unity* claimed as their purpose "Freedom, Fellowship and Character in Religion." There were many people in the Unitarian movement who thought that a denomination which sought to promote "pure Christianity" should at least make mention of God or Jesus in its statements of purpose at every level.

So why didn't the Western Conference express more clearly its Christian basis? Because out here in the West, many of the churches had moved beyond "pure Christianity" and were seeking "pure religion." The interest in world religions that the transcendentalists had brought to Unitarianism had flowered into an attempt to find the common core of all religion.

The idea we had here in the West was that the world religions differed greatly in their theologies, their myths, their symbols, and their rituals, but they had common ground in their ethics. In seeking pure religion, we emphasized the Ethical Basis of religion.

But this did not satisfy all those who found God and Jesus to be the most important things in their lives. For them, Unitarianism was an advanced Christianity based on sound Biblical scholarship and faith.

Rev. J. L. Douthit, one of our Western Unitarians, followed the example of *The Christian Life* and sent an extra edition of his own periodical, *Our Best Words*, to all Unitarian ministers. In it he joined the denunciation of the non-Christian position of the Western Conference. He demanded to know:

## J. L. DOUTHIT

Does Unitarianism mean the Christian religion in its simplicity and purity or does it mean something else?

Are we Unitarians an organized body of Christian believers with the Holy Son of God as our Captain or are we only a nebulous, tenuous mass of humanity, believing in anything and everything in general and nothing in particular?

Are Unitarians unequivocally and aggressively Christian in character or are we merely a heterogeneous multitude clamoring for Freedom, Fellowship and Character in Religion with a complacent indifference as to whether the divine religion of Jesus is voted up or down?

#### NARRATOR

Douthit had an ally in Rev. Jabez T. Sunderland, who had replaced Jenkin Lloyd Jones as Missionary Secretary of the Western Conference. Jones had traveled widely and had helped found churches and societies throughout the Western Conference area, accepting Christians and Free Thinkers alike. Sunderland had a different attitude. At the 1885 Conference sessions at St. Louis, Sunderland noted a “dark side” of the state of Unitarianism in the West: Many of the churches had been organized on too broad a basis, including both believers and non-believers. The non-believers were voting themselves into leadership positions. Children in Sunday schools were getting nothing but ethics. As a consequence, Unitarianism is not gaining as it should. He threatened that “If things went on as they had been for the past few years the time would come when it would be necessary to divide into two parties, the Ethical Culture one to go on by themselves, those who believe in Christianity by themselves.”

Sunderland did not support his generalizations with facts. He did not mention that some of the more moribund Unitarian churches in the West were Christian, some of the most vibrant were non-Christian.

Samuel J. Barrows, editor of *The Christian Register*, the national Unitarian periodical, heard rumors that Sunderland was plotting a coup d'etat at the 1886 Conference meeting in Cincinnati. To Barrows, Sunderland's campaign seemed reminiscent of the methods the Calvinists had used against Unitarians in 1825. From the beginning of April to mid-May he came out against the Sunderland faction. He quoted covenants of Western churches to show that most contained no theological restrictions on membership. Of 355 societies, only 127 bore the Unitarian name and only 16 called themselves Christian. Barrows proposed this definition of Unitarianism that could reconcile all, Christian and non-Christian alike: “Unitarianism is that free and progressive development of historic Christianity which aspires to be synonymous with universal ethics and universal religion.”

The factions were not, at that time, however, interested being reconciled.

Barrows quoted Rev. E. S. Gannett, Channing's colleague and first secretary of the A. U. A., in his objection to the attempt to expel Theodore Parker from the Boston Association of Ministers in 1843:

E. S. GANNETT

One of the first principles on which we are united, in opposition to the sects about us, is the denial of the right of any denomination to censure its members for mere opinion.... We will let no association of Christians, no company of fellow men, however sincere and honest, come within the walls of any of our congregations and say what shall be believed and what shall be done there. It is very doubtful if any article of theological belief, however intimate its relations may be with piety and virtue, can be made by us the common ground and occasion of effort. Our difference from the sects about us is whether faith or character is the one thing needful. We maintain that it is character which alone can make saints or sinners and therefore it is character which Christianity regards as supremely important.

NARRATOR

One week before the 1886 meeting, Sunderland sent out thousands of copies of a pamphlet, entitled *The Issue in the West*, to ministers and prominent members of Unitarian churches. Copies were handed out to delegates as they arrived. The pamphlet said in part:

J. T. SUNDERLAND

I would have the denomination defend against [Free Religion], not by persecution or heresy trials but by insisting always and everywhere that [the Conference] has always been and still is broadly Christian; that we stand for, at least and everywhere, God and worship, the great immortal hope, the ideal of divine humanity that shines in Christ Jesus.... All true progress leads to the God idea.... By hauling down our Theistic and Christian flags and running up in their place the Ethical flag only I am convinced we should seal the fate of Unitarianism in the West.

... Men will labor and give money only for definite religious ideas, definite religious institutions,... [but] to expect men with clear business heads permanently to take interest in [Ethical Basis] religion, to give much money or make much sacrifice to support it would seem an absurdity— here is reason run mad!

NARRATOR

At the meeting, Rev. William Channing Gannett attacked the pamphlet

WILLIAM CHANNING GANNETT

Is Western Unitarianism ready to give up its Christian character? No! Is it ready to exclude from its full membership those who do not take the names of Christian or Theist? No!

NARRATOR

Now we will vote on the propositions they voted on then. You will say Aye or Nay, and the Chair will announce how the actual vote went.

#### CHAIR

The Rev. Oscar Clute has moved: "The primary object of this Conference is to diffuse the knowledge and promote the interests of pure Christianity." All those in favor say "Aye." ... All those opposed, say "Nay."

[Announce results.]

In 1886, the motion was defeated.

The Rev. Sunderland has moved: "That while rejecting all creeds and creed limitations the Western Unitarian Conference hereby expresses its purpose as a body to be the promotion of a religion of love to God and love to man." All those in favor say "Aye." ... All those opposed, say "Nay."

[Announce results.]

In 1886, the motion was defeated.

The Rev. Gannett has moved: "That the Western Unitarian Conference conditions its fellowship on no dogmatic tests but welcomes all who wish to join it to establish Truth, Righteousness and Love in the world." All those in favor say "Aye." ... All those opposed, say "Nay."

[Announce results.]

In 1886, the motion passed.

The Rev. Gannett has moved to appoint a committee to draw up in simple words "the things most commonly believed among us." All those in favor say "Aye." ... All those opposed, say "Nay."

[Announce results.]

In 1886, the motion was defeated.

#### NARRATOR

The Sunderland/Douthit faction formed their own organization, the Western Unitarian Association in Chicago on June 21, 1886.

What, you may wonder, was the reaction of the A. U. A.? Well, the Unitarian churches in Massachusetts were broadly Christian, therefore the Association was too. The money collected by the A. U. A. back east for missionary work in the west was going solely to the Christian churches. They pointed out that they were collecting the money for the stated purpose of promoting "pure Christianity," and to send it to non-Christian churches would be improper both ethically and legally. But, I suspect, they mainly wished the problem would go away.

Now for the statement of belief that I promised you. At the 1887 Western Conference meeting at All Souls in Chicago, Gannett came with a statement of "Things commonly believed among us" that was approved over opposition of the Christian Theists by a vote of 59 to 13. It is arguably the finest statement of its kind in Unitarian history.

WILLIAM CHANNING GANNETT

The Western Conference has neither the wish nor the right to bind a single member by declarations concerning fellowship or doctrine. Yet it thinks some practical good may be done by setting forth in simple words the things most commonly believed among us, - the Statement being always open to re-statement and to be regarded only as the thought of the majority.

All names that divide "religion" are to us of little consequence compared with religion itself. Whoever loves Truth and lives the Good is, in a broad sense, of our religious fellowship; whoever loves the one or lives the other better than ourselves is our teacher, whatever church or age he may belong to.

The general faith is hinted well in the words which several of our churches have adopted for their covenant: "In the freedom of the Truth and in the Spirit of Jesus Christ, we unite for the worship of God and the service of man." It is hinted in such words as these: "Unitarianism is a religion of love to God and love to man." Because we have no "creed" which we impose as a condition of fellowship, specific statements of belief abound among us, always somewhat differing, always largely agreeing. One such we offer here:

VOICE 1

We believe that to love the Good and live the Good is the supreme thing in religion;

VOICE 2

We hold reason and conscience to be the final authorities in matters of religious belief;

VOICE 1

We honor the Bible and all inspiring scripture, old and new;

VOICE 2

We revere Jesus, and all holy souls that have taught men truth and righteousness and love, as prophets of religion.

VOICE 1

We believe in the growing nobility of Man;

VOICE 2

We trust the unfolding Universe as beautiful, beneficent, unchanging Order; to know this order is truth; to obey it is right and liberty and stronger life;

VOICE 1

We believe that good and evil invariably carry their own recompense, no good thing being failure and no evil thing success; that heaven and hell are states of being; that no evil can befall the good man in either life or death; that all things work together for the victory of Good.

VOICE 2

We believe that we ought to join hands and work to make the good things better and the worst good, counting nothing good for self that is not good for all;

## VOICE 1

We believe that this self-forgetting, loyal life awakes in man the sense of union here and now with things eternal - the sense of deathlessness; and this sense is to us an earnest of the life to come.

## VOICE 2

We worship One-in-All - that Life whence suns and stars derive their orbits and the soul of man is Ought,—that Light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world, giving us power to become the sons of God,—that Love with whom our souls commune. This One we name,—the Eternal God, our Father.

## NARRATOR

You are no doubt wondering how it all came out. There were several more years of division and squabbling.

In 1893, the World Parliament of Religions, held in conjunction with the World's Colombian Exposition in Chicago, was organized by Jenkin Lloyd Jones—remember him, Sunderland's predecessor? It attracted many Unitarians from back East and conveyed to them something of the broad religious vision of the Westerners.

At the 1894 A. U. A. meeting in Saratoga, the delegates reached a compromise, unanimously approving a new preamble for the constitution which mentioned “the kingdom of God” and “the religion of Jesus,” but also explicitly excluding any doctrinal test for membership and encouraged people of differing beliefs to join. From then on, the Unitarians lost interest in fighting over matters of opinion.

*Hymn With Heart and Mind #300*

## *Sermon, part II* NARRATOR

I have told one of the stories of our denomination's freeing itself from creeds and tests of belief. There remains the question of whether it was wise or foolish to have done so. We need to look more closely at Belief before we make a judgment.

How important is belief in spiritual growth?

The Buddha placed Right Belief as the first step of the eightfold path. It can also be translated Right Opinions, or Right Views. It really amounts to nothing more than believing the Buddha's diagnosis of the nature of human suffering, its cause and cure. The second step is the desire to do something about it. The next four or five steps are devoted to building character. The last two steps involve meditation. Huston Smith suggests that the reason for Right Beliefs is mainly negative. The right beliefs cannot in and of themselves bring enlightenment, but the wrong beliefs can easily prevent it. If you don't really believe in something, you won't try it.

The de-emphasis of belief by Unitarians and the emphasis on Character corresponds to the same relative emphasis in Buddhism

There is an even better justification for the Unitarian de-emphasis on Belief: the meaning of the word “belief” has changed from when the early Christian texts were first translated.

Here are some observations by Professor Wilfred Cantwell Smith. In studying the languages of the world's religions, including the Greek and Latin of early Christianity, Smith discovered that when speaking of faith, the words the religions use have a great similarity of meaning. The words tend to mean “I set my heart upon” or “I give my heart to” something or someone. They cannot be translated by belief or believing.

So why were the Latin and Greek words for Christian faith translated into “belief”? Well, at the time of the translation “belief” had the correct meaning; it meant “to hold dear.” After the sixteenth century, the meaning of the word “belief” started drifting towards the modern meaning, “to accept a proposition as being true.” This change was complete by the last century, when the story I told you was happening. Smith summarized the change as follows:

#### WILFRED CANTWELL SMITH

There was a time when “I believe” as a ceremonial declaration of faith meant, and was heard as meaning: “Given the reality of God, as a fact of the universe, I hereby proclaim that I align my life accordingly, pledging love and loyalty.” A statement about a person's believing has now come to mean, rather, something of the sort: “Given the uncertainty of God, as a fact of modern life, so-and-so reports that the idea of God is part of the furniture of his mind.”

#### NARRATOR

So it appears that we were right, a century ago, to throw out belief. Belief is the wrong concept anyway. So what is the right concept?

Smith uses the word “faith.” In contrasting “faith” to “belief,” he says:

#### WILFRED CANTWELL SMITH

Faith is deeper, richer, more personal. It is engendered by a religious tradition, in some cases and to some degree by doctrines; but it is a quality of the person not of the system. It is an orientation of the personality, to oneself, to one's neighbor, to the universe; a total response; a way of seeing whatever one sees and of handling whatever one handles; a capacity to live at more than a mundane level; to see, to feel, to act in terms of, a transcendent dimension....

Faith, then, is a quality of human living. At its best it has taken the form of serenity and courage and loyalty and service: a quiet confidence and joy which enable one to feel at home in the universe, and to find meaning in the world and in one's own life, a meaning that is profound and ultimate, and is stable no matter what may happen to oneself at the level of immediate event. Men and women of this kind of faith face

catastrophe and confusion, affluence and sorrow, unperturbed; face opportunity with conviction and drive; and face others with cheerful charity.

NARRATOR

Over a century ago, we replaced the word “belief” with the word “character” meaning what Smith means by “faith.”

*Postlude*  
*Benediction*

NARRATOR

You have received in this denomination the opportunity for religious freedom. I charge you to use it well, building a personal character that takes “the form of serenity and courage and loyalty and service: a quiet confidence and joy which enables you to feel at home in the universe, and to find meaning in the world and in your own life, a meaning that is profound and ultimate, and is stable no matter what may happen to you at the level of immediate event. So that you can face catastrophe and confusion, affluence and sorrow, unperturbed; face opportunity with conviction and drive; and face others with cheerful charity.”