

African American Pioneers in Unitarian Universalism

By The Rev. Dick Weston-Jones, March 16, 2008

For The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough, NC

Has America reached a post-racist age? You certainly might have thought so last week when Geraldine Ferrero claimed that the only reason for Barack Obama's political success is the color of his skin. What an advantage that is in America! How fortunate to be black! I can't decide whether her comments show that she is openly racist or only terminally dumb. Ferrero is a political liberal, the Democratic nominee for Vice President in 1984.

Many Unitarian Universalists are surprised to learn that our liberal faith was conservative a short time ago. We have not always based our religion on a belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every person. In fact, we are not far from an age of open bigotry in our churches. I grew up in a white supremacist Unitarian church in Kentucky.

This morning I'm going to tell you the tale of our liberal bigotry and how our African American pioneers were treated by our forebears. Some of them were courageous liberals of whom we can be proud. They welcomed a black man, Gloster Dalton, as a founding member of the first Universalist Church in America in 1789 in Gloucester, Massachusetts. We know very little about his life and nothing at all about his beliefs—just that he was accepted as an equal in that pioneer Universalist Church, lived and died there. Universalists have believed in the equality of all people from the start of their movement.

We know a lot more about the beliefs of the first black woman to deliver a public political speech, in fact the first American-born woman of any heritage to do so. She broke a taboo that no white woman had dared confront. She was African American and free, and determined to exhort her fellow African American women to take their independence for themselves. It was 1831, just six years after the American Unitarian Association was founded in Boston that Maria W. Stewart gave a rousing speech in "Beantown."

Do you ask the disposition I would have you possess? [she said]. Possess the spirit of independence. The Americans do, and why should not you? [She meant by the "Americans" all the white people who made up the population of Boston.] "Possess the spirit of men, bold and enterprising, fearless and undaunted. Sue for your rights and privileges. Know the reason that you can attain them.... Why should man any longer deprive his fellow-man of equal rights and privileges? Oh America, America, foul and indelible is thy stain! Dark and dismal is the cloud that hangs over thee, for thy cruel wrongs and injuries to the fallen sons of Africa.

I can easily imagine Barack Obama's wife Michelle giving that speech. Unfortunately, we cannot claim Maria Stewart as an early day Unitarian or Universalist. We know only that she was Baptist, black and Bostonian. Most Unitarians would have been appalled at her effrontery.

Indeed, there were white Unitarian and Universalist abolitionists who supported her, but they were a small minority in our fledgling denomination in 1831 when she started speaking publicly. She was driven from Boston in 1833 by the scandal of her lectures, in fear for her own safety. The threat was as much from black men who were scandalized by her speeches, as from white men. I think she'd be great on the campaign trail today.

A white Unitarian woman who was a popular writer, Lydia Maria Child, gathered up her courage and stepped forward that year with her own publication of a tract titled "*An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans.*" She too was treated with disdain by many people.

Lydia Child found publishers no longer would publish her works. You know one of them, the Thanksgiving song that starts "Over the river and through the woods to grandmother's house we go...." Grandmother couldn't save her, and many Unitarian shunned her too. Lydia Child became editor of *The National Anti-Slavery Standard* for several years, but found cold comfort with her New York church.

"The Unitarian meetings here chill me with their cold intellectual respectability," she said. Years later, after the Civil War, she returned to the Unitarian fold when we had become broader and more humanistic—but Unitarians generally would not open their congregations to African-American participation for another hundred years. We are still lagging.

We don't know who the first African-American Unitarian was. It could have been the Reverend Mr. Jackson, an African-American from New Bedford Massachusetts, who announced his conversion to Unitarianism at the 1860 Autumnal Convention of the American Unitarian Association. He told the delegates about the needs of his church and they took up a collection for him. It totaled \$49. He was sent on his way and never heard from again. We don't know where his church was. According to Douglas Stange in his book *Patterns of Antislavery Among American Unitarians, 1831-1860*, "no discussion, no welcome, no expression of praise and satisfaction was uttered, that the Unitarian gospel had reached the 'colored.'" We know he was not accepted as a minister.

Our Meadville theological school that Holly Lux-Sullivan and John Saxon attend accepted an African American student in 1870, but nothing came of that. It was not until 1912 that a person of color finally was ordained as a Unitarian minister, Ethelred Brown. He had a tough time with Unitarians throughout his ministry.

The first African-American ordained by the Universalists, Joseph Jordan, founded the First Universalist Church of Norfolk in 1887. He had been ordained as a Baptist minister in 1880 but after reading Thomas Whittemore's book, *The Plain Guide to Universalism*, he had a spiritual crisis. He could no longer preach the Baptist belief in Hell.

Will Frank, the historian of the Unitarian Church of Norfolk, says Whittemore "makes it clear that Universalism was not a religion for the bigoted, but for those who could accept that God's love is extended equally to all—the powerless and the powerful, the oppressed and their oppressors. By contrast the prevailing attitude among blacks in the 1880s, as subjugation and

segregation became increasingly implanted in southern society was that white oppressors would surely suffer in Hell.”

Jordan went to Philadelphia where he knew there was a significant community of Universalists. He studied with the minister of the Universalist Church of the Messiah there for seven months, and then returned in 1887 to Norfolk to preach Universalism to anyone who would listen. He rented a room for a chapel and it was soon filled with black worshippers. His congregation of 20 families was formally organized as a Universalist mission on June 29, 1887 and within a few months Jordan was issued a formal license by the Universalists to preach for one year.

A Universalist Ordaining Council of three ministers in Philadelphia examined his fitness for the ministry and said they found him to have “a clear and bright mind” and “free alike from pretension and from abjectness.... He believes in us and he knows why,” they said. On March 31, 1889, he was ordained as the first African-American Universalist minister.

The rented room became too crowded but the congregation could not afford a church of its own so in 1893 Jordan spoke to the General Convention of Universalists in Washington, DC, persuading delegates there to donate enough money, \$2,758, to build a church and provide some furnishings. The new building was dedicated in November 1894 in the heart of Norfolk’s black community. white Universalists, who had no church of their own in Norfolk, occasionally attended. They started a day school for black children, who were not permitted to attend public schools.

Following Jordan’s death in 1901, the church dwindled and finally closed in 1906. While there was no connection between that congregation and the current Unitarian Church of Norfolk that was founded in 1930, they consider it their “grandparent.” Another Universalist mission that started in Suffolk with a stronger day school for black children continued until 1984.

“When I cast my eyes on the long list of illustrious names that are enrolled on the bright annals of fame among the whites,” said Maria Stewart in 1833, “I turn my eyes within and ask my thoughts, ‘Where are the names of our illustrious ones?’” Where indeed! Our Unitarian forebears did their best to discourage them. We did not do much better in the twentieth century, or now in the new millennium. Only 1.3% of the people in our Unitarian Universalist Association are black; in this church zero percent.

Ethelred Brown, the first black Unitarian minister, was a choirboy in an Episcopalian Church in Jamaica when he happened upon William Ellery Channing’s “Baltimore Address,” a memorable sermon in which Channing had declared his Unitarianism in 1819. Brown followed up by reading several Unitarian books he found in a doctor’s library, and said, “as a result, I became a Unitarian without a church.”

In 1900, he wrote a letter describing his predicament and addressed it “To Any Unitarian Minister in New York City.” Amazingly, it arrived at the desk of the Secretary of the Unitarian Ministerial Fellowship Committee who passed it on to the President of Meadville Theological School. After many exchanges in correspondence, he was offered a small scholarship and in 1910, he went to attend Meadville, the seventh black man to do so.

The American Unitarian Association warned him that there might be no Unitarian Church that would offer him a pulpit, but upon his graduation, he persuaded the AUA President, Samuel Eliot, to give him funds to start a church back in Jamaica. He began his work there as a Unitarian missionary in 1912.

The following year a retired minister, Hilary Bygraves, was sent to assess his work. He reported back to the AUA “The Rev. E.E. Brown is pronouncedly black, which is somewhat of a handicap to him in his work, since those of his race who are fortunate enough to approach absolute whiteness are too proud ‘to sit under’ any minister save ‘a white gentleman.’ He is fairly well educated, seems endowed with tact and great common sense, and is a speaker of considerable eloquence and force.”

When Ethelred Brown requested more funds the next year, Bygraves wrote to the AUA that the support should not continue “since Mr. B. being coal black himself could not hope to secure the cooperation of white people, and what was sadder still not even the presence of the whiter people of his own race.” For the next 6 years, the American and British Unitarians gave money to him fitfully, never quite enough, so he had to have a second job.

Finally, in 1920 Brown moved to Harlem in New York City and set up the Harlem Unitarian Church. There black socialist intellectuals were attracted to his weekly forums during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920’s and the Depression of the 30’s, but he never again got any help from the American Unitarian Association. They tried to remove his name from the list of ministers twice, and would have succeeded if the Rev. John Haynes Holmes, minister of the Unitarian Community Church of New York City had not come to his defense. Some of you may know that Holmes was one of the founders of both the ACLU and the NAACP. (He was white.)

Brown expressed the passion of his ministry in these words:

The Negro...has too much of the wrong kind of religion... [What is needed is] a religion of the present and the practical profoundly concerned with this world.... The virtue of discontentment is a necessary preliminary to making this earth a place wherein dwell justice and peace and love.... [Every one must] shoulder his own responsibility [and]...work out his own salvation.

I grew up as a Universalist and Unitarian child in the 40s and 50s in Louisville, KY in what my dad, the minister of the church characterized in his autobiography as a “white supremacist” congregation. It was a proud old southern Unitarian church, having been founded in 1830, just a year before Maria W. Stewart delivered her fiery speech in Boston.

When African-Americans would show up at Sunday services, the patrician grandfathers of the church would politely suggest to them that they might be more comfortable with their own people—in a colored church. My mother took to standing by the door so she could intervene, greet any African-American visitors and take them to sit with her through the service. When they left, they knew they had been welcomed there.

Two conservative members went to see my father about it. “Bob,” one said, “we’re unhappy about Coloreds coming to the church. Someday one may decide to join. We can’t let that happen.” My father replied, “You take it to the congregation, and see what they say. If they won’t allow Negroes to join, I’ll accept that, but until they do that this church is open to everyone.” The elders went away, calmed down, and didn’t take it to the congregation for a vote. They knew they would lose. Times were changing.

In 1957 a black woman, Maxine Whedbee, did join the church and was active for years until she moved to Pittsburgh to be close to her brother, pop singer Billy Eckstein. You may remember his hit song, “If I didn’t care.”

We are still far too short of African-Americans in our churches and our ministry. Ethelred Brown was one of only 23 black men and women who were fellowshipped as Unitarian or Universalist ministers between 1889 and 1993. The numbers are going up. Ten years ago, there were 30 persons of color in our ministry. Five years ago, there were 37. Today there are about 50, of whom 30 are African Americans currently serving UU congregations. None are in the South. A quarter of all UUs recently said they thought being black would “hinder the effectiveness” of their minister. John Weston, director of ministerial settlement for the UUA says every one of them has had to deal with issues of race in their ministry to our churches.

The Rev. Dr. Mark Morrison-Reed, one of our African-American UU ministers, wrote his doctoral thesis on Black Pioneers in a White Denomination to ask why there were so few. He said “80-85 percent of all black churchgoers belong to black denominations.” UUs are still “class and culture bound.”

Can we start from the top down? The President of the UUA, the Rev. Bill Sinkford, is African-American, the first black to head a predominantly white American religious movement. But Bill is only one UU. We will only get more by actively working to get them. Given our history, I think anything less smacks of racism. I hope you hear me: that’s a challenge. Hillsboro is a community with a significant body of African Americans, and Durham has many more. Why do we have none in this congregation?

What the African-American religious tradition and Unitarian Universalism have in common, said Mark Morrison-Reed, is “is a common concern with freedom. Intellectual, political and spiritual freedoms are valued, but black religions list spiritual freedom as higher while UUs list intellectual freedom as the most prized.”

But freedom is not enough. Unitarian Universalism will continue to have only a smattering of African-American participants until we become more welcoming to black people. black people only get into this congregation if they somehow hear about us and wander in. That’s the way white folks get here too, and I think this church does not do enough to attract any new people, black or white. We need a Growth Program to concertedly attract and assimilate new people. That’s a challenge, too.

In 1997, the General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association passed a resolution calling on the UUA to work towards becoming an anti-racist, anti-oppressive, multicultural religious community. It's past time to put it into effect here and everywhere.

There will never be large numbers of African-American UUs here but I think we'd have more if we tried. The first step might be to begin placing advertising in the black newspaper that serves this area. We might share the cost with All Souls Church, UU, of Durham, that is making a concerted effort to reach out to African Americans. Let them know you're here, and what you're about, and that you want to welcome them. Don't criticize Geraldine Ferraro for her views about race unless you're willing to make a change here, in our home.

It's up to you. We can change our heritage and make it a proud one to leave to our children worthy of the challenge laid down by Maria W. Stewart 175 years ago:

Do you ask the disposition I would have you possess? Possess the spirit of independence.... We need never to think that any body is going to feel interested for us, if we do not feel interested for ourselves."

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