

From Revelation to Reason to Intuition to Freedom: The Development of Unitarianism in America—A Local Perspective by Mark W. Harris

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A revolution had been simmering in the Standing Order of Congregational Churches of Massachusetts ever since the Great Awakening of the 1740's stirred the revival spirit in some latter day Puritans. Many congregations that opposed the revival for its emotional style and anti-establishment fervor were led by Harvard educated clergy who were called Arminians, a label indicating a theology focused on people's moral choices, as well as God's grace. These Arminians believed that humans had God given abilities to ensure their personal salvation, rather than be subject to the inscrutable decisions of an all-powerful sovereign. They rejected original sin and predestination, embraced a benevolent God, and many doubted the complete divinity of Jesus. Yet most of them did not want to upset the establishment applecart, refusing to publicly avow their burgeoning Unitarianism. By 1805 some of the Calvinists rejected this mixing of liberals and orthodox within the Congregational Churches, and found an occasion to voice their public displeasure when Harvard College elected Henry Ware as its new professor of divinity. On a local level, the Calvinist Congregationalists' unwillingness to be grouped with their heretical cousins had already become apparent by the increasingly sectarian nature of participation in church councils, ministerial exchanges, and church membership practices.

The liberals found a leader in William Ellery Channing, who preached a denominational manifesto, *Unitarian Christianity* in 1819. That was the same year that Convers Francis was called to be the last town wide, tax supported minister in

Watertown, Massachusetts. This paper will examine the transition in Unitarianism from a rational, Bible based Christian faith to the intuition and “religious feeling” orientation of Transcendentalism to a more scientifically minded free religion as seen through the careers of Francis and John Weiss, whose roles in the development of the Unitarian movement have not generally been recognized.

Convers Francis (1795-1863) grew up in Medford, MA, the son of a baker. His early church going years were under the ministrations of David Osgood, who held the fort in Medford’s First Parish for 48 years in a congregation that mirrored the theological mixing of Trinitarians and Unitarians that was so common in many towns. In his ordination sermon for Francis in June 1819, Osgood said, “there can be no excusable pretence for either party's excluding the other from christian or ministerial fellowship. It is certain that the spirit of Christ is not confined to any one sect, party or denomination of his professed followers.” Osgood promoted a broad spirit, proclaiming that it was wrong to limit “our charity to persons of our own persuasions,” but we should instead “learn to extend it to all. . .”¹ Osgood’s theology reflected the ethical, non dogmatic brand of Christianity that characterized Unitarianism in its early days. He said true faith is demonstrated by its fruits, “not by their doctrines, nor by their professions.” In addressing the Watertown congregation, he wrote, “in these times of prevailing division, your continued harmony and brotherly affection are worthy of admiration.”²

When he was fifteen, Convers Francis’ father asked him if he wanted to learn a trade or go to college. Preferring a life inspired by books, the young scholar graduated

¹ “A Sermon at the Ordination of the Reverend Convers Francis to the Pastoral Charge of the Church and Society in Watertown,” June 23, 1819 by David Osgood, D.D. (Cambridge, 1819), p. 19

² Ibid., pp. 20-21.

from Harvard in 1815. He continued there for three more years studying for the ministry, reflecting the then growing trend toward professionalizing the calling. Ironically, it was the conservatives who began the abandonment of the traditional on-the-job training with a settled minister. After Andover Seminary was founded in 1807 to train orthodox ministers, the Unitarians knew they needed to respond in kind, and were eager to improve the training of “their” ministers, and did so after 1810 under Harvard’s new president John T. Kirkland.³

Francis was “approbated” to preach in the spring of 1818, when he was twenty-three. The following spring he was recommended for the Watertown pulpit by church members, and then the town (or parish) concurred on April 12, 1819. This was the traditional pattern among Standing Order parishes, but a split in nearby Dedham that was then in litigation broke it. A liberal, Alvin Lamson, had been rejected by a majority of church members, only to have a minority of members then sue to prove that they were the rightful representatives of the parish. Their victory in 1820 precipitated many public divisions between Unitarians and Trinitarians. The ordination council for Francis met in June 1819, and he reported that “there was no disputing, and everything went on peaceably.”⁴ This would remain the pattern in Watertown, where the church had undergone a slow drift towards liberalism, but there was never a secession movement of any kind, a true reflection of Convers Francis’ abilities to be diplomatic, the “genial, kindly scholar,” who Henry Steele Commager once said, “presided so benignly over the

³ George Huntston Williams, ed. *The Harvard Divinity School*. (Boston, 1954), p. 21-27.

⁴ “The Journals of Convers Francis” (Part 1), edited by Guy R. Woodall, *Studies in the American Renaissance*, edited by Joel Myerson (Boston, 1981), p. 287. See Moseetta I. Vaughan, *Sketch of the Life and Work of Convers Francis, D. D.* (Watertown, MA, 1944), pp. 6-7.

Watertown church.”⁵ This was true despite Francis’ liberal theology. In November 1819 he preached the same sermon he had given before the Boston Association of Ministers when he was approved to preach. He noted in his journal that “it contained a view of the scripture doctrine concerning redemption and salvation . . . some would call a very heretical one.”⁶

Evidence of the breach in the Standing Order was noticeable among those who participated in councils, ordinations and ultimately in pulpit exchanges. Exchanges were among the most important kinds of relationships among parishes as they exposed congregations to a variety of viewpoints, and allowed them to keep the peace. Abiel Holmes, the minister in Cambridge regularly exchanged with liberal and orthodox alike for thirty years, but this suddenly changed in 1826 when he adopted an exclusive policy. This public expression of unwillingness to promote harmony in a broad theological parish excited controversy, and he was dismissed in 1829, taking a majority of the church members with him. Francis’ “Journal,” which includes frequent notices of pulpit exchanges, mostly with liberal colleagues noted his last exchange with Holmes in 1826: “Dr H. being an orthodox man is just able to settle the affair with his conscience so as to be able to exchange with me, & that is all, - how long even this will continue to be the case is quite uncertain.” When the orthodox ministers made decisions not to exchange, splits in their churches became inevitable.⁷

Francis’ “Journal” entries also reflect a gradual liberalization of the practice of the

⁵ Henry Steele Commager, *Theodore Parker*. (Boston, 1947), p. 24.

⁶ “The Journals of Convers Francis” (Part 2), edited by Guy R. Woodall, *Studies in the American Renaissance*, edited by Joel Myerson. (Boston, 1982). P. 292.

⁷ Vaughan, p. 14; Francis, “Journal,” p. 234; Conrad Wright, “Institutional Reconstruction in the Unitarian Controversy, in Conrad E. Wright, editor, *American Unitarianism, 1805-1865* (Boston, 1989), pp. 14-17.

faith in Watertown. The celebration of the Lord's Supper had long been one of two Protestant sacraments, but it became more and more common for liberally inclined churches to observe it less frequently. This was the case in Watertown almost immediately after Francis assumed the ministry. In July, the congregation voted that communion be celebrated on the first Sunday of every other month (rather than monthly). Francis wrote that there was "opposition" and some "indication of bad feelings." This was the first time he had seen "evidence of that spirit wh loves to oppose for the sake of seeming more wise or pious than others, -- & Heaven grant it may be the last."⁸

The practice of welcoming new members into the church was also liberalized during Francis' early years in the ministry. Historically members were examined by the deacons and the minister, and then had to make public confession of their sins and profess their faith before the congregation. Many church covenants were being rewritten by the late eighteenth century to make them more acceptable to liberal congregations. In May 1821, Francis describes a Mr. Hall and his wife being received into membership, whereby "the covenant being read before the church only," so there was no confession of sin, or profession of faith. Francis noted that this was "the first time this practice has been introduced here."⁹ Broader membership standards were also evident with changes in the sacrament of baptism. At a church meeting on January 22, 1821 the congregation voted that "the half-way covenant (a rite whereby the unconverted could have their children baptized) should be abolished, and that for the future, the pastor shall be at liberty to baptize the children of any parents, who may request it, without any conditions.

⁸ Francis, "Journal," p. 288.

⁹ Ibid., p. 303.

“Everyone” they declared, “had a right to the ordinance.”¹⁰

By the 1830’s an earthquake of discord in Unitarian thinking was rumbling, and Francis found himself siding with the Transcendentalist rebellion. He noted this developing split in his journal: “I have long seen that the Unitarians must break into two schools, - the Old one, or English school, belonging to the sensual and empiric philosophy, - and the New one, or the German school . . . belong to the spiritual philosophy. The last have the most of truth; but it will take them some time to ripen, and meanwhile they will be laughed at perhaps, for things that will appear visionary and crude.” Despite his belief that the “New Thought” was superior, Francis remained firmly grounded in Christian revelation and the idea of a personal God. As Octavius Brooks Frothingham said of him, “he gave his full assent to the intuitive philosophy, and used them as the pillars of Christianity.”¹¹

Like many of his liberal contemporaries Francis eschewed controversy on theological matters, and advocated an ethical faith. He explicitly defined Christianity as an “interior principle of moral life” in a sermon he gave in 1831 at the ordination of Oliver Stearns in Northampton, Massachusetts. He claimed that at first Christianity was a “living principle of moral and spiritual improvement,” but as it prospered its followers began to build “up outworks around it for ornaments and for resting-places.” Francis argued that forms of speculative faith such as creeds were not a mark of real religion. Those doctrines, which are most important, are those that influence practice. The minister, he said, was not a “manager of the ceremonies of sacred things,” but rather his

¹⁰ Watertown (Mass.), First Parish Church Records, Box 9, First Parish Record Book, Bound Volumes, 1819-1907, p. 13, Massachusetts Historical Society.

¹¹ Francis, “Journal,” pp. 246-247; Octavius Brooks Frothingham, *Transcendentalism in New England, A History* (Philadelphia, 1959), p. 354. Orig. published, 1876.

greatest work is “the production of goodness, of spiritual purity.” Thus, Christianity was “purely an internal religion” that should minimize forms, rites and doctrines, and uphold the development of personal virtue. The design of Christianity was to cultivate and improve individual character, so that “the path of duty and the path to heaven are always the same.”¹²

As a scholar Francis knew few equals. He had a large private library, and frequently loaned volumes out, and scholarship was the reason Theodore Parker sought him out as a mentor in 1832, saying “I long for books, and I long to know how to study.” Francis was an astute historian, demonstrating his talents in works on the early preacher John Eliot and in a history of Watertown. In 1832 his review of Alexander Crombie’s *Natural Theology* for the *Christian Examiner*, confirmed his place among the Transcendentalists, as he asserted that the “human soul is a particle of the divine mind.”¹³ In 1836 he began to attend the meetings of the newly formed Transcendental, or Hedge’s, Club. He was present for half of all the meetings, and combined his skills as a diplomat with the recognized wisdom of being the eldest member to moderate the discussions.

In the winter of 1837 Francis began attending lectures by Emerson. He noted that Emerson was perpetually opening “rich, lofty, far reaching veins of thought,” that left him “breathless.” These forays to hear Emerson continued the following year, ramping up to the July “Divinity School Address,” a watershed event in Unitarian history. In March Francis heard a talk on “*the holy* in man,” which alarmed some for its apparent

¹² Convers Francis, *A Sermon Preached at the Ordination of the Rev. Oliver Stearns to the Pastoral Care of the Second Congregational Society in Northampton*, Nov. 9, 1831 (Northampton, 1831), pp. 3, 6, 8, 10, 22.

¹³ John Weiss, *Discourse Occasioned by the Death of Convers Francis, D.D.* (Cambridge, 1863), p. 67; Convers Francis, “Natural Theology,” in Perry Miller, editor, *The Transcendentalists* (Cambridge, 1950), p. 64.

denial of the personality of the Deity. Francis thought that the only idea impugned was that God occupied space, but that Emerson did affirm the notion of will and consciousness in God. Francis also thought that Emerson denied the idea of a conscious human existence after death, saying that humans merge into a “Divine Soul.” Francis would soon sit in Divinity Hall, and hear Emerson say clearly “the soul knows no persons.”¹⁴

Francis found all of Emerson’s writings and talks examples of “a rich strain of music from the upper air.” He admired Emerson as a person, and so he could more easily forgive some of their differences. In the wake of the “Divinity School Address,” Francis wrote to Frederic Henry Hedge about the hubbub it caused. Francis reported that Emerson’s principal points were put forth with “great power.” Disagreeing with some of what Emerson said, Francis thought he could have given more significance to Jesus, but did not because he considered every man a divine being. He also reported how the Address gave offence to all the rulers in Cambridge, and that “infidel” and “atheist” were the best terms Emerson received. Francis spent the night at Emerson’s house in September 1838. They talked about the storm the Address had caused, and though Emerson and Francis “could not agree upon some points,” Francis concluded, “he is a true, godful man, though in his love of the ideal he disregards too much the actual.”¹⁵

Emerson was undergoing a persistent struggle over the nature of God, which led him to identify God with human character – the individual’s soul “carried out to perfection.” He moved his search from the outside world to the inner soul, and thus was

¹⁴ Francis, “Journal,” pp. 249, 251.

¹⁵ Convers Francis to Frederic Henry Hedge, August 10, 1838 in *Emerson in His Own Time*, ed. By Ronald A. Bosco and Joel Myerson (Iowa City, 2003), pp. 3-4; Francis, “Journal,” p. 251.

freed from the idea of God as an external being. His developing concept of an impersonal God as elucidated in the Address is what provoked Henry Ware, Jr. to preach, “The Personality of the Deity,” in which he said that if there is “no plan, no purpose, no design; there is nothing but a set of abstract and unconscious principles.”¹⁶ Ware and Francis shared styles of ministry with other moderate Unitarians who were threatened by the idea of removing a father like figure who formed the very basis of religion and morality. In a letter to Hedge in November, Francis expressed his concern that in Emerson’s Address there was the “want of an adequate expression on the *Christian* element in the world’s culture.”¹⁷

Yet Francis and Ware were not willing to call their friend an infidel, as Harvard professor Andrews Norton did, even if they worried about the claims of rejecting the miraculous nature and centrality of Christianity. They still considered Emerson a Christian, and thought the intolerance of people like Norton destroyed the spirit of free inquiry that was the basis of Unitarianism. This issue of freedom became especially relevant after Theodore Parker preached “The Transient and Permanent in Christianity” in 1841. Parker argued that the doctrines and forms of the church were transient, while the religion of Jesus, or “Absolute pure morality,” was permanent. This questioning of the authority of the Bible and Jesus produced a firestorm, and eventually Parker was asked to resign from the Boston Association. Dean Grodzins calls this the only time in Unitarian history a minister was asked to resign from fellowship for reasons of doctrinal

¹⁶ Henry Ware, Jr., “The Personality of the Deity,” in Sidney E. Ahlstrom and Jonathan S. Carey, eds., *An American Reformation: A Documentary History of Unitarian Christianity* (Middletown, Conn., 1985), p. 434.

¹⁷ Convers Francis to Frederic Henry Hedge, November 12, 1838 in *Emerson in His Own Time*, p. 4; David Robinson, *Apostle of Culture, Emerson as Preacher and Lecturer* (Philadelphia, 1982), pp. 126-131.

nonconformity. Parker refused, but was effectively ostracized by colleagues who would not exchange pulpits with him. In his Journal Francis noted that Parker was accused of infidelity, reporting that one writer called for his prosecution for blasphemy. Francis was appalled at this treatment of a “man of sound Christian piety,” who was “menaced” because he believed “we may be Christians without believing all that is written in the Old and New Testaments!” And this from “a community boasting of its entire religious freedom.”¹⁸

Soon thereafter Francis received an invitation to leave his parish in Watertown and accept an appointment as Professor of Pastoral Care and Pulpit Eloquence at the Harvard Divinity School. Francis was hesitant at first. His Watertown successor John Weiss reported, “his modesty and self-distrust were serious obstacles to accepting it.” Parker was among those who encouraged him to go, saying “I can’t help thinking that the welfare of the denomination depends upon it,” and then concluded with these words: “Would to Heaven you had gone to Cambridge before I went to the School!” He saw even greater implications when he wrote that it was “as great a gain for the College and for the whole community as the accession of Dr. Ware was in 1805.”¹⁹

Francis left Watertown in the summer of 1842, shortly after preaching at the rededication of a new meetinghouse to replace one that had been consumed by fire. In many ways Francis seems to have been the perfect appointment for a denomination split between reason and intuition; between Christian revelation and freedom. His was a tolerant, moderate Transcendentalism, grounded in institutional loyalty, which meant that

¹⁸ Francis, “Journal,” p. 255; Dean Grodzins, *American Heretic: Theodore Parker and Transcendentalism* (Chapel Hill, 2007), p. 444.

¹⁹ Weiss, *Discourse*, pp. 37-39.

radicals and conservatives alike could trust him. Yet some members of the Boston Association accused him of “the horrible crime of Transcendentalism.” He tried to appease the conservatives that summer with the Thursday Lecture, but they continued to harass him. Samuel Johnson, who saw Francis making the school into something “respectable” and “adequate,” noticed this. “But what can be done with a *Unitarian* school,” he wrote, “when Unitarianism is kicking at those who are trying to change it into something healthier and purer than any *ism*. . . ?” Francis has sometimes been categorized as someone who was “too all sided” in his understanding of various viewpoints.²⁰ Yet his moderation was an effective tool in giving students the freedom to make their own decisions about intellectual and professional matters and their application to ministry. John Weiss, his successor in Watertown, said that Francis had a “bias for spiritual views of God and man; yet he seemed almost neutral when it came to the development of doctrines and the history of human opinions.”²¹

In a letter to Weiss after her brother’s death, Lydia Maria (Francis) Child wrote how Convers had inspired the students to become abolitionists. In his Journal Francis noted that “I said all I could to encourage them in their resistance to this sin of our land, and told them I hope every member of the School would go forth into the ministry prepared to set his face as a flint against this terrible iniquity.”²² On his contributions to the divinity school as a whole, Child said “I think few appreciate duly the liberal influence of my brother in his teachings at the University. He never sought to impress his

²⁰ Johnson, as quoted in Guy R. Woodall, “Convers Francis, The Transcendentalists, and the Boston Association of Ministers, *The Proceedings of the Unitarian Universalist Historical Society* Vol. XXI, Part II (1989), p. 46.

²¹ Weiss, *Discourse*, p. 43.

²² Francis, “Journal,” p. 258.

own opinions, or the doctrines of any sect, upon the minds of his pupils; but presented questions from various points of view, and left their minds free to decide which aspect was the true one. Sectarians complained of this, and he had many difficulties to encounter in consequence of their opposition; but he had his reward in the liberalizing effect of his system.”²³

During his professorship Convers Francis transformed the thinking at Harvard. Even as the newly formed National Conference of Unitarian Churches kept the denomination a bastion of rational Christianity, the students Francis helped mentor were preparing to lead the Unitarians in new directions. They soon rebelled against the old theological order and provided leadership in the movement toward free religion. In 1855, his sister Lydia Maria Child published *The Progress of Religious Ideas, Through Successive Ages*. This remarkable book covered each of the major world religions “in its own light.” Using the sacred texts to describe both “the beauties and the blemishes” of each faith, Child neither condemned any faith nor elevated Christianity to special status, but attempted to promote tolerance of all. In February 1856, Child wrote to Lucy Osgood, an old friend from Medford days, about the book. She said, “My good brother C. [Convers] is not *altogether* pleased with what I say about *theology* . . . asking whether the “science of God” is not the highest and best of all sciences?” Child said, “Undoubtedly it is, “ but wondered how we could call it a science within our finite human vision. She believed faith and aspiration were all humans had, and that we could not “teach others concerning God with any certainty of basis that belongs to a *science*.”

²³ Lydia Maria Child to John Weiss, April 15, 1863 in *Lydia Maria Child: Selected Letter, 1817-1880*, ed. by Milton Meltzer and Patricia G. Holland, Amherst, Mass., 1982), pp. 425-426.

Furthermore, she felt while much “good had been done to the human race by *religion*” . . . she wondered, “what good has been done by *doctrines* concerning God and the soul, I am yet to learn.” Happily, she went on, “With this exception, he [Convers] seems to rejoice in my book.”²⁴

Francis remained at the Divinity School for twenty years, making it the beneficiary, Sidney Ahlstrom said, of his “fine mind, wide-ranging interests, and profound sense of duty.” While Hedge felt that Francis became more cautious during his tenure, and blamed the change on a “rigid, cautious, circumspect, conservative *tang* in the very air of Cambridge which no one . . . can escape,” the results of his teaching were revolutionary. By bringing Transcendentalism into the curriculum, his twenty-year tenure transformed the Divinity School, its students, and the very basis of Unitarian thought in ways, which embraced more universal religious principles, leading the way to the free religion his sister embraced. In the decades prior to the Civil War, many of the most capable students were converted to Transcendentalism, becoming the free religionists of the next generation. This disturbed the Harvard trustees, who decried the “decline of moral earnestness,”²⁵ but most threatening of all was that the changes wrought by the younger generation of Transcendentalists were only beginning to be felt.

Convers Francis died in 1863, less than six months after one of his successors in Watertown, Arthur Fuller, was struck and killed by a sharpshooter’s bullet at Fredericksburg. As the end of the Civil War neared, Henry Whitney Bellows, a leading minister from New York City, dreamed of a national church organization that would

²⁴ Lydia Maria Child to Lucy Osgood, February 11 or 19, 1856 in *Selected Letters*, p. 278.

²⁵ George H. Williams, ed. *The Harvard Divinity School*, p. 105; Stow Persons, *Free Religion* (Boston, 1947), p. 22.

unite the Unitarians, just as the nation struggled to build a stronger union. Bellows had complained that his fellow liberals were “sticklers for individual independence in the churches, and very little disposed to expect great things, or to undertake large enterprises.” In late 1864 Bellows proposed the organization of a national conference that might be “a reanimation of our Liberal Xty & its appearance on the public Stage, in National proportions.”²⁶

Bellows’ dream was achieved with the formation of the National Conference of Unitarian Churches in 1865. Within the denomination the “Broad Church Movement” hoped to unite four Unitarian theological groupings, ranging from evangelical creedal advocates to traditional upholders of Brahmin self-culture, through a Broad Christian group, to a radical fringe that considered Christianity one of many world religions. It was this fringe group and their response to the theological implications of the preamble that would cause serious divisions. The preamble, in calling upon the delegates to respond to the organizational demands before them, stated that members were “all disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ,” who were doing the “service of God” by “building up the Kingdom of his Son. . .”²⁷ The conference managed to give the denomination a solid organizational foundation, but the preamble still defined Unitarianism as specifically part of the Christian tradition. Many of the radicals believed that any Christian wording, no matter how broad, still contained a taint of creedalism.

When the National Conference met the following year in Syracuse, New York, the preamble was reaffirmed. Several disgruntled clergy left feeling as though free

²⁶ Conrad Wright, ed. *A Stream of Light: A Sesquicentennial History of American Unitarianism* (Boston, 1975), pp. 86.94.

²⁷ David B. Parke, ed. *The Epic of Unitarianism* (Boston, 1957), p. 121.

inquiry, the bedrock of Unitarianism, had been destroyed. William James Potter from New Bedford, Massachusetts, fumed on the train ride home that was he going to start a “spiritual anti-slavery society.” He joined forces with Francis Ellingwood Abbot, the minister in Dover, New Hampshire, who had brought to the convention an alternative preamble, which changed the Christian emphasis from one of devotion to the Lordship of Christ, to the principles of “Love, Righteousness and Truth” instead. This was soundly defeated after a heated debate, in which some said this was a rejection of Christ as the head of the Church. Feeling defeated, Abbot and Potter gathered with six other men, including John Weiss, the minister in Watertown, at the home of Cyrus Bartol in Boston in late October. Together they would form the Free Religious Association (FRA).²⁸

Weiss was among those who signed a January 1, 1867 letter inviting those interested in forming a new organization to gather at Bartol’s home in February. This group declared that they were not withdrawing from Unitarianism, as long as it affirmed that each person was free to hold his/her religious convictions, and each church was free to manage its own affairs. At the formal organization of the FRA on May 30, 1867, Weiss was one of the main speakers, although his delay due a Boston traffic jam, forced him to speak later in the day. When he did address the crowd, he recalled the fight in Syracuse, and how he wanted to see a free non-sectarian organization that would embody both the old and new Unitarianism.²⁹

While Convers Francis helped transform Unitarianism from its basis in a rational understanding of Christianity grounded in the Biblical miracles to an intuitive faith, his

²⁸ Conrad Wright, *The Liberal Christians* (Boston, 1970), p. 104.

²⁹ Wright, *Stream*, pp. 79-80; J. Wade Caruthers, *Octavius Brooks Frothingham: Gentle Radical* (University, Alabama, 1977), pp.108-110

successor in Watertown, John Weiss, would help lead the liberals even further along the path towards a theistic naturalism that embraced both the findings of science and a multi-religious approach to faith. In their articles of organization the FRA stated that the basis for this group was something broader than anything attempted in religious history. Seeking the “common ground on which all religion rests,” the founders sought an “ultimate union . . . of all religions, Christian and non-Christian.” For the first time, a religious organization proposed that all faiths meet “on perfectly equal terms.” In addition to its openness to what was true in all religions, the FRA advocated the possibility of ever advancing truth with no sense of “finality in religious faith and practice.” In its goal of advancing the “pure religion” of Parker, the FRA was also formed to “encourage the scientific study of theology.”³⁰

This new group was an attempt to give organizational expression to “perfect religious freedom.” Some of the radicals wanted a completely new organization to promote free religion, and others feared any organizational structure, but Weiss spoke against a total break with the Unitarians. He wanted free religion to be incorporated into Unitarianism, as the religion’s proper expression of faith. While the FRA never amounted to much organizationally, its impact on the AUA and liberal religion was substantial. The FRA embodied a spirit of freedom first voiced by some Transcendentalists, and later embodied in the Western Unitarian Conference, where William Channing Gannett and the Unity Men ultimately forged a broad spiritual unity for the entire National Conference, expressed by an inclusive practical faith: “love to God

³⁰ “Aims of the Free Religious Association,” *The Free Religious Association, Freedom and Fellowship in Religion, A Collection of Essays and Addresses* (Boston, 1875), pp. 357-361.

and love to man.” Essentially the FRA formally articulated an important and energizing strand within the religion.

While Bellows called his fellow Unitarians to a vigorous national institution, the FRA’s founders asserted a faith that was fiercely individualistic. No one embodied this more than John Weiss. Weiss, the grandson of a German, Jewish immigrant, and the son of a barber, was born in Boston in 1818. He has been called brilliant, fearless and radical. He seems to have always enjoyed a strong sense of humor. One story from his boyhood relates how he was out one day with some other boys, when they approached a yard that was filled with cherry trees heavy with ripe fruit. While one of his cohorts suggested they scale the fence and appropriate the fruit, Weiss had a cleverer plan in mind. He looked through a knothole and noticed the owner near by, waiting to pounce. Not wanting to be chased and caught, Weiss instead called out in a loud and virtuous voice that while his friends might do as they pleased, he was not going to steal a man’s cherries. This clever ploy earned him a large reward, when he later found the owner had admired his honesty, and delivered a large basket of the cherries to his home.³¹

Later after graduating from Harvard College, and subsequently the Divinity School, Weiss formed a club with other young clergy. He gave the group its name of Hook and Ladder Club, after spraying Samuel Johnson, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, and Octavius Brooks Frothingham with a hose. They later declared they were holy firefighters putting out devilish fires. Enjoying life and making people laugh remained vital to Weiss throughout his life, as evidenced by his essays on *Wit, Humor and Shakespeare* (1876), and his delivery of a lecture in New York on “The Cause of

³¹ “John Weiss” in *Heralds of a Liberal Faith*, vol. 3. Ed. by Samuel A. Eliot (Boston, 1910), pp. 379-380.

Laughter” in February 1873. The *New York Times* reported that this was a “highly interesting and humorous lecture” that frequently caused “side-splitting laughter” among the audience. Drawing upon the claims of evolution that humans had descended from lower animals, Weiss facetiously looked to nature to find “the laughing propensity among our ancestors.”³²

The relationship between religion and science was a concern for Weiss even before Darwin appeared. In an 1847 sermon, “Faith in God,” Weiss called God a “consummate chemist.” Reminding his listeners “Our creation is not yet complete,” Weiss said, “In the whole of nature, nowhere can you find a flaw. And the natural world but faintly represents the harmonies of the spiritual.”³³ He was very serious about the impact of Darwin’s theories of evolution upon his faith. Like other founders of the FRA, Weiss sought a wedding between science and religion. In describing his theology, Octavius Brooks Frothingham said it “treads the border-land between science and religion, recognizing the claims of both.” Called “poetic” and “imaginative,” Weiss’ central belief was in a “divine immanence.”

Ten years after Darwin, Weiss had an opportunity to address the graduating class at Harvard Divinity School in 1868. He chose to tell the students that religion had failed to respond to science except with old fashioned “Bible-worship” and the like. Weiss described science as showing “the divine method and purpose by means of all animate and inanimate things.” While the students were captivated by the new Unitarianism, the

³² “The Cause of Laughter,” *New York Times*, February 8, 1873, p. 8; Caruthers, Frothingham, p. 31.

³³ Octavius Brooks Frothingham, *Transcendentalism in New England* (Philadelphia, 1972) reprint of 1876 edition, pp. 351-352; John Weiss, “Faith in God,” in *The Monthly Religious Magazine*, ed. Frederic Dan Huntington, Vol. 4, 1847, no. 12, p. 564.

Society for Promoting Theological Education thought better of it. They set up a committee to examine the class of 1869 as to their personal views on Christianity, and two of them were denied their annual stipend. Eventually the matter was resolved in the students favor, but it showed that liberal institutions were still attempting to force the faithful to subscribe to Christianity.³⁴

In his most important work, *American Religion*, Weiss purports that “the idea of God is equivalent to the whole of Life, the whole of History, the whole of Science and Religion.” God is an “immeasurable Presence” who holds “the roots of every sweet or noxious thing,” and, echoing the influence of Darwin, he finds people are “like his other growths” who are visited daily by the “tides of his Moral Law.”³⁵ Reflecting the Transcendentalist influence, Weiss used German Idealism as a starting point, identifying the mind with the universe. But he also continued to wrestle with the new concepts of evolution, and affirmed an immanent spiritual truth that is grounded in an empirical knowledge of nature: “All the mental states which we call intuitions, should be called digestions from experience.”³⁶

Some of the Free Religionists such as David Wasson and Thomas Wentworth Higginson remained loyal to intuition as the basis for faith, while others including Frothingham and John W. Chadwick, came to prefer purely scientific methods. This caused rancor in the FRA ranks.³⁷ Weiss tended toward the intuitionist, with Octavius

³⁴ David Robinson, *The Unitarians and the Universalists* (Westport, Connecticut, 1985), p. 333; Stow Persons, *Free Religion* (New Haven, 1947), p. 79.

³⁵ John Weiss, *American Religion* (Boston, 1871), p. 89.

³⁶ John Weiss, “Religion and Science,” The Free Religious Association, *Freedom and Fellowship in Religion*, p. 149.

³⁷ William R. Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (Cambridge, 1976), pp. 198-199.

Brooks Frothingham describing him as holding the fortress against “the advancing ranks of the new materialism.” He described Weiss treading “the border-land between religion and science, recognizing the claims of both,” developing a kind of “theistic naturalism,” with God as an encompassing All.³⁸ He saw the spiritual world as one and the same as the natural world. When considering personal immortality, he stated, “there is no such thing as death, but an incessant shifting into and out of all forms.” Back to the dawn of creation, Weiss says he goes, hand in hand, with science. Religion is defined as “the recurrence of human nature to the facts of the universe.” Nature provides the religious texts, and is the only religious certitude.³⁹

John Weiss was an ardent individualist and a believer in freedom of religious expression. Before being settled in a parish, he studied at Heidelberg University in Germany. He was an outstanding German scholar, and some called him a marvelous conversationalist and genius, but he also had the “limitations that are apt to accompany genius.” He could be quite critical of others, using a bitter sarcasm in his attacks. In one address he noted, “time was that when the brain was out a man would die, but now they make a Unitarian minister of him.”⁴⁰ Weiss was minister twice in Watertown, Massachusetts. His first settlement (1843-1847) was interrupted by conflict, in which he resigned in 1845 over his unswerving abolitionist views, but then returned the next year. Thereafter he served the New Bedford congregation for eleven years, leaving for health reasons, and briefly supplying the Hollis Street Church in Boston and lecturing. Then he

³⁸ Frothingham, *Transcendentalism*, p. 352.

³⁹ Weiss, “Religion and Science,” pp. 145, 161, 171.

⁴⁰ Weiss, *Heralds*, vol. 3, p. 378.

returned to Watertown in 1862, remaining until 1869. The last ten years of his life were spent writing and lecturing, and he was a member of the Radical Club.

Weiss wrote, “the sacredness of the individual is the basis of American Religion.” Feeling that religious identity served individuals, Weiss feared strong, central institutions, “The soul is weakened by learning to lean upon a go-between.”⁴¹ He did not attend the National Conference meeting in New York in 1865, but he also did not want to give up his Unitarian identity. Despite his unwillingness to support a strong centralized denominational bureaucracy, he was a member of the AUA’s Board of Directors. Like many of his Unitarian predecessors, Weiss wanted to build up local churches, but individual faith development was emphasized more than the community. Henry Ware, Jr. had once said that the “great community of laymen” could be built up by that “grand secret,” “to make them individually Christians.”⁴²

Can an individual remain free in his/her search for religious truth, and also have a strong sense of roots in a community? This issue has plagued Unitarianism throughout its history. Many of the radicals remained committed to Unitarianism, but were concerned that it remain free and not become creedal, and that individual churches not become pawns of a strong central bureaucracy. Historian David Robinson reminds us that “Most of the radicals . . . were serving as Unitarian ministers or trying to negotiate a suitable alternative. The fate of the church, broadly speaking, and of their particular churches was thus of compelling interest to them, both philosophically and personally.”⁴³

⁴¹ Weiss, *American Religion*, pp. 59, 62-63.

⁴² Henry Ware, Jr. “The Best Means of Bringing our Lay Brethren to be More Useful in the Maintenance of Religious Institutions,” *Berry Street Essay*, 1835.
<http://www.uuma.org/Page/BSE1835>

⁴³ David M. Robinson, “The New Epoch of Belief”: *The Radical* and Religious

Like Weiss, most of the radical leaders sought a more democratic and universal expression of faith, but they did not quit the institutional church as some of the older Transcendentalists did. They were in fact institutionalists themselves, but at a local and personal level.

The founders of the FRA search for a “common ground on which all religion rests,” in a union that combined Christian and non-Christian, was realized in local congregations, which sometimes renamed themselves to appear broader than sectarian Unitarian. When Octavius Brooks Frothingham was serving at Third Unitarian (renamed Independent Liberal Church) in New York City, Henry Whitney Bellows snubbed him for leading a “church of the unchurched” and espousing a vague theology.

Frothingham’s theology was called “too broad for Unitarianism or any mere theological creed.”⁴⁴ This broad theology also became central to the New Bedford congregation when Weiss served there. Richard Kellaway reports that during Weiss’ ministry the church ceased to exist as an entity separate from the parish, so there was no longer any semblance of creed or even covenant that members had to subscribe to. This meant that the doors were open to anyone – atheists, Buddhists, Jews, etc – who wished to join.

This emphasis upon complete freedom provoked attacks for years to come. Weiss was an officer of the FRA in 1872 when the Unitarian paper, the *Christian Register* stated, “the Free Religionists stand before the world as an anti-Christian sect.” The AUA threatened

Transformation in Nineteenth Century New England,” *The New England Quarterly* (December 2006) LXXIV, No. 4, p. 561.

⁴⁴ Caruthers, *Frothingham*, pp. 181-184.

to withhold hospitality because anyone who united with them was “virtually renouncing Christianity.”⁴⁵

When Frothingham spoke before the FRA in 1876, he reminded the gathering that no one was really free unless they saw the opposition’s point of view, but Weiss responded that he could not forget the ever-present conflict between freedom and organized religion, and he remembered that religion could oppress. Weiss’ embrace of the sacredness of the individual and his/her freedom made it difficult for him to believe in structures that might bring individuals together. His distaste for limits or rules precluded the idea that fulfillment might actually be interpersonal, not wholly individual. He wrote, “America is an opportunity to make a Religion out of the sacredness of the individual.”⁴⁶ His American Religion was embodied in democracy, which affirmed a kind of total embrace of each person’s ability to know the truth.

Like many of the free religionists, Weiss owed a tremendous debt to Theodore Parker, who was an iconic hero to them. In 1864, Weiss published a two-volume biography of Parker, which preserves many primary materials not found elsewhere. Parker’s “Absolute Religion” allowed Weiss and others to reach beyond Christianity to a pure understanding of the divine, accessible and revealed to each soul. This religion of democracy was God’s plan for the world, and each person could feel an “organic fellow feeling” or connection to others, wherever moral or spiritual truth was found. This “one blood of the spirit” would help people embrace a common religious sensibility, but the

⁴⁵ Richard A. Kellaway, “The Free Religious Association,” unpublished paper for Collegium. http://www.uucollegium.org/Research%20papers/10paper_Kellaway01.pdf, pp. 10,15.

⁴⁶ Weiss, *American Religion*, p. 47; Caruthers, *Frothingham*, p. 119.

house for that sensibility necessarily remained undefined.⁴⁷ The radical willingness to move beyond Christianity demonstrates Weiss' leadership among religious liberals. He moved them towards the humanism of the twentieth century, and he was attacked for his radicalism. Unitarian Universalists of today owe much to these free religionists who helped make Unitarianism the multi-religious faith it became. After his active parish days had ended, Weiss met Minot Savage in Boston. He said, "Savage, you ought to be grateful to some of us fellows. We have been killed to make way for you."⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Weiss, *American Religion*, p. 58,59.

⁴⁸ "Weiss, *Heralds*, vol. 3, p. 378.