

NO COVENANT WITH SIN: UNITARIANS AND THE ABOLITION MOVEMENT IN
MASSACHUSETTS, 1820-1860

by

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of
The University of North Carolina at Charlotte
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts in
History

Charlotte

2020

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ABSTRACT

CHRISTOPHER ELLINGWOOD. A study of Unitarian theology prior to the American Civil War to assess its flexibility in accommodating both immediate abolitionists as well as those uninvolved in, or opposed to, the movement. (Under the direction of

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The abolitionists' radical commitment to principle over expediency prompted a split from conventional methods and institutions. Major abolitionist figures such as William Lloyd Garrison distanced themselves from established, centralized religions. The presence of abolitionists who did not keep positions considered orthodox by their religious peers demonstrates the importance of understanding religious dissent in the movement even though the split never completely eliminated earlier forms of moderate antislavery. The Unitarians offer a valuable opportunity to study the unorthodox foundations of immediate abolitionism. Those who adopted the revivalist theological imperative to not maintain communion with sinners increased tensions within major denominations such as Methodists and Baptists. The original constitution of the American Unitarian Association laid out the guiding principles that the founders hoped all Unitarians would aspire to. These same principles explain the uniquely Unitarian framework of abolitionism within the movement. Instead, the decentralization of Unitarian organization permitted different interpretations and practices of Unitarian values, which fostered adherents with different ideological positions on slavery to manifest these in characteristically Unitarian fashion.

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INTRODUCTION

Karl (anglicized Charles) Follen found a fresh start in the United States in 1824 with new friends and family in Boston after he had been exiled for his political activism in his native German states.¹ Four years after his arrival, he integrated within the Unitarians when he married abolitionist Eliza Lee of the prominent Bostonian Cabot family in 1828, and made friends with respected minister William Ellery Channing.² Follen found more than a home; he discovered new ideas and beliefs that appealed to his radical streak as a political reformer in Germany. The start of the new year of 1840 held the promise of a bright future for the Unitarian preacher. Having just finished a lecture tour in New York City, he boarded a steamship headed for his adopted home of Boston, Massachusetts. Years earlier his outspoken views as an opponent of slavery cost him his position as a professor at Harvard and as a minister at his first church. Now Boston beckoned him home once again with the promise of a new congregation, but he never made it. Storm clouds leering over Long Island upended those plans. The water from the storm, and the fire on board, took the steamship down along with Charles Follen. He died on that ship and this left his family with the unenviable task of preparing his funeral without even a body to bury. Furthermore, his reputation as an abolitionist hindered their efforts, as church after church refused to hold his funeral. Not even his friend William Ellery Channing could convince his congregation to open their church. Finally, the abolitionist minister Samuel J. May found a location at the Marlborough Chapel in Boston. Three months after his death, Unitarian abolitionists would cast Follen as a martyr, even as moderates rejected him as a radical. The

¹ Edmund Spevack, *Charles Follen's Search for Nationality and Freedom: Germany and America, 1796-1840* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 1.

² Spevack, *Charles Follen's Search*, 141.

issue of slavery challenged the harmony of the Unitarian churches, and the death and remembrance of Follen is emblematic of this struggle.

Early nineteenth century reformers prior to the American Civil War were deeply troubled by societal ills and no problem carried as much fearsome power as the immorality of slavery. Indeed, abolitionist reformers increasingly couched their denunciations of slavery in religious language, criticizing the depths of its moral perversity. These abolitionists who demanded an immediate end to slavery rose to prominence during the 1820s to 1860. The abolitionists of this period sought to create a social movement dedicated to the eradication of slavery and the natural starting point for many reformers was within their own church communities. The Unitarian churches offer a unique and valuable opportunity to study the language of abolition and religious reform. It will be more straightforward to analyze the relationship between religion and abolitionism in Boston, which served as a geographical center for both Unitarians and abolitionists. Additionally, the Unitarians lacked the significant congregational centralization of other groups which meant the abolitionists were able to generate enthusiasm for reform without being easily able to project that enthusiasm throughout the whole denomination. Abolitionist pursuits to encourage an uncompromising stance on slavery clashed with religious peers' reluctance to allow a single social issue to outstrip other moral matters. Although abolitionist tracts promoted a greater acceptance of immediate abolition within their religious denominations, the religious sermons of their churches in turn informed abolitionist commitments to ending slavery.

The 1820s and 1830s witnessed the rise in abolitionist support for immediate emancipation of slaves held in bondage in the southern United States. The Missouri Compromise

of 1820 which allowed for the formation of a new slave state to be added to the Union demonstrated that the institution of slavery was growing in power despite the efforts of antislavery activists. The next generation of self-styled ‘abolitionists’ increasingly perceived that the efforts of the antislavery movement had been too moderate and slow to bring about meaningful changes in American society and law. The abolitionists instead argued for radical devotion to the movement to emancipate slaves and for that emancipation to be carried out immediately without compensation for the slave owners.

Race and class divided the earliest of antislavery efforts into the groups of gradual reformers that emphasized the role that elite lawyers and politicians had in a movement marked by deference and Enlightenment sensibilities and the black activists that posited a more sweeping approach to antislavery that aimed for more immediate relief to the issue. Black activists formed their own communities and organizations dedicated to publishing “antislavery tracts and essays in newspapers” and appealing to the government directly to end slavery.³ The Religious Society of Friends, or Quakers, had provided most of the support for the reformers in the Pennsylvania Abolition Society that focused on a gradual, legislative end to slavery prior to the 1820s.⁴ This movement of gradual antislavery efforts sought to bring about legislative change through “respectfully worded, carefully written” petitions in order to “persuade subtly, not dogmatically.”⁵ The Pennsylvania Abolition Society used nonradical means to advance their otherwise radical protest. The antislavery mindset of traditional, gradual reform also extended to

³ Christopher Cameron, *To Plead Our Own Cause: African Americans in Massachusetts and the Making of the Antislavery Movement* (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 2014), 114.

⁴ Richard S. Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 4.

⁵ Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism*, 39.

their membership. Of the two major antislavery societies, neither the Pennsylvania Abolition Society nor the New York Manumission Society, accepted black members.⁶

Elitism of antislavery groups that only advocated for gradual emancipation prompted a new era of popular literature by black abolitionists who instead supported an immediate end to slavery.⁷ These new methods of the 1820s and 1830s valued public attention over government appeals as well as the power of non-elites to bring about change.⁸ Religious rhetoric developed at roughly the same time to emphasize the ability for each individual to pursue a perfectionist morality to achieve salvation.⁹ As a result slavery became understood as an unconscionable affront against the slave's ability to achieve salvation. Impediments to salvation and sin became the main points of contrast between the older, gradual attempts at emancipation and the new, immediate attempts at abolition.¹⁰ The Second Great Awakening instigated this religious revival in the early 1800s and its religious intensity lent itself to the more radical abolitionism. The theological trends that emerged out of the Second Great Awakening altered the language of abolitionism to consider slave holding "always, everywhere, and only a sin" that could never be compromised with.¹¹ These factors transformed the movement from one primarily focused on legal and political reform to one of social and moral reform.

⁶Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism*, 88.

⁷Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism*, 2.

⁸ Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism*, 89.

⁹ John R. McKivigan, *The War against Proslavery Religion: Abolitionism and the Northern Churches, 1830-1865* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1984), 20.

¹⁰ McKivigan, *The War against Proslavery Religion*, 20.

¹¹ McKivigan, *The War against Proslavery Religion*, 20.

The abolitionists' radical commitment to principle over expediency prompted a split from conventional methods and institutions.¹² Major abolitionist figures such as William Lloyd Garrison distanced themselves from established, centralized religions. The presence of abolitionists who did not keep positions considered orthodox by their religious peers demonstrates the importance of understanding religious dissent in the movement even though the split never completely eliminated earlier forms of moderate antislavery. The Unitarians offer a valuable opportunity to study the unorthodox foundations of immediate abolitionism. Those who adopted the revivalist theological imperative to not maintain communion with sinners increased tensions within major denominations such as Methodists and Baptists. By the 1840s, radical abolitionists seceded from religious groups which permitted slaveholders among their laity or even from groups that did not take a similarly radical stance against slavery.¹³ Some of the splinter sects that protested their parent denominations were the American Free Baptist Mission Society, the Wesleyan Methodist Connection, the Indiana Yearly Meeting of Anti-Slavery Friends, while churches such as the African Methodist Episcopal and African Methodist Episcopal Zion split from the Methodist church to distance themselves from racist as well as proslavery prejudices.¹⁴ The Unitarians witnessed less obvious divisions due to their "loose congregational polity."¹⁵ The religious concepts of these groups informed their commitment to emancipation.

¹² Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism*, 4.

¹³ McKivigan, *The War against Proslavery Religion*, 93.

¹⁴ McKivigan, *The War against Proslavery Religion*, 93.

¹⁵ Douglas C. Stange, *Patterns of Antislavery among American Unitarians, 1831-1860* (Cranbury, New Jersey: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1977), 10.

Abolitionists in the 1830s began to increasingly regard the institution of slavery as sinful and not merely unjust. This common characterization of slavery demonstrated that religious convictions were a significant factor in motivating the activists of the new immediate abolitionists.¹⁶ Dissenting members of established churches fought with more traditional members which frequently led to both sides accusing the other of religious infidelity or a lack of moral courage. The topic of slavery became an ideological battleground, as did the role of religious individuals and communities in addressing the subject. Many established churches refused to make abolitionism their main goal or to expel slave holding members from their ranks. Denominations such as the Methodists and Baptists were so split along ideological lines that they also split along sectional ones, decades before states would do the same politically.¹⁷

Not all religious abolitionists emulated the beliefs and practices of the Second Great Revival. The Unitarians, concentrated in Boston, favored rational persuasion over what they understood to be an excess of revivalist emotionalism.¹⁸ Nevertheless some of the most famous radical abolitionists were Unitarians, including Samuel J. May and Lydia Maria Child, and they sought to expand support for their cause throughout the Unitarian churches.¹⁹ The Unitarians prized individualism and their churches were not strictly centralized.²⁰ Their regionalized structure meant that the abolitionists saw only modest growth in spreading their ideology even as late as 1845-1860.²¹ While Unitarianism failed to be the leading denomination in the cause for immediate abolitionism, several of its members eventually succeeded in turning it into a positive

¹⁶ Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism*, 4.

¹⁷ Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 256.

¹⁸ McKivigan, *The War against Proslavery Religion*, 172.

¹⁹ McKivigan, *The War against Proslavery Religion*, 172.

²⁰ McKivigan, *The War against Proslavery Religion*, 172.

²¹ McKivigan, *The War against Proslavery Religion*, 172.

force for the movement.²² That same regionalized structure that prevented wide expansion of abolitionism across all the Unitarians also ensured that the churches that did profess stern opposition to slavery could do so with opposition from American Unitarian Association.

Scholarship on the abolition movement examines topics such as moderate antislavery, radical abolitionism, the transformation between these two eras, the role of African American abolitionists, women abolitionists, and religious, political, sociocultural, and economic causes. While numerous studies of the relationship between religion and abolitionism like John R. McKivigan's *The War against Proslavery Religion: Abolitionism and the Northern Churches, 1830-1865* exist, there is not a thorough enough examination of how the religious concepts of the specific denomination of Unitarians informed their dedication to radical abolition. This is significant because Unitarians played a larger role in the abolitionist movement than either their numbers or the general reluctance of most Unitarians to focus on a single social issue might suggest.²³

Perhaps Douglas C. Stange came closest to amending this imbalance in his book *Patterns of Antislavery among American Unitarians*. One of Stange's arguments is that the patterns of moderate thought in Unitarianism did not adequately address the radical impulses that animated abolitionists at the time. However other historians criticize Stange's work for inadequately developing several of his hypotheses. George M. Fredrickson of Northwestern University writes that "this thesis is not pursued very deeply into the thought and consciousness of the principals" and that the book "offers only a few glimpses into the intellectual, social, or psychological

²² Stange, *Patterns of Antislavery*, 228.

²³ McKivigan, *The War Against Proslavery Religion*, 173.

sources of the range of attitudes and convictions surveyed.”²⁴ Other reviewers shared similar criticisms. James Brewer Stewart of Macalester College complains that Stange failed to consider scholarship after the 1970s and that he is unsuccessful in exploring “the growth of any abolitionist consensus peculiar to Unitarians.”²⁵ Stange establishes the history of the abolition movement from 1820 to 1865, argues comparatively between moderate and radical elements of the Unitarians, and concludes that the disparate elements of Unitarian abolitionist thought eventually worked towards the mutual goal of ending slavery, but only after decades of abolitionists had fought to develop support for abolitionism within the denomination.²⁶ The aforementioned reviewers support the understanding that Stange’s multiple goals limited his ability to address his main points with sufficient depth. I argue against Stange’s decision to classify the different patterns on antislavery thought as largely distinctive within the Unitarians. Instead, the decentralization of Unitarian organization permitted different interpretations and practices of Unitarian values, which fostered adherents with different ideological positions on slavery to manifest these in characteristically Unitarian fashion. This demonstrates the need for further examination on the role of Unitarian thought in abolitionism and vice-versa.

Furthermore, Stange argued that the three patterns of positions on slavery; religious, philosophical, and political, characterized Unitarian ideology from 1820-1865 with his investigation into Unitarians and their trends of emancipationist thinking and practices. But Stange’s justifications for the different positions within the Unitarians is not so clear. For

²⁴ George M. Fredrickson, review of *Patterns of Antislavery among American Unitarians*, by Douglas C. Stange, *Civil War History*, June 1980.

²⁵ James Brewer Stewart, review of *Patterns of Antislavery among American Unitarians*, by Douglas C. Stange, *The Journal of American History*, December 1978.

²⁶ Stange, *Patterns of Antislavery*, 10.

instance, recent scholarship challenged Stange's decision to present William Ellery Channing as a figurehead for moderate antislavery efforts within Unitarianism.²⁷ Christopher Cameron argued in his article "William Ellery Channing and Abolitionist Historiography" that Channing's lack of commitment to abolitionism is not so clear. He wrote that "While Channing was skeptical that denouncing slaveholders and immediately liberating the slaves without any preparation for freedom may not be the wisest course of action, he was nevertheless an important proponent of abolitionism."²⁸ Again, more work is required to establish a clearer understanding of abolitionism with the Unitarian ranks, and of the ideological relationship between its members.

Other academic works expand upon the relationship between Unitarians and abolitionism. Another of Stange's books, *British Unitarians against American Slavery, 1833-65*, provides an analysis of the transatlantic connection between British and American Unitarian reform.²⁹ Dean Grodzins and Donald Yacovone write monographs entirely dedicated to a single Unitarian minister each. Grodzins writes *American Heretic: Theodore Parker and Transcendentalism* to examine Theodore Parker's life, theological writings, and interactions with conservative ministers with exacting detail.³⁰ Yacovone studies the intellectual writings of the minister and renowned abolitionist Samuel Joseph May in *Samuel Joseph May and the Dilemmas of the Liberal Persuasion*.³¹ My research presents a greater geographical focus than

²⁷ Stange, *Patterns of Antislavery*, 31.

²⁸ Christopher Cameron, "William Ellery Channing and Abolitionist Historiography," *U.S. Intellectual History Blog*, February 23, 2014, <https://s-usih.org/2014/02/william-ellery-channing-and-abolitionist-historiography/>.

²⁹ Stange, *Patterns of Antislavery*, 9.

³⁰ Dean Grodzins, *American Heretic: Theodore Parker and Transcendentalism* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), ix.

³¹ Donald Yacovone, *Samuel Joseph May and the Dilemmas of the Liberal Persuasion, 1797-1871* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 3.

Stange while simultaneously providing a broader coverage of Unitarian writings on abolitionism by focusing on the Boston area and by investigating multiple abolitionists.

In addition to these historians, several others more generally expanded the study of abolitionism and religion. Arthur Zilversmit provided one of the earlier entries into the historiography of abolitionism with *The First Emancipation: The Abolition of Slavery in the North*. Zilversmit's book is an important contribution to the study of abolition because it surveyed the efforts of the reformers who attempted to end slavery prior to the later era of abolitionists who advocated for immediate abolition of slavery. Several historians within the past few decades have amended Zilversmit's most glaring oversight of not considering African American efforts at emancipation. Richard S. Newman argued in his book *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic* that black pamphleteers, reformers, and petitioners heralded the transition between gradual efforts at emancipation and radical efforts to end slavery immediately.³² Later scholarship of Manisha Sinha, Christopher Cameron, and David Brion Davis demonstrated the persistence of African American resistance slavery throughout the life of the institution. Manisha Sinha's emphasized in *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* the role that slaves and free blacks had in advancing the cause of their own liberation. Sinha's book is an expansive examination of the entire drive to end slavery in the region occupied by the modern United States from its origins of initial Spanish dissent from the practice, through gradual antislavery efforts, and finally to radical abolitionists.³³ She also attempted to challenge the view that abolitionists were merely bourgeois activists by highlighting the movement's radical nature and the roles that women and African Americans played in it.

³² Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism*, 106-107.

³³ Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 2, 9.

Christopher Cameron argued in *To Plead Our Own Cause: African Americans in Massachusetts and the Making of the Antislavery Movement* that African Americans blended “religious and political rhetoric in the cause of abolitionism” to organize community building and abolition societies in Massachusetts and other areas prior to the peak of radical abolitionism in the 1830s.³⁴ Davis concluded a trilogy on abolitionism with *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation* by analyzing the problems and opportunities of abolitionism particularly focusing on the role of black abolitionism. These works contributed a greater presence of perspectives and sources for abolitionism, but there is still room for further study on the role that a more specific denomination, in my case Unitarianism, played in the abolitionist movement.

This thesis explores several themes related to the growth and conversion of the abolitionist movement and the distance abolitionists placed between themselves and religious and social elites. Many scholarly discussions of radical abolition begin with William Lloyd Garrison’s famous injunction within the first issue of *The Liberator*, “AND I WILL BE HEARD,” but space exists to examine the deeper relationship between radicals such as Garrison and the religious groups to which they belonged.³⁵ Why did radical, immediate abolitionism take hold in some splinter sects but not in a decentralized denomination such as the Unitarians? Why did the abolitionists continue to work within the Unitarians and not simply separate like other groups? The unity of these denominations was contingent upon the organization of the group in question and the amount of leadership positions within these churches that were held by those sympathetic to the cause of emancipation. The following chapters will expand these explanations

³⁴ Cameron, *To Plead Our Own Cause*, 1, 4.

³⁵ William Lloyd Garrison, “To the Public,” *Liberator* (Boston, MA), Jan. 1, 1831.

by analyzing the efforts of the abolitionist reformers and the apathy or even counterattacks by the moderate elements of the Unitarians.

I argue that Unitarian theology was flexible enough to accommodate both immediate abolitionists as well as those uninvolved in, or opposed to, the movement. Religious revivalism in the early nineteenth century created a new group of radicals driven by a visceral reaction against sin in general and slavery in particular. These dissenters and reformers worked tirelessly to convince other practitioners of the moral evil of slavery. Amongst the Unitarians, these trends animated reformers towards social activism without abandoning their denomination's commitment to rationality. Those who did put Unitarianism behind them still converted those trends into action such as when Theodore Parker demonstrated his commitment to the existence of a practical component of religion by loudly denouncing the apprehension of escaped slaves in Boston, and "would later lead Boston resistance to the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850."³⁶ Unitarian abolitionist efforts were so potent that people like William Lloyd Garrison and his like-minded peers were able to work alongside even the more prudent and sober minded members such as Samuel J. May to pursue an end to slavery. May for his part, confirmed his belief in the Unitarian principle of lived virtue during incidents such as when he took twenty of his students from the Lexington Normal School to the Latimer Rally in 1842 to oppose the rendition of fugitive slave George Latimer. From these philosophies I demonstrate how abolitionist Unitarians carved out an ideological niche within the Unitarians without abandoning them wholesale by carefully examining the morally charged language employed by their proponents.

³⁶ Grodzins, *American Heretic*, 338.

CHAPTER 1: TO COOPERATE WITH THIS ASSOCIATION: UNITARIAN DOCTRINE IN THE CREATION OF CONFLICTING IDEAS ABOUT EMANCIPATION

An older history of antislavery existed which predated the abolitionist culture that had adopted Follen. Early American moderate opposition to slavery is most closely associated with the Religious Society of Friends, more commonly known as Quakers. However, the 1830s saw the rise of newer, less established, and even breakaway religious dissenters that led Christian abolitionism in the northern states. Later efforts, known more commonly as abolitionist, emphasized an immediate end to slavery without compensation and many proponents advocated for equal treatment and not merely for freeing slaves. Historian Manisha Sinha credited this development in part due to the rise in religious egalitarianism that resulted in an “antiracist construction of Christianity.”³⁷ As a result, religious characterizations of abolitionism spawned activists throughout various religious groups. Christian denominations in the United States experienced this as a time of fragmentation as internal tensions between advocates for gradual emancipation, advocates for immediate emancipation and practitioners who wished to avoid politics altogether, contended to present a unified answer to the question of slavery. The Boston-based Unitarians also suffered from internal division as to which response they should take towards slavery, or even if they should have a response. The Transcendentalist movement grew out of a dissatisfaction with Unitarianism theologically even as abolitionists became dissatisfied with Unitarianism’s lack of a firm position against slavery. Religious groups across the northern states increasingly struggled to formulate a unified response to the question of slavery, but there were groups such as the Unitarians whose religious decentralization empowered their abolitionist

³⁷ Sinha, *The Slave’s Cause*, 28.

members to advocate for an immediate end to slavery with little worry that they might be cast out of an organizational hierarchy.

The Unitarians had only recently established the Boston-based American Unitarian Association in 1825 when the slavery issue began to increase in intensity.³⁸ Historian Conrad Wright observed that Unitarianism grew out of the liberal movement of the eighteenth century in support of a rational approach to the Bible and Christianity.³⁹ Prominent Unitarians like Samuel Gilman appreciated Unitarianism for its moderating rationality and for avoiding the extremism that seemed to pervade other religious groups enrolled in the revivals of the Second Great Awakening. At worst abolitionists within the Unitarian ranks might expect to be ostracized. Yet those same religious convictions that favored moderation resulted in limited unified efforts to divide the nascent association. Their tolerance allowed for abolitionism but did not endorse it. Crises did arise, such as when friends of abolitionist and Unitarian reverend Charles Follen struggled to find a church that would hold his funeral service, but soon slavery became too politically significant for even moderates to ignore. Abolitionist activists within the Unitarians grew more extreme in their commitment as the Civil War approached, which fostered further division over the topic.

It should come as no surprise that “unity” and “Unitarian” share the same root. ‘Unitarian’ originated as a derogatory term for their belief that God was a single person separate from the person of Jesus.⁴⁰ They opposed the trinitarian belief common in many other Christian groups that the Godhead contained God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

³⁸ “Original Constitution of the American Unitarian Association, Accepted May 26.” (1825) *American Unitarian Association Letterbooks*, bMS 571/1, Andover-Harvard Library, Harvard Divinity School.

³⁹ Conrad Wright, *The Beginnings of Unitarianism in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 3.

⁴⁰ David Robinson, ed., *William Ellery Channing: Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 70.

Theologians like Channing disbelieved that this was a trivial distinction. Indeed, he used his *Unitarian Christianity* sermon to adopt the term ‘Unitarian’ six years before their association had even formed. He upheld a belief in “the unity of Jesus Christ” on the grounds that an exclusive Godhead made more sense than an inclusive one of three persons.⁴¹ Not only was this an expression of Channing’s stress on moderated rationality, but it also separated the Unitarians from most of the other trinitarian groups in the area. This distinction created common ground among practitioners.

While scholarship on the period typically divides the period of reform between moderate antislavery and radical abolitionists, these designations are not wholly appropriate for the Unitarians.⁴² Their forms of participation in these categories fit at a vague level of analysis but they inaccurately account for the motivations and doctrinal underpinnings of Unitarian thought. Historians such as Douglass C. Stange argued in *Patterns of Antislavery among American Unitarians* that three patterns of religious, philosophical, and political positions on slavery characterized Unitarian ideology based on his investigation into their trends of emancipationist thinking and practices.⁴³ Instead, Unitarian commitment to emancipation grew out of their internal doctrinal debates between the time of the founding of the American Unitarian Association and the Civil War.

⁴¹ Channing, “Unitarian Christianity,” 82.

⁴² Perhaps Douglas C. Stange came closest to amending this imbalance in his book *Patterns of Antislavery among American Unitarians*. One of his arguments was that the patterns of moderate thought in Unitarianism did not adequately address the radical impulses that animated abolitionists at the time. However he was not entirely successful in explaining the development of any kind of compromise or agreement among the various groups of Unitarianism. His history of the abolition movement from 1820 to 1865 argued comparatively between moderate and radical elements of the Unitarians. He concluded that the disparate elements of Unitarian abolitionist thought would eventually work towards the mutual goal of ending slavery, but only after decades of abolitionists had fought to develop support for abolitionism within the denomination.

⁴³ Stange, *Patterns of Antislavery*, 75.

This chapter is written in part to define doctrinal divisions between rationality and lived virtue, about forming a common creed, and the idealistic Transcendentalist movement. This will in turn help explain how the Unitarians developed their unique responses to abolitionism. The contentions over Unitarian doctrine matter because they precede arguments over how a Unitarian ought to relate to the issue of slavery. Figures like William Ellery Channing highlight the unclear lines of division because his own desire to end slavery gradually deepened over the course of his life but he simply did not follow the route of other opponents to slavery who joined associations of any kind to advocate their views, profess Unitarianism, or used strong language to condemn slaveholders.⁴⁴ Channing's reservations on this issue can be understood not just as one who lacked the commitment to be an American radical, but as someone committed instead to the Unitarian values of rationality, lived virtue, and unity.

These values were an integral part of Unitarian belief and practice from the beginning. The original 1825 constitution of the American Unitarian Association stated that, "The objects of this association shall be to diffuse the knowledge and promote the interests of pure Christianity throughout our country."⁴⁵ This statement established the founding principles of the Unitarians primarily based upon the theological works of Channing, particularly his 1819 Baltimore sermon.⁴⁶ Although Channing served as the intellectual basis for much of the AUA's ideas, Channing himself never helped create or foster it as he worried more that the creation of such a group would leave one "covered with badges of party, shutting his eyes on the

⁴⁴ Stange, *Patterns of Antislavery*, 75.

⁴⁵ "Original Constitution of the American Unitarian Association, Accepted May 26." (1825) *American Unitarian Association Letterbooks*, bMS 571/1, Andover-Harvard Library, Harvard Divinity School.

⁴⁶ William Ellery Channing, 1780-1842. Papers, 1803-1980. "Unitarian Christianity," original draft, 1819. bMS 100, bMS 100/1 (11), Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School.

virtues.”⁴⁷ Reverend N. L. Frothingham later reiterated these values when he attempted to cement Unitarian beliefs into an established creed. He stated that “belief of the truth,” which involved the reasoned search for understanding religious principles, and “sanctification of the spirit,” being the pursuit of moral excellence, comprised Christian religion.⁴⁸ He further characterized the basic parts of these beliefs as being “moral dispositions and intellectual conclusions.”⁴⁹ Frothingham demonstrated the highest regard for moderated rationality and lived virtue twenty years after the formation of the association when he sought to entrench their unity with a shared creed. The question of what to do about slavery challenged efforts at reconciliation among Unitarians who held these shared values and unity but had different views on emancipation.

The first part of the American Unitarian Association’s constitution emphasized its commitment to knowledge, specifically the reasonability of a system of Christianity free from extremes that it believed compromised other denominations. Reverend Samuel Gilman wrote in *Unitarian Christianity Free from Objectionable Extremes* that Unitarianism avoided “doctrinal extravagance, [and] every practical excess . . .”⁵⁰ They favored rational self-control in their doctrines and in their worldview. Gilman insisted that the “sentiments and practices” of their beliefs were at their best when they preserved “an eligible medium.”⁵¹ They judged activists prone to impassioned pleas in comparison to the ideal of calm, moderated rationality. Channing and his peers could not easily divest themselves of this stoic quality.

⁴⁷ Channing, 1780-1842. “Unitarian Christianity,” original draft.

⁴⁸ N. L. Frothingham, *Deism or Christianity?: Four Discourses* (Boston: Wm. Crosby and H. P. Nichols, 1845), 23.

⁴⁹ Frothingham, *Deism or Christianity?*, 24.

⁵⁰ Samuel Gilman, “Unitarian Christianity Free from Objectionable Extremes.” *Tracts of the American Unitarian Association* 1st Ser., No. 29. (Boston: Gray and Bowen, 1829), 7.

⁵¹ Gilman, “Unitarian Christianity,” 14.

Periodic critiques challenged Unitarians to defend their basic principles. For example, an anonymously authored tract attempted to unite disparate religious factions in Boston disparaged Unitarians on the point of their devotion to rationality.⁵² This writer mocked them by saying the tone of their “teachings [are] academic,” delivered without zeal.⁵³ Yet Channing anticipated this critique years before it was made and before the American Unitarian Association even coalesced. He admitted that the “unwarranted use of reason in the interpretation of scripture” was a common charge leveled at Unitarians.⁵⁴ However he insisted that no book demanded a “more frequent exercise of reason than the Bible” due to the inherent difficulties in understanding its style and language.⁵⁵ To Channing, dealing with a book as important as the Bible meant that employing reason was the most justifiable possible approach. He believed that any truly wise God would necessarily instruct followers in comprehensible truths.⁵⁶ Therefore practitioners generally and Unitarians specifically needed to engage their reason to receive these truths.

Perhaps one of William Ellery Channing’s greatest outlets for zeal *was* his pursuit of rationality. As Ezra Stiles Gannett, his friend and fellow minister, recalled upon Channing’s death, “liberty, progress, virtue – to these and kindred ideas did he devote his energies of thought” such that he never felt comfortable with committing to joining or leading many of the “philanthropic associations of the day.”⁵⁷ While his devotion to rationality did not manifest in

⁵² *A Letter to the So-Called ‘Boston Churches,’ Which are in Truth only Parts of One Church* (Boston: Wm. Crosby and H. P. Nichols, 1846), 18.

⁵³ *A Letter to the So-Called ‘Boston Churches,’* 13.

⁵⁴ William Ellery Channing, “Unitarian Christianity,” in *William Ellery Channing: Selected Writings*, ed. David Robinson (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 72.

⁵⁵ Channing, “Unitarian Christianity,” 73.

⁵⁶ Channing, “Unitarian Christianity,” 77.

⁵⁷ Ezra S. Gannett, “Address and Discourse after the Death of Rev. W. E. Channing, D. D.” (1842) *Ezra Stiles Gannett: Papers, 1824-1924*, bMS 480/1, Andover-Harvard Library, Harvard Divinity School, 19.

following any abolitionist group, it would result in stronger rebukes of slavery closer to the end of his life.

The constitutional statement also alluded to a secondary goal: lived virtue. The document's second point established both knowledge and "pure Christianity" as coequal values by placing them in the same sentence.⁵⁸ Samuel J. May argued in his tract, "Redemption by Jesus Christ," that redemption only came insofar as Jesus "incites, persuades, and leads men . . . does he *save* them."⁵⁹ In May's estimation the central appeal of Jesus came through the example of lived virtue that he modeled for others. In a similar manner Frothingham framed the life of Jesus as a "faultless pattern for his followers to walk by."⁶⁰ Again, the focus was not on the virtue of Jesus as it pertained to his own life, but rather on the transmission of that virtue to others to improve their lives. Lived morality was a results-based virtue; its value lay in its efficacy to promote lived morality in witnesses.

May and plenty of his fellow Unitarians believed that the influence of lived virtue could and would prompt people to adopt that goodness.⁶¹ He brought up the Biblical city of Sodom to demonstrate his point that they were "assured in Holy Writ" that the presence of even a few people who lived lives of virtue "might have reclaimed even that profligate people."⁶² Here he established two principles. The first was that a life of virtue was not an exclusively private affair, but one to be shared with others. The second was that there was a class of people whose wickedness needed to be amended. Historian Donald Yacovone outlined May's belief that

⁵⁸ "Original Constitution," *American Unitarian Association Letterbooks*.

⁵⁹ Samuel J. May, "On Redemption by Jesus Christ." *Tracts of the American Unitarian Association* 1st Ser., No. 234. (Boston: Crosby and Nichols, 1847), 7.

⁶⁰ Frothingham, *Deism or Christianity?*, 55.

⁶¹ May, "On Redemption by Jesus Christ.", 8.

⁶² May, "On Redemption by Jesus Christ.", 9-10.

Christian principles needed to challenge opponents of the “Christian cause of abolitionism.”⁶³

Taken in this light it is easier to see how Unitarian abolitionists, among whom May might be considered a major figure, could express lived virtue as abolitionist activism carried out against the sinfulness of slavery.⁶⁴

The same anonymous tract writer also took umbrage at this second principle of Unitarianism. This critic argued that “Christ was not an example, but a force” for speaking to the world “in his humanity.”⁶⁵ Again Channing preemptively responded to this challenge. To him, the example and the force were inseparable. He asserted that the force, or purpose, of Christianity was meant to “effect a moral, or spiritual deliverance of mankind.”⁶⁶ But deliverance could only be principally achieved through the pursuit of purity and that required an example to follow. This is what made exemplified virtue so central to the Unitarians. He believed in these elements not solely as abstract truth, but for their ability to “bring forth fruit.”⁶⁷ Means and ends were intertwined as the promotion of lived virtue brought about virtuous living and virtuous lives.

Unitarianism could then turn into a battleground divided by the tension between the deeply established values of rationality and lived virtue. The Unitarians themselves experienced this tension as a pull between a kind of reserved stoicism and an energetic activism. The third value in the next line of the constitution of the American Unitarian Association would help alleviate this strain. The third resolution in its constitution stated that “Unitarian Christians

⁶³ Yacovone, *Samuel Joseph May*, 96.

⁶⁴ Stange, *Patterns of Antislavery*, 45.

⁶⁵ *A Letter to the So-Called 'Boston Churches,'* 7.

⁶⁶ Channing, “Unitarian Christianity,” 90.

⁶⁷ Channing, “Unitarian Christianity,” 99.

throughout the United States shall be invited to unite and cooperate with this association.”⁶⁸ This last statement is best understood as a statement of intention, rather than one of fact, as many Unitarians such as Channing himself never joined the AUA.

The decades preceding the Civil War challenged the unity of more than just the Unitarians. The 1820s and 1830s witnessed the rise in abolitionist support for immediate emancipation of slaves held in bondage in the southern United States. As Christopher Cameron notes, the expansion of religion proved “vital to the growth of antislavery sentiment in the North.”⁶⁹ This was due to the theological trends that emerged out of the Second Great Awakening that altered the language of abolitionism to consider slave holding “always, everywhere, and only a sin,” a principle that could never be compromised.⁷⁰ Former Unitarian minister and radical abolitionist Theodore Parker condemned the institution of slavery as “moral degradation which is contagious not less than the plague.”⁷¹ Such harsh language left little room for moderates, who increasingly divided themselves into the radical anti and pro-slavery groups. Polarization on the question of slavery also challenged and eroded the cohesion of Unitarians.

Slavery brought with it a level of divisiveness that fractured Christian denominations such as the Baptists and the Methodists. In contrast to the Unitarians, the Baptists were much more wide spread in the United States before they formed a General Convention in the early 1800s.⁷² The Baptists were also more decentralized in organization.⁷³ The Unitarians were concentrated more securely in Boston, though this was largely due to the fact that their smaller

⁶⁸ “Original Constitution,” *American Unitarian Association Letterbooks*.

⁶⁹ Cameron, *To Plead our Own Cause*, 94.

⁷⁰ McKivigan, *The War against Proslavery Religion*, 20.

⁷¹ Theodore Parker, *The Effect of Slavery on the American People* (Boston: William L. Kent and Company, 1858), 9.

⁷² William Wright Barnes, *The Southern Baptist Convention: 1845-1953* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1954), 8.

⁷³ Barnes, *The Southern Baptist Convention*, 9.

numbers required fewer centers of power in the first place. Yet the 1830s brought the question of slavery again to the forefront of critical issues and began to split the Baptists along the lines of northern and southern states. Baptist minister R. Fuller decried the fervor of the new abolitionists who “virtually excommunicate all, without discrimination.”⁷⁴ This was not a surprising stance since abolitionists classified slaveholding as a grave and personal sin that required the wicked individual to either repent and free their slaves or to abandon the church. Abolitionists broadened the scope of what sinful slaveholding meant. They forced southerners with more moderate pro-slavery views to radicalize in response to this new classification of that purchasing, selling, and owning slaves was entirely and morally corrupt. Fuller cut to the heart of the elimination of these distinctions in what he viewed as the conflation of “the cruelty of some masters . . .” into the “crime of everyone.”⁷⁵ The southern Baptists adopted an almost universal desire to secede from the fledgling Baptist union, resulting in the formation of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1845.⁷⁶ This religious disunion clearly foreshadowed the sectional, political disunion of the Civil War.

The Methodist Episcopal Church too faced division as the rhetoric against slavery intensified. The denomination had no lack of critics of slavery at that time. Methodist Elias Bowen contended that slavery had to be understood as a dichotomy wherein if slavery was “a kindness to the slave. . . there should be a great deal of it in the church: if wrong, none at all.”⁷⁷ Yet if Methodists could not form a consensus on the issue of slavery, did that necessarily entail that they could not have peace among themselves? Bowen argued no because the Methodist

⁷⁴ R. Fuller, “To the Rev. Elon Galusha,” *Baptist Anti-Slavery Correspondent* 1, no. 1 (February 1841): 3.

⁷⁵ Fuller, “To the Rev. Elon Galusha,” 3.

⁷⁶ Barnes, *The Southern Baptist Convention*, 28-29.

⁷⁷ Elias Bowen, *Slavery in the Methodist Episcopal Church* (Auburn: William J. Moses, 1859), 142.

church was a slavery church by the very nature of its toleration for the “legal relation” of it.⁷⁸ Compromise was not an option; it could not be considered on principle. Another critic, O. Scott, hearkened back to founder John Wesley by elevating Wesley’s words as command: “this *equally* concerns all *slaveholders*, seeing men-buyers are exactly on a level with *menstealers*.”⁷⁹ Scott concluded that it was his duty to secede from pro-slavery churches.⁸⁰ This demonstrates that the language of condemnations on both sides of the issue contributed to an impasse within their own denomination. This ultimately concluded in the split between Methodist Episcopal churches along the lines of the northern and southern states.⁸¹

These divisions were not limited to the Methodists and Baptists of that era. The antebellum period was a time of unrest and uncertainty not only for the United States, but for the Unitarians as well. Unitarians debated what defined a member of their organization. The American Unitarian Association was still in its infancy, ministers like Frothingham tried to secure a fixed creed, while other ministers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Theodore Parker diverged from already malleable norms to form the Transcendentalist movement. Historian John d’Entremont contended that “Unitarianism was approaching an internal crisis, brought about by those who took the principles of . . . rational investigation to their logical extremes.”⁸² Yet differing views of the role of the AUA in addressing slavery could and did exist simultaneously in the more ideologically flexible era that ran from the 1830s to the first shots of the Civil War.

⁷⁸ Bowen, *Slavery in the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 141.

⁷⁹ O. Scott, *The Methodist E. Church and Slavery* (Boston: Published by O. Scott, 1844), 74.

⁸⁰ Scott, *The Methodist E. Church and Slavery*, 74.

⁸¹ John Nelson Norwood, *The Schism in the Methodist Episcopal Church 1844: A Study of Slavery and Ecclesiastical Politics* (Philadelphia: Porcupine Press, 1976), 58.

⁸² John d’Entremont. *Southern Emancipator: Moncure Conway* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 74.

Although the founding constitution of the AUA did not receive the support of every Unitarian, it limited itself to only nine provisions. This limitation helped balance the Unitarian's desires for a semi-unified body based on shared principles without abandoning their reluctance to constrain their views on liberal Christianity.⁸³ Most of the early official correspondence between ministers reflects their humble origins in that a reoccurring problem persisted in funding congregations centered in Boston but spread nationally. Distant South Carolina formed a Unitarian book society for the "mutual advice and cooperation" with the AUA.⁸⁴ The most common form of "advice" requested were Unitarian tracts printed in or near Boston that the book society wished to disseminate to its members.⁸⁵ Minister William Pierce wrote to his superiors about his struggle to afford an organ for his church twenty years after the formation of the AUA.⁸⁶ These examples demonstrate the practical vulnerabilities of a fledgling group, while some ministers attempted to remedy what they believed to be doctrinal vulnerabilities in the group. The Unitarians relative decentralization compared to the Methodists and Baptists better accommodated competing factions within their group. Yet it also forestalled the abolitionists from stretching their wings like a Methodist or Baptist abolitionist could, unencumbered from those supporting or tolerating slavery within their ranks.

However, there were other reasons that a Unitarian might desire to centralize the Unitarian churches. Minister Nathaniel Langdon Frothingham wrote his tract, *Deism or Christianity?: Four Discourses*, in 1845 not only to argue in favor of Unitarianism but rather a specific kind of Unitarian thought. Frothingham argued in favor of establishing a fixed, or at

⁸³ Norwood, *The Schism in the Methodist Episcopal Church 1844*, 58.

⁸⁴ "Report of 6th Anniversary of Charleston Unitarian Book Society." (May 20, 1827) *American Unitarian Association Letterbooks*, bMS 571/4, Andover-Harvard Library, Harvard Divinity School.

⁸⁵ "Report of 6th Anniversary."

⁸⁶ William B. Pierce, January 27, 1845, in *American Unitarian Association Letterbooks*, bMS 571/59, Andover-Harvard Library, Harvard Divinity School.

least firmer, creed for the Unitarians.⁸⁷ “How else can we tell or know what we believe?” he wrote in 1845.⁸⁸ He mirrored the simplicity of the AUA constitution by only asking for a creed without specific restrictions on “how much there is of it, nor of what precise kind it is.”⁸⁹ His chief goal was to stabilize Unitarianism so as to provide safer foundations for the theological and political debates that raged at the time. He desired to strengthen the accreditations of his group to the Bible likely because some individuals, especially those among the Transcendentalists that will be discussed, expressed doubts that sacred text was necessary for authentic Christian belief. Frothingham justified his claims by appealing to the character of Jesus that Unitarians had modeled their values of rationality and virtue upon. He wrote “we say that [Jesus’] example was a faultless pattern for his followers to walk by.”⁹⁰ Frothingham hoped that a creed would help to clarify that example. Nor was this some idle request. He believed that a creed was so necessary that he resigned that if “liberal Christianity means only an unbounded license of speculation . . . my place is not there.”⁹¹ This illustrates both that Unitarians were opened to changing their practices even as they faced stress that criticized their founding principles.

Another more well-known group that demonstrated the porous dividing lines of Unitarianism were the Transcendentalists. Historian George Hochfield explained that the Transcendentalist movement grew out of dissatisfaction with Unitarianism.⁹² Transcendentalists rejected Unitarianism’s heavy emphasis on the “sterility” of pure rationality that failed to reach into the lives, into the very souls, of its adherents.⁹³ This typically presented as a rejection of

⁸⁷ Frothingham, *Deism or Christianity?*, 31.

⁸⁸ Frothingham, *Deism or Christianity?*, 31.

⁸⁹ Frothingham, *Deism or Christianity?*, 31.

⁹⁰ Frothingham, *Deism or Christianity?*, 55.

⁹¹ Frothingham, *Deism or Christianity?*, 49.

⁹² George Hochfield, *Selected Writings of the American Transcendentalists* (New Haven: Yale University Press: 2004), xi.

⁹³ Hochfield, *Selected Writings of the American Transcendentalists*, xi.

orthodox (if such a word can even apply) Unitarianism's values of moderation and rationality to grant greater focus to lived virtue. The Unitarians were quite radical themselves in their rejection of Trinitarianism and their commitment to their principles despite criticism. Now Transcendentalists attempted take a step further by stripping away more dogma from the edifice of liberal Christianity.

Two Unitarian ministers best exemplified the new movement by building upon prior Unitarian writings, by sharing similar inspirations, and by organizing their beliefs into four main tenets. Ralph Waldo Emerson began his career as a Unitarian minister before he became perhaps the most famous author of the Transcendentalist movement. Theodore Parker too was a Unitarian minister and fellow Transcendentalist, but his writing favored an academic style in comparison to Emerson's more poetic manner. Both became supporters of the abolitionist movement. Emerson noted that the Transcendentalists took their name from a technical term used by philosopher Immanuel Kant.⁹⁴ As the Transcendentalists rejected the cold logic of the Enlightenment and Unitarianism for the intuition and emotional appeals of Romanticism, Kant supplanted John Locke, the figurehead of worldviews past.⁹⁵ Parker too drew inspiration from Kant's writings, though not evidently his prose which he chided as being the product of one of the world's "worst writers."⁹⁶

There are also four parts to Transcendentalism that Emerson and Parker held in common. Inspired by philosophers like David Hume and Immanuel Kant, the Transcendentalists first

⁹⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Transcendentalist," in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: The Major Prose*, ed. Ronald A. Boscoe and Joel Myerson (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2015), 169.

⁹⁵ Emerson, "The Transcendentalist," 169.

⁹⁶ Theodore Parker, "Theodore Parker's Experience as a Minister," in *Selected Writings of the American Transcendentalists*, ed. George Hochfield (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 417.

criticized the Enlightenment broadly and Unitarianism specifically.⁹⁷ Second it favored intuition opposed to a purely empirical sensory experience.⁹⁸ This often manifested as a desire to appreciate nature and the present moment. Third, it placed the individual at the center for salvation rather than any church.⁹⁹ Finally, it encouraged action over abstract thinking, disdaining those who think deeply but did not live out their beliefs. Furthermore, Transcendentalism adopted many of the hallmarks of Unitarianism even as they tried to separate themselves from it. Channing wrote that “true religion . . . was known by high aspirations, hopes, and efforts.”¹⁰⁰ These elements roughly correlate with the intuitions, individualism, and action basis of Transcendentalists by the time Emerson first penned *The Transcendentalist* more than a decade later in 1842.

Emerson upheld stronger critiques of Unitarianism when he accepted the values of Transcendentalism. He described the group as “Idealists” opposed to the “Materialists” with the former founded on consciousness and the latter founded on experience.¹⁰¹ The idealist insisted on “the power of Thought and Will, on inspiration, on miracle, on individual culture.”¹⁰² This meant that there was no such thing as a pure Transcendentalist as they intentionally avoided the rigid classification that seemed to pervade Enlightenment thinking.¹⁰³

Emerson attended Harvard early in his life and became a Unitarian Minister in Boston.¹⁰⁴ Historian Len Gougeon wrote that after the death of Emerson’s wife in 1831 he gradually

⁹⁷ Grodzins, *American Heretic*, 62.

⁹⁸ Grodzins, *American Heretic*, 63.

⁹⁹ Grodzins, *American Heretic*, 63-64.

¹⁰⁰ William Ellery Channing, “Likeness to God,” in *Selected Writings of the American Transcendentalists*, ed. George Hochfield (New Haven: Yale University Press: 2004), 63.

¹⁰¹ Emerson, “The Transcendentalist,” 164.

¹⁰² Emerson, “The Transcendentalist,” 164.

¹⁰³ Emerson, “The Transcendentalist,” 168.

¹⁰⁴ Len Gougeon, *Emerson and Eros: The Making of a Cultural Hero* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 1.

decided that Unitarianism “failed utterly to satisfy his acute emotional and spiritual needs.”¹⁰⁵

Emerson instead became one of the chief architects of the Transcendentalist movement and one of his most notable critiques stems from his “Divinity School Address of 1838” which he used to develop his ideas. He protested against a focus on the historicity of Jesus or the miracles because it exaggerated the “ritual” at the expense of the “doctrine of the soul.”¹⁰⁶ The significance here is not the historicity of Jesus, but the emphasis placed on internal experience of religious truth over an empirical standard for religious truth. To Emerson, debating whether Jesus was a real person or not is unimportant next to the effect it had on one’s personal character. Already one can spot the similarity to the Unitarian concept of lived virtue, alive again in Emerson’s focus on a “doctrine of the soul.”¹⁰⁷ However he continued his critique by claiming that Unitarianism “seems to totter to its fall, almost all life extinct.”¹⁰⁸ Again he added, “thought may work cold . . . and find no end or unity.”¹⁰⁹ Here he chastised the Unitarians for a commitment to thought that he believed to be lifeless both in character and in effect of speeding the group’s demise. As religion necessitated action, so too would abolition.

Despite Emerson’s dismissal he did not reject thinking but simply a style of thinking exclusively dependent on the senses that he associated with the Unitarians. Limiting experience to the physical senses ignored the intuitions that captured the mind. Through “virtue on the heart,” or intuition, “the soul first knows itself.”¹¹⁰ Many Transcendentalist ideas drew inspiration from Channing’s own writing, despite him never joining or otherwise associating

¹⁰⁵ Gougeon, *Emerson and Eros*, 4, 5.

¹⁰⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Divinity School Address,” in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: The Major Prose*, ed. Ronald A. Boscoe and Joel Myerson (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2015), 115.

¹⁰⁷ Emerson, “The Divinity School Address,” 115.

¹⁰⁸ Emerson, “The Divinity School Address,” 118.

¹⁰⁹ Emerson, “The Divinity School Address,” 113.

¹¹⁰ Emerson, “The Divinity School Address,” 113.

with the group. Ten years earlier in 1828, Channing suggested that knowledge of the “Supreme Being” came from “our own souls.”¹¹¹ Moreover when Emerson thought of the “intuition of moral sentiment,” Channing earlier suggested that likeness to God had its foundations in the mind.¹¹² Emerson may have finished with Unitarianism, but he did not abandon many of its ideas. He did not expunge the value of rationality; rather, he refocused it on intuition.

The Transcendentalists also focused heavily on the role of the individual and individualism. Intuition shifted emphasis away from institutional churches and academic book studies towards the kind of experiences that, almost by definition, must be accounted for at the individual level. Reusing a quote from Emerson, he insisted that transcendentalist power rested upon several elements, one of which was “individual culture.”¹¹³ He reiterated his sentiments towards the individual when he wrote that “in the soul of man there is justice.”¹¹⁴ So Emerson argued that each person was in possession of a kind of moral intuition at the level of individual, and not a group like a church. Again Channing expounded upon a not altogether dissimilar point. He insisted that “God is said to communicate . . . to the human soul.”¹¹⁵ He also recorded the notion of conscience as the “divinity within us.”¹¹⁶ However, while both Emerson and Channing may share a belief in the centrality of the individual soul, Channing implied that communication to the individual would come from within the church and the study of sense based experience. Emerson did not accept that assumption. This can be witnessed in their discussions about religion specifically. Channing believed that the role of religion was to “conform ourselves to

¹¹¹ Channing, “Likeness to God,” 57.

¹¹² Emerson, “The Divinity School Address,” 115.; Channing, “Likeness to God,” 54.

¹¹³ Emerson, “The Transcendentalist,” 164.

¹¹⁴ Emerson, “The Divinity School Address,” 111, 112.

¹¹⁵ Channing, “Likeness to God,” 56.

¹¹⁶ Channing, “Likeness to God,” 58.

God, or to unfold the divine likeness within us.”¹¹⁷ Emerson instead believed in salvation coming to the individual and not the church; to “refuse good models” so as to love God without intermediaries.¹¹⁸ Here, Emerson distinguished himself from Channing. Emerson diverged from the sense of unity that Channing treasured despite the earlier mentioned shared different conceptions of rationality.

As to the final point of action, Channing offered little of substance to support the Transcendentalist ideal of action. While he had marked one of the signs of true religion as “efforts,” the more traditional members of Unitarianism rarely spent much energy on the lived virtue part of their constitution.¹¹⁹ Emerson believed that this lack was an inherent and insurmountable flaw in a system that attempted to categorize spirituality rather than be open to it. He thought instead that “overpowering beauty” appeared to the individual who was “open to the sentiment of virtue.”¹²⁰ This entailed an ethics of studying virtue whereas a study of books would waylay the individual’s progress.¹²¹ He repeatedly reiterated the importance of living a moral life and not passively observing, yet never participating, in one. If he advocated studying for virtue it was only in living out the lessons so that one could “study the grand strokes of rectitude.”¹²² Emerson’s take on virtue again diverged from the Unitarian model of values and when he wrote of “genius and virtue” he meant a lived experience of those principles.

Parker, a Unitarian minister and contemporary to Emerson, held controversial theological views during an era of already strained intersect relations. Parker studied theology at Harvard

¹¹⁷ Channing, “Likeness to God,” 64.

¹¹⁸ Emerson, “The Divinity School Address,” 123.

¹¹⁹ Channing, “Likeness to God,” 64.

¹²⁰ Emerson, “The Divinity School Address,” 111.

¹²¹ Emerson, “The Divinity School Address,” 118.

¹²² Emerson, “The Divinity School Address,” 124.

under Unitarian mentors, as had Emerson.¹²³ While Parker expressed differences of opinion with traditional Unitarians, he, too, shared points of connectivity. Channing recognized true religion by its aspirations, hopes, and efforts.¹²⁴ Parker summed up true religion into three parts: emotional, intellectual, and practical.¹²⁵ The emotional part was instinctual or intuitive to the individual. Yet while Emerson appreciated emotionally directed aspirations, he already chided that sort of mentality for being long on thought and short on acting on it. Hopes and efforts were roughly contiguous with Parker's intellectual and practical parts of religion, but they too differed in their approaches to Christian practice.

Despite these similarities, or perhaps because of them, Parker still challenged the practices of Christianity broadly and Unitarianism specifically. Parker believed that "religious consciousness was universal in human history" and therefore that every church was more of a human institution than a divine one.¹²⁶ He maintained that the doctrines of Christianity were thus changeable, even unavoidably so.¹²⁷ Like Emerson, Parker rejected the authority of the New Testament not because he disliked it but because he asserted that "Christianity does not rest on the infallible authority of the New Testament."¹²⁸ Historian John d'Entremont remarks that these kind of ideas created the reputation of "wild Theodore Parker and his bloodcurdling heresies."¹²⁹ Parker's reputation and theological divergences set him well outside the bounds of even the most tolerant definitions of Unitarianism.

¹²³ Parker, "Experience as a Minister," 414.

¹²⁴ Channing, "Likeness to God," 63.

¹²⁵ Parker, "Experience as a Minister," 423.

¹²⁶ Parker, "Experience as a Minister," 416.

¹²⁷ Theodore Parker, "A Discourse of the Transient and Permanent in Christianity," in *The Spirituality of the American Transcendentalists*, ed. Catherine L. Albanese (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1988), 189.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 190.

¹²⁹ d'Entremont. *Southern Emancipator*, 97.

Parker's dissatisfaction with Unitarianism was more specific in highlighting areas that did not meet his standards. He took special umbrage at statements from ministers such as "reason must be put down, or she will soon ask terrible questions."¹³⁰ Here he defended rationality from the group that claimed to hold it as a principle virtue! But one must remember that Parker referred to a specific kind of rationality. It is not inquiry that was loathed; it was his suborning sense experience to the intuitive.¹³¹ Ultimately, he decided that Unitarianism was less of a problem than "any other sect in Christendom."¹³² He may have considered them sluggish in their response to his attempts to reform, but at least they had "not yet petrified into a sect."¹³³ Parker was not willing to close the door entirely on the Unitarians, despite their rising defensiveness in the 1850s.¹³⁴

Although Parker's academic writing style might lend the appearance of adherence to Unitarian orthodoxy's focus on rationality, this is merely stylistic similarity. For example, he laid out the three primal intuitions at the root of human nature: intuition of the just and right, and intuition that the immortal individuality never dies.¹³⁵ Intuition meant an awareness and participation in the present. He recalled the story of a medieval monk, Bernard of Clairvaux, who walked all day along Lake Geneva contemplating abstract theology only to return home at the end of the day pleased that he had remained ignorant of the beauty of his surroundings.¹³⁶ This was the height of folly to Parker. When he wrote that there was a practical component to true religion, he meant that one had to live in the present to live and understand virtue. For this

¹³⁰ Parker, "Experience as a Minister," 421.

¹³¹ Parker, "Experience as a Minister," 421.

¹³² Theodore Parker, "A Sermon on the Delights of Piety," in *The Spirituality of the American Transcendentalists*, ed. Catherine L. Albanese (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1988), 189.

¹³³ Parker, "Experience as a Minister," 418.

¹³⁴ d'Entremont. *Southern Emancipator*, 97.

¹³⁵ Parker, "Experience as a Minister," 417.

¹³⁶ Parker, "A Sermon," 224.

reason, he also rejected the notion that miracles were historically accurate; Christianity was true because of its teachings cut to the heart of every person to be lived and not because of any vague spirituality.

Parker's argument for the individual stemmed from the belief that God had imbued every single person with the internal capability for virtue. As he put it, truths found in "my consciousness reflected back from the Deity itself."¹³⁷ Channing's tract, *Likeness to God*, is just as relevant to Parker's ideas as it was to Emerson's. Channing claimed that "the soul . . . alone . . . understands and recognizes the Sovereign of the Universe."¹³⁸ So Channing placed importance upon the interior life as did Parker years later. Again, the Transcendentalists maintained continuity with earlier ideas even as they challenged them by placing them in different contexts or arrived at them by different arguments. Channing's context, or proposition, was that the "great work of religion is to conform ourselves with God, or to unfold the divine likeness within us."¹³⁹ The significance here is Channing saw the spiritual path conforming within a religious context, though he expressed that he did not believe it to require "unnatural effort."¹⁴⁰ Parker held a considerably more pragmatic view of religion. He thought that religion, as a man-made structure, was useful insofar as it comforted people like the Good Samaritan of Biblical parable or aided the development of piety.¹⁴¹ He defined piety as the proper relation to the "Word of God" along with the rights and duties that entailed.¹⁴² For Parker, religion was valued for its usefulness in connecting one to the world, to the present. These very different, yet not unrelated, opinions both

¹³⁷ Parker, "Experience as a Minister," 424.

¹³⁸ Channing, "Likeness to God," 58.

¹³⁹ Channing, "Likeness to God," 64.

¹⁴⁰ Channing, "Likeness to God," 64.

¹⁴¹ Parker, "A Discourse," 200.; Parker, "Delights of Piety," 219.

¹⁴² Parker, "Delights of Piety," 219.

existed within Unitarianism at the same time even if not entirely peacefully. Could different ideas of emancipation not then find a way to coexist?

Parker's principles of action drove his commitment to Transcendentalism. These principles established a worldview that was more assertive than Unitarian traditionalists permitted and encouraged his activism in abolitionist activities. His idea of piety resembled earlier ideas of lived virtue; it entailed a "complete Will to serve God."¹⁴³ "Passive to receive God's love, I am active to return it with love again," he wrote.¹⁴⁴ This was a religious call to arms; his principles compelled action on his part. Living out piety was a necessary part of his religious devotion that manifested in his efforts to abolish slavery. Furthermore, the Transcendentalist belief that individuals possessed an intuitive sense of morality implied intrinsic value to slaves for possessing this moral sense. These conclusions help explain Parker's sincere commitment towards immediate abolitionism, to the point where he at times called for violence or to physically impede slavecatchers attempting to drag escaped slaves in the free states back to the slave states.

The tumultuous few decades before the political divide of the Civil War tore the country apart witnessed the religious division of different denominations over the question of how to properly address slavery. Baptist and Methodist congregations separated, and the Unitarians nearly did so themselves. Political and social realities quickly tested the newly minted American Unitarian Association. Organizational and doctrinal flexibility permitted sometimes conflicting viewpoints to coincide and typically without dramatic disruptions. Unitarian commitment to the core principles of rationality, lived virtue, and unity created the conditions where the sect

¹⁴³ Parker, "Delights of Piety," 220.

¹⁴⁴ Parker, "Delights of Piety," 230.

survived despite its relative youth, or its call to calcify its dogma, or its dealing with the occasionally reform/ occasionally splinter movement of Transcendentalism.

CHAPTER 2: LET HIM BELIEVE WHAT HE WILL: SOUTHERN UNITARIANISM AND ABOLITIONISM

It would be reasonable enough to forgive a visitor to the antebellum United States for erroneously assuming that the Unitarian branch of Christians were a largely Northern phenomena. Boston housed the American Unitarian Association and the nearby Harvard University trained many of their ministers such as Samuel J. May, William Ellery Channing, and Samuel Gilman.¹⁴⁵ Even German immigrant and Unitarian convert Charles Follen taught there for a time before his candid support for abolitionism alienated him from both the university and his pulpit. Both May and Follen spread their views on faith and abolition to New York, while other practitioners scattered throughout the mid-Atlantic and New England regions. Unitarians like May and Follen associated with the wider abolitionist movements, but the Unitarians as a whole remained largely distant from the endeavor.¹⁴⁶ These abolitionists challenged the ideas of Unitarian reluctance to directly engage politics and the membership of the abolitionist movement as largely orthodox evangelicals. However Reverend Samuel Gilman contrasted these figures by residing in the South for almost the last forty years of his life and by deliberately avoiding any mention of the practice of slavery. Gilman's career and writings provide an insight into how a northern born and educated clergyman came to balance evangelizing a religion with increasingly vocal abolitionist members with toleration towards the institution of slavery.

Yet Gilman, like Unitarianism, was not native to the South. Gilman's birthplace and the largest group of Unitarians were both in Massachusetts. Thus, Gilman's migration to Charleston

¹⁴⁵ "Memorial to Rev. Samuel Gilman, 1811," *Harvard Alumni Bulletin* 15, no. 27 (1913), Thomas Cooper Library, University of South Carolina: 446.

¹⁴⁶ McKivigan, *The War against Proslavery Religion*, 49.

was just as much a movement of his beliefs as it was of his body. The church in Charleston converted to Unitarianism along with its reverend, Anthony Forster, but his successor Gilman left a much greater impression on southern Unitarianism with his almost forty years as a preacher there as compared to Forster's four.¹⁴⁷ Reverend Joseph Tuckerman, also of Massachusetts, asked the question at the sermon for Gilman's installation as pastor of the church in Charleston as to the "influence of our ministry . . . what are our just claims upon society?"¹⁴⁸ Tuckerman grappled with the issue that Gilman would deal with all of his life; what role could and should largely northern beliefs have in a southern culture and society?

Gilman was amongst the most prominent Unitarians in the antebellum south along with Theodore Clapp of New Orleans. Wright found that the Unitarian register for 1850 listed only nine of their churches in the slave states.¹⁴⁹ He contended that Clapp was an outspoken apologist for slavery while Gilman resisted public expression of his own views.¹⁵⁰ "I am desirous of no more publicity" Gilman wrote in a letter defending slavery and expressing his doubts that the country would ever reconcile on the issue.¹⁵¹ One visitor to New Orleans eagerly sought out Clapp but remarked that the state of Unitarianism there "nominally. . . does not exist to any extent" in 1841, as they "have not organized, and show no disposition to erect a church."¹⁵² By contrast Gilman led the Charleston Unitarians since he was elected pastor in 1819 out of the

¹⁴⁷ "Memorial to Rev. Samuel Gilman," 446.

¹⁴⁸ Joseph Tuckerman, *A Sermon Delivered at the Ordination of the Rev. Samuel Gilman to the Pastoral Care of the Second Independent Church in Charleston, Dec. 1st, 1819* (Charleston: A. E. Miller, 1819), 5.

¹⁴⁹ Conrad Wright, *The Liberal Christians: Essays on American Unitarian History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), 63.

¹⁵⁰ Wright, *The Liberal Christians*, 63.

¹⁵¹ Samuel Gilman, August 18, 1856, in *American Unitarian Association Letterbooks*, bMS 571/117, Andover-Harvard Library, Harvard Divinity School.

¹⁵² C. J. P., "Unitarianism in New Orleans," *Christian Register*, April 10, 1841, 58.

city's former Independent Church.¹⁵³ Gilman remains a key figure in explaining proslavery sentiment among the Unitarians for his missionary activities throughout the south, for assisting the formation of several Unitarian churches in the south, and for his close correspondence with his northern counterparts struggling with the issue despite his own reservations to openly discuss slavery.

Although Gilman was born and raised in Massachusetts not all that far from the epicenter of American Unitarianism, he readily acclimated to Charleston where he lived the majority of his life. One Unitarian wrote of the south that “the style of preaching common in Boston, that of Dr. Channing . . . for instance would not be popular here. It is too quiet. Rashness is much more excusable here than tameness.” While Gilman might not fit the classification of a boisterous speaker, he clearly accrued considerable respect as both an orator and as an occasional poet.¹⁵⁴ A letter reprinted in the *Christian Examiner* described how during one of Gilman's preaching tours to Augusta, Georgia that he debated both a Presbyterian and a Baptist minister that had individually chosen to criticize Unitarianism.¹⁵⁵ To Gilman this was an academic exercise of theology, and he wisely avoided any discussion of slavery. Gilman spoke so eloquently that evening in defense of Unitarianism that the author of the letter believed that he had “never witnessed a more serious attention in any congregation.”¹⁵⁶ He was not the only one to be impressed by Gilman. By the end of Gilman's visit he had rallied the Unitarians in the area to

¹⁵³ “Memorial to Rev. Samuel Gilman,” *Harvard Alumni Bulletin*, 446.

¹⁵⁴ “Unitarianism in Augusta, Georgia,” (1826, Jul) *Christian Examiner and Theological Review* 3, no. 4 (July 1828): 353.

¹⁵⁵ Samuel Gilman, “Calhoun: Ode,” (Walter & Evans, 1828-1850), Thomas Cooper Library, University of South Carolina: 1.

¹⁵⁶ “Unitarianism in Augusta,” 355.

“organize a society before Mr. Gilman returns home.”¹⁵⁷ Historian John Allen Macaulay asserts that by the 1840s the Unitarian churches in “Augusta and Savannah, Georgia, and even Mobile Alabama rested almost entirely on the back of the Charleston congregation,” and the Charleston congregation rested on the back of Samuel Gilman.¹⁵⁸

The task of spreading Unitarianism throughout the South required being more than a skilled orator and powerful preacher. It also required an understanding of local cultural customs and expectations. Most of the Unitarian tracts and essays came from writers in the North, primarily from Boston where a high concentration of adherents lived. Gilman recognized that he needed to adapt northern sermons and practices to southern tastes. He delivered a famous sermon at the dedication of the Unitarian church in Augusta that served as the guiding document for much of the southern practice of Unitarianism.¹⁵⁹ However, this reprinted and widely circulated speech did much more than espouse the views of their religion.

The appropriately titled address, *Unitarian Christianity Free from Objectionable Extremes*, sought to preempt criticism and backlash against the new Unitarians in the area by disassociating their practices from “every doctrinal extravagance,” to avoid any “injurious, revolting, and incredible doctrines.”¹⁶⁰ The trinitarian beliefs of the local Presbyterians and Baptists posed quite possibly the most significant challenge to the Unitarians. Trinitarianism entailed that three persons, God the Father, God the Son (Jesus Christ), and God the Holy Spirit, constituted the “Supreme God.”¹⁶¹ Unitarian insistence that God the Father was alone in making

¹⁵⁷ “Unitarianism in Augusta,” 354.

¹⁵⁸ Macauley, *Unitarianism in the Antebellum South*, 46.

¹⁵⁹ Macauley, *Unitarianism in the Antebellum South*, 132.

¹⁶⁰ Gilman, *Unitarian Christianity*, 7, 10.

¹⁶¹ Gilman, *Unitarian Christianity*, 10.

up the Supreme God led to the common misconception among trinitarians that because the Unitarians did not consider Jesus to be God that they considered him to instead be “on a level with the other sons of Adam.”¹⁶² Gilman stressed that while Unitarians viewed Jesus as quite simply human, God nevertheless “bestowed on him a character of inimitable perfection.”¹⁶³ Gilman’s clarification was so necessary and important because the Unitarians had little to no hope of being tolerated, much less accepted, in the region so long as they appeared to be insulting the nature of the God predominantly believed in. Back in Boston the Unitarians praised Gilman’s efforts and their publication, the *Christian Examiner*, commended his work for possessing the “higher excellences of pulpit addresses in a degree that will add to the reputation of the preacher.”¹⁶⁴ Gilman proceeded with his attempts to integrate Unitarianism into the South, confident in the support of Northern associates.

The Charleston Unitarian Book and Tract Society was established in 1821 for southern Unitarians and the American Unitarian Association was formed in 1825.¹⁶⁵ Yet society at large sharply criticized these groups which hindered their ability to evangelize or foster acceptance. The Unitarians were notable for embracing a religious rationalism born of the Enlightenment.¹⁶⁶ In practice this meant that Unitarian beliefs challenged those of the prevailing Protestant orthodoxy in at least two notable ways. Historian Conrad Wright characterizes these as the esteeming of individual reason over orthodox creeds as a method of forming the “essentials of

¹⁶² Gilman, *Unitarian Christianity*, 10.

¹⁶³ Gilman, *Unitarian Christianity*, 10.

¹⁶⁴ “Unitarian Christianity Free from Objectionable Extremes,” *Christian Examiner and Theological Review* 5, no. 1 (1828, Jan/Feb): 84.

¹⁶⁵ “Original Constitution.”

¹⁶⁶ John Allen Macauley, *Unitarianism in the Antebellum South* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2001), 12.

natural religion” and an anti-Trinitarian view that claimed that Jesus Christ is “inferior to God the Father, yet more than mere man.”¹⁶⁷ Indeed, this break with traditional theology and the doctrine of three persons in one god that defined Trinitarianism brought about the designation of Unitarians as “Unitarian” for their belief in the solitary personage of God the Father. This represented a radical break with religious orthodoxy and meant Unitarians faced an uphill battle in their dealings with practitioners of more popular denominations of Christianity.

The formation of the Charleston Unitarian Book and Tract Society aided southern Unitarians in sustaining and promulgating their beliefs. Gilman helped form the society in 1821, four years before the American Unitarian Association began purporting to represent all American Unitarians.¹⁶⁸ Nonetheless, the latter association appealed to the southern tract society with an offer to join their larger, albeit newer organization.¹⁶⁹ While the tract society responded enthusiastically to their “correspondence for mutual advice and cooperation,” they ultimately declined integration on the grounds of self-autonomy.¹⁷⁰ The tract society agreed to contribute funds to the association in exchange for Unitarian literature but they believed that they better served the southern churches by remaining a local organization.¹⁷¹ In practical terms they viewed their relationship as already constituting an “auxiliary, a fellow laborer” and for all intents and purposes operated as a self-governing branch of the association to the point that the association

¹⁶⁷ Wright, *The Beginnings of Unitarianism in America*, 2, 201.

¹⁶⁸ “Original Constitution of the A. U. A.”

¹⁶⁹ “Report of Sixth Anniversary of Charleston Unitarian Book Society.” (May 20, 1827) *American Unitarian Association Letterbooks*, bMS 571/4, Andover-Harvard Library, Harvard Divinity School.

¹⁷⁰ “Report of Sixth Anniversary.”

¹⁷¹ “Report of Sixth Anniversary.”

listed the southern churches as members on its registry even after the issue of slavery drove a wedge between them.¹⁷²

For a time however they were pleased to operate as closely tied, yet distinct organizations. The American Unitarian Association supplied the tract society with relevant religious literature and Samuel Gilman would even submit tracts written by Charleston locals to the association's domestic secretary Ezra Gannett to be published for their benefit too.¹⁷³ Gilman also sent a delegate from the tract society to the association on the event of their anniversary.¹⁷⁴ Furthermore individuals still sought separate memberships in both groups, highlighting the official divisions between the two before cultural divisions split their sense of unity.¹⁷⁵

Nevertheless, almost thirty years of cooperation proved too brief of a time to overcome the sectional divide that plagued the whole country. By the 1850s questions of slavery and abolitionism sundered religious groups as surely as it did to the nation. Macauley described the tract society's reluctance to fully incorporate into the American Unitarian Association as resulting from their worry that they might "lose their unique heritage" as a culturally distinct branch of the religion.¹⁷⁶ In 1856 Gilman wrote the association at the behest of his tract society to discontinue their subscription to one hundred and ten copies of their quarterly journal.¹⁷⁷ Gilman evidently felt it unnecessary to clarify abolitionism as the issue, as he did not mention it

¹⁷² "Report of Sixth Anniversary."

¹⁷³ Samuel Gilman to Ezra S. Gannett, August 19, 1827, in *American Unitarian Association Letterbooks*, bMS 571/5, Andover-Harvard Library, Harvard Divinity School.

¹⁷⁴ Samuel Gilman to Ezra S. Gannett, May 27, 1827, in *American Unitarian Association Letterbooks*, bMS 571/4, Andover-Harvard Library, Harvard Divinity School.

¹⁷⁵ Gilman to Gannett, August 19, 1827.

¹⁷⁶ Macauley, *Unitarianism in the Antebellum South*, 131.

¹⁷⁷ Samuel Gilman to the American Unitarian Association, August 18, 1856, in *American Unitarian Association Letterbooks*, bMS 571/117, Andover-Harvard Library, Harvard Divinity School, 1.

by name until the second page of his letter.¹⁷⁸ Instead he initially described the problem with the prior set of journals as possessing a “character to forbid their safe circulation in this community.”¹⁷⁹ Although Gilman might be understood just as ensuring the safety of southern sensibilities, his words did draw attention to the fact that an abolitionist minister might face threats to their physical safety as well. Gilman had good cause to express concern. Prior to that 1856 letter, both Unitarian ministers George Frederick Simmons in 1840 and Mellish I. Motte in 1842 were unsuccessfully assigned to lead the churches at Mobile and Savannah respectively.¹⁸⁰ Simmons had preached abolitionism while Motte had a reputation for being an abolitionist himself; the former fled back to New England due to rumors of threats while the latter found that his congregation denied him even the opportunity to preach in the first place.¹⁸¹ Abolitionism truly was not a safe topic of discussion in the southern Unitarian churches.

By 1843 the Unitarians in Savannah wrestled to secure both the funds to build themselves a church and to procure a minister to preach there. This left them with a debt of four thousand dollars and they appealed to the American Unitarian Association to supply them with a preacher from one of the north’s comparatively large supply of trained men.¹⁸² Although the congregation at Savannah felt that, as Unitarians, they were “excluded from the pale of Christian courtesy” in southern society, they could still trust their northern brethren to support them.¹⁸³ The association responded by sending them Motte to become their new minister, but his reputation as an

¹⁷⁸ Gilman to the A. U. A., August 18, 1856, 2.

¹⁷⁹ Gilman to the A. U. A., August 18, 1856, 1.

¹⁸⁰ Macauley, *Unitarianism in the Antebellum South*, 142.

¹⁸¹ Stange, *Patterns of Antislavery*, 188.

¹⁸² Richard D. Arnold, Charles Davis, and W. H. C. Mills, “The Officers of the American Unitarian Association in Correspondence with the Unitarian Church at Savannah,” *Christian Register* 22, no. 10, March 11, 1843, 38.

¹⁸³ Arnold, “The Officers of the American Unitarian Association,” 38.

abolitionist preceded him. They wrote that although “he may have been born a Southern Man, it was but too evident that he had abjured Southern principles.”¹⁸⁴ Motte’s protestations that he had never been involved with any abolitionist group or preached support for the movement fell upon deaf ears. His sermons had been deemed “insurrectionary” and they sent him back north.¹⁸⁵ At this point southern Unitarians placed greater trust in the rumors of their fellow southerners above the solemn word of their fellow Unitarians.

Gilman and other missionaries expected that when they planted the seeds of Unitarianism in the South that it would develop in much the same way it had in the North. But they underestimated the difference that the soil of the Southern way of life would have on the growth of Northern ideas and religion. Unitarianism took on a new character amidst Southern culture and this was clearly demonstrated by differing theological approaches to addressing slavery. Growing cultural differences between the North and South further encouraged caution on sensitive subjects, lest a missionary thought to sympathetic to abolitionism be ejected much in the same way as Simmons or Motte. For example, the untimely death of Charles Follen in 1840 allowed for selective understandings of his life. By as late as 1855 Boston Unitarians remembered him for his involvement with their own church, and at least one reverend ordered one hundred and thirty-four copies of “Channing’s Discourse on Dr. Follen” for his ministry.¹⁸⁶ Follen remained a popular character to study even fifteen years after his advocacy for both Unitarianism and abolitionism ceased.

¹⁸⁴ Arnold, “The Officers of the American Unitarian Association,” 38.

¹⁸⁵ Arnold, “The Officers of the American Unitarian Association,” 38.

¹⁸⁶ Monroe and Co., May 18, 1855, in *American Unitarian Association Letterbooks*, bMS 571/110, Andover-Harvard Library, Harvard Divinity School.

Yet southerners faced more immediate concerns of interpreting Follen's life just as had their northern brethren. Should they remember him for abolitionism, or in spite of it? The southern view seemed to match the answer of northern moderates: silence. The *Charleston Courier* printed his obituary which recalled his possessing "a highly cultivated intellect, of an enlarged and liberal philosophy, and a most benevolent and generous disposition" along with several other positive achievements and virtues but made no mention of anything related to his abolitionist stances apart from a general praise of his "philanthropy."¹⁸⁷ Gilman might well have learned of the death of his fellow Unitarian minister from reading the newspaper of Gilman's adopted southern home, though their opinions on the unwritten question of slavery could not be more different.

Ezra S. Gannett, one of the leaders in the American Unitarian Association, credited Channing at the occasion of his death for his lifelong support of the "rights of intellectual and spiritual liberty which he held that every man is endowed by the Creator."¹⁸⁸ His fondness for spiritual liberty marked him as a Unitarian, but his love for intellectual liberty marked him as a moderate in a religion struggling to reconcile abolitionist and proslavery impulses within its ranks. Although Gannett remarked that Channing "scorned, abhorred, and exposed" slavery "in every form," he also "would neither follow, nor lead a party."¹⁸⁹ This meant that antislavery never rose above the level of secondary concern for Channing because he willingly committed to the Unitarian cause, but never joined a radical abolitionist group or even a moderate antislavery one.

¹⁸⁷ "Dr. Follen," *Charleston Courier*, January 25, 1840.

¹⁸⁸ Ezra S. Gannett, *Address and Discourse After the Death of Rev. W. E. Channing, D.D* (1842), *American Unitarian Association Letterbooks*, bMS 571/48, Andover-Harvard Library, Harvard Divinity School.

¹⁸⁹ Gannett, *Address and Discourse*, 17, 19.

Channing's death then, resulted in a change for those willing to risk religious unity for the sake of political purity. Historian Douglas Stange commented that the deaths of Channing and other moderates about slavery meant that "the prudent approach to antislavery activity largely died with them."¹⁹⁰ For though Channing himself adjusted to a principled objection to slavery later in life, his criticisms of both abolitionist and proslavery Unitarians failed to find root.¹⁹¹ With Channing dead, the moderate position lost its most ardent voice. Then there were few barriers to forestall greater conflict between radical factions with the moderates gone or overridden.

Gilman's design as a missionary was to transplant Unitarianism into Southern soil, but he did not fully anticipate how the new environment altered the nature of his message. He wrote in 1829 that, "we are too much accustomed to the storms and fluctuations of political life, not to know that religious agitation will speedily subside unless backed and perpetuated by civil power."¹⁹² Gilman described how the negative reaction that Unitarians and Unitarianism faced from practitioners of other Christian denominations inadvertently produced a more unified congregation that attracted new members drawn to its robust character. Unitarians stood firm against squabbling denominations, but this strength rested upon the assumption of the unity or "civil power" of the Unitarian churches.¹⁹³ As Reverend Joseph Tuckerman put it at the ordination of Samuel Gilman, "everyone has equally a right... to interpret the Scriptures for himself."¹⁹⁴ While Tuckerman spoke of religious principle, what prevented proslavery

¹⁹⁰ Stange, *Patterns of Antislavery*, 98.

¹⁹¹ Stange, *Patterns of Antislavery*, 99.

¹⁹² Gilman, *Unitarian Christianity*, 23.

¹⁹³ Gilman, *Unitarian Christianity*, 23.

¹⁹⁴ Joseph Tuckerman, *A Sermon, Delivered at the Ordination of the Rev. Samuel Gilman, to the Pastoral Care of the Second Independent Church in Charleston, December 1st, 1819* (Chelsea, Massachusetts: A. E. Miller, Printer, 1819), 6.

Southerners from interpreting Unitarianism according to Southern principles? Gilman could achieve establishing Unitarianism in the South, but in doing so he paved the way for the issue of slavery to fracture the unity he so valued.

Other authors understood how the predominantly moderate position of most Unitarians held the various individual churches together. Macauley noted that during earlier decades “Unitarians North and South were united in opposition to revivalistic enthusiasm,” which emphasized passion over reasoning.¹⁹⁵ He argues that the radical Northern abolitionists forced the issue of slavery into being the dividing line for Unitarians. After all, the proslavery Southerners possessed slaves far longer than it had been so vehemently opposed within church circles. Southerners could then accuse their Northern colleagues of falling “victim to the ‘fanaticism’ they themselves had originally disdained... associated with ‘revivalistic’ evangelicalism.”¹⁹⁶ In the Southern view, it was the Northerners who rocked the boat, who fomented division. Wright theorized that there was “an easy explanation for the moderate position of most of the clergy on the slavery issue.”¹⁹⁷ First, business interests tied the South too closely to Boston and New York to permit agitation on the issue, and second that ministers who spoke too radically on an issue as political as slavery risked alienating moderate and proslavery laity, leaving them with a miniscule antislavery society rather than a church. Samuel Gilman remained largely silent on the issue of slavery and in so doing avoided being ejected from the South as had George Frederick Simmons and Mellish I. Motte.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁵ Macauley, *Unitarianism in the Antebellum South*, 152.

¹⁹⁶ Macauley, *Unitarianism in the Antebellum South*, 152.

¹⁹⁷ Wright, *The Liberal Christians*, 79.

¹⁹⁸ Wright, *The Liberal Christians*, 63.

Therefore, proslavery individuals took Unitarianism not as an intrusive, foreign set of beliefs, but a lens through which they interpreted their own culture. Southerners such as Minister Charles A. Farley certainly expressed this stance by using Unitarianism to reconcile or even justify proslavery beliefs. Farley defended these ideas in an 1835 sermon delivered to the Unitarian church in Richmond, Virginia, on the grounds that slave owners were themselves without fault for slavery, that slavery was a justified method of ‘civilizing’ kidnapped Africans, and that abolitionists were really the ones to blame for stirring up trouble.¹⁹⁹ He also denied that slaves were “cruelly treated,” and attributed such ideas to abolitionist lies.²⁰⁰ This method shifted blame away from the slave owners. He also described the pre-slavery African communities as “equally barbarous, equally miserable, and equally unable to take care of themselves.”²⁰¹ In Farley’s estimation, this meant that “the introduction of slavery was not necessarily a sin” but a civilizing endeavor that had, at worst, “dreadful consequences of mistaken benevolence.”²⁰² Here Farley espoused his belief in African inferiority which justified, or at least mitigated, the harmful elements of the slave trade. Furthermore, Farley accused Unitarian abolitionists of sowing sedition and of taking “the moral law.... into his own hands” by imposing their “spiritual concerns” upon others.²⁰³ Here Farley directly highlighted how different Unitarians could interpret their religion as it applied to slavery. These common proslavery arguments demonstrate the fact that the cultural divides over slavery overrode religious unity among the Unitarians.

While support for abolitionism became an untenable position for Unitarian ministers in the south, it grew in acceptability in the northern churches. The very same year that the tract

¹⁹⁹ Charles A. Farley, *Slavery; A Discourse Delivered in the Unitarian Church, Richmond, VA*. (Richmond, VA: James C. Walker, Printer, 1835), 10.

²⁰⁰ Farley, *Slavery; A Discourse*, 16.

²⁰¹ Farley, *Slavery; A Discourse*, 9.

²⁰² Farley, *Slavery; A Discourse*, 9.

²⁰³ Farley, *Slavery; A Discourse*, 11.

society distanced itself from the association, Reverend M. Holland of Boston wrote a recommendation to the very same association on the grounds of opposition to slavery. He counseled that a minister who advocated “philanthropy and reform, temperance and antislavery . . . will help not hinder him unspeakably” in preaching to a church in New York.²⁰⁴ It is no coincidence that New York also housed one of the most radical Unitarian ministers Samuel J. May. “The public mind here [Charleston] is in a very excitable and irritable state in regards to the same topics which have excited and irritated our northern brethren,” wrote Gilman.²⁰⁵ The northern and southern churches grew increasingly ostracized from one another not merely because of political attitudes toward slavery, but because slavery dominated the theology and tracts that used to unite the regions.

The regional division in Unitarianism appeared to be irreconcilable by 1856. “We have no hope that these sectional agitations will now ever cease,” wrote Gilman in a letter to the American Unitarian Association.²⁰⁶ By this point, arguments over slavery divided the Unitarians before the political division plunged the country into war. Macauley notes that while Gilman was a “purist” who preached the gospel and avoided bringing up the topic of slavery in his sermons, privately he defended slavery when among his family and friends.²⁰⁷ For while Macauley acknowledged that Gilman professed in 1844 to have educated James, a slave he owned, in preparation for “ultimate freedom,” James was still enslaved by the time of the Civil War, and remained in the family’s service even after.²⁰⁸ When the Charleston Unitarian Book and Tract

²⁰⁴ M. Holland to the American Unitarian Association, December 5, 1856, in *American Unitarian Association Letterbooks*, bMS 571/118, Andover-Harvard Library, Harvard Divinity School.

²⁰⁵ Gilman to the A. U. A., August 18, 1856, 1.

²⁰⁶ Gilman to the A. U. A., August 18, 1856, 3.

²⁰⁷ Macauley, *Unitarianism in the Antebellum South*, 165-6.

²⁰⁸ Macauley, *Unitarianism in the Antebellum South*, 164.

Society became incensed at abolitionist messages in the quarterly journal they received from the American Unitarian Association, they demanded Gilman cease their subscription. However while Gilman dutifully complied, he added a postscript to the letter cancelling the subscription requesting that he himself still receive a copy to the journal.²⁰⁹ This reflects Gilman's inner turmoil on the issue; outwardly he acted as he always had to grow and sustain the southern Unitarians, but he still maintained a sense of religious unity that his peers increasingly lacked.

In the end, Gilman's lifelong campaign to promote the toleration of Unitarianism in the South largely succeeded but only at the cost that the Unitarians there adopted closer ties to southern culture than to their northern fellows. Many of the Unitarian churches in the South either closed their doors or otherwise dissolved as distinct congregations by the eve of the Civil War. Expelling ministers like Simmons and Motte did not encourage the AUA to send many more missionaries, and the southern churches continued financial reliance on Boston did not help either. Some churches like the one in Savannah were forced to sell their building to pay their debts while others like the one in Augusta did not receive a pastor for many years.²¹⁰ These conditions forced their members to join the orthodox churches such as the Presbyterians and Baptists, which they attended whilst keeping their liberal theological views. Even the church in Charleston proved vulnerable to the conditions of the times when Samuel Gilman's death in 1858 left them bereft of leadership only two years after the Charleston Unitarian Book and Tract Society broke ties with its northern brethren.²¹¹ The church received a series of short-term ministers before the Civil War broke out, but none could replace the charismatic Gilman.²¹²

²⁰⁹ Gilman to the A. U. A., August 18, 1856, 4.

²¹⁰ Macauley, *Unitarianism in the Antebellum South*, 172-3.

²¹¹ "Memorial to Rev. Samuel Gilman," *Harvard Alumni Bulletin*, 446.

²¹² Macauley, *Unitarianism in the Antebellum South*, 180.

Southern Unitarianism experienced steep declines as its appearance of connection with northern abolitionists, unwillingness to cooperate with ministers linked to the practices of either radical abolitionism or moderate antislavery isolated their congregations, ultimately leading to the end of these churches as a lack of support in either ministers or funds from the American Unitarian Association left them to wither on the vine. There were few visible reminders of the Unitarians by the time the Civil War reached Charleston apart from the building itself. Church records and religious paraphernalia held at Columbia for safekeeping were all destroyed or captured when Sherman's army occupied the city.²¹³ All that remained was the old gothic architecture of the building, and the cover to the communion table that a Union soldier sympathetically offered to a refugee and a member of the church.²¹⁴

²¹³ "Memorial to Rev. Samuel Gilman," *Harvard Alumni Bulletin*, 446.

²¹⁴ "Memorial to Rev. Samuel Gilman," *Harvard Alumni Bulletin*, 446.

CHAPTER 3: A MORAL CONTAGION: SLAVERY, INDIVIDUALS, AND OPPORTUNITIES

The question of what to do regarding slavery altered the character of Unitarianism and how adherents lived it, going beyond simply dividing them into geographic or doctrinally divergent factions. Unitarians north and south, antislavery, proslavery, and moderate, transformed as a religious practice because of dividing over slavery. This change led to the intensifying of divisions and the clarifying of how their own faction might differ from others. Unitarian and abolitionist activist Eliza Lee Cabot Follen implored fellow mothers to do all they could to abolish slavery as a “solemn duty, a glorious work.”²¹⁵ She heavily disparaged pro-slavery groups when she wrote that anyone who “pretends to own a human soul usurps the prerogative of the Almighty.”²¹⁶ She also advocated for positive living withing her own sect through advising mothers of their role in shaping the character and virtues of their (eventually voting) sons.²¹⁷ Follen, along with other likeminded activists, endeavored to strengthen the abolitionist movement as one of positive values, rather than being merely reactionary against doctrinal and geographic opponents. Unitarians in the years before the Civil War carved out their own niches within the religion by emphasizing the differences in their beliefs from others, took advantage of and criticized restrictions to individuals due to the anti-slavery and abolitionist movements, and highlighted how their religious beliefs compelled them to live in an age of slavery.

²¹⁵ Eliza Lee Cabot Follen, *To Mothers in the Free States* (New York City: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1855), 3.

²¹⁶ Follen, *To Mothers in the Free States*, 4.

²¹⁷ Follen, *To Mothers in the Free States*, 4.

While Unitarianism went through doctrinal reforms that separated it from more orthodox faiths, it was not similarly prepared to reform itself to adopt the social positions of the antislavery activists. Boston was the “chief stronghold of liberal Christianity” generally, and of the Unitarians specifically by the start of the century.²¹⁸ By 1804 the Unitarians largely succeeded in establishing their beliefs as preeminent in the city and in the nearby Harvard University.²¹⁹ They matured as a religious movement rather than a social one. McKivigan argued the Unitarian’s “decentralized organization... made it impossible for the growing abolitionist element... to enforce disciplinary rules against the fellowship of slaveholders...” that while the Unitarians were moderately more antislavery than other groups, they refused to expel or categorically condemn slaveholders.²²⁰ The same structural dynamism that aided them in liturgical reform left them without the cohesion to make and enforce organizational changes. Furthermore, northern emancipation already removed slavery and slaveholders from Boston which removed the incentive to take a stand against the practice in places far from the city.²²¹ While there were different liberal Christians in the area there was pressure to promote Unitarianism; while there were no slaves in the area there was only limited pressure to promote abolitionism. Consequently, the Unitarians were the radicals in the realm of Boston theology, but they fell far behind abolitionist expectations for evangelizing activism.

The alienation experienced by abolitionists rarely manifested in a subtle or even a polite way. Samuel J. May remarked in his eulogy regarding fellow opponent of slavery Charles Follen

²¹⁸ Wright, *The Beginnings of Unitarianism in America*, 253.

²¹⁹ Wright, *The Beginnings of Unitarianism in America*, 253.

²²⁰ McKivigan, *The War against Proslavery Religion*, 179.

²²¹ McKivigan, *The War against Proslavery Religion*, 54.

that “wherever we went, mobs arose to withstand us.”²²² May understood that his society tolerated the liberal Christians far more than it tolerated the abolitionists. The liberal Christians themselves refused to welcome the abolitionists as May noted that “in Boston, every church was closed against our meetings...”²²³ Boston society and even most of the Unitarians largely deemed abolitionism to be too extreme for their tastes, and instead limited the ability for the existing Unitarian abolitionists to push for systemic changes within the AUA. The scorn and dismissal directed at the Unitarian abolitionists did little to dissuade them, as they believed that they had a moral duty towards ending slavery. Eliza Follen wrote of her belief that those in the northern states were “the greater sinners, for we have the baser motives for our share in the iniquity.”²²⁴ Abolitionists such as Eliza Follen held that the northern states actively participated in slavery by supporting it politically through bills like the Fugitive Slave Law and by benefitting from it economically.²²⁵

These issues fostered division within the Unitarian ranks, and even total splits with some abolitionists like Theodore Parker. Parker mirrored Eliza Follen’s language in calling slavery a “great sin,” and shared her criticism of the Fugitive Slave Law’s northern compliance on the part of “the American government, which did the deed: on the people’s part it was a great defeat...”²²⁶ Abolitionists such as Parker understood their efforts at emancipation as part of a two pronged fight not only against slavery itself, but often also against their own slave free society that nevertheless enabled and supported the institution. Parker recognized the problem of

²²² Samuel J. May, *Mr. May’s Discourse on the Life and Character of Rev. Charles Follen, L. L. D. Delivered before the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, in the Marlborough Chapel, Boston, April 17, 1840* (1840) *American Unitarian Association Letterbooks*, bMS 571/38, Andover-Harvard Library, Harvard Divinity School: 17.

²²³ May, *Mr. May’s Discourse*, 17.

²²⁴ Follen, *To Mothers in the Free States*, 3.

²²⁵ Follen, *To Mothers in the Free States*, 3.

²²⁶ Theodore Parker, *The Boston Kidnapping: A Discourse to Commemorate the Rendition of Thomas Simms* (Boston: Crosby, Nichols, and Company, 1852), 9.

political toleration of slavery but added that “the State makes slavery a Measure, but the Church baptizes it as a Principle.”²²⁷ The abolitionists did not shy from trading barbs with the religious institutions that criticized them for their emancipatory zeal. McKivigan contended that the Unitarian practice of delegating authority to local churches simultaneously allowed abolitionist groups to flourish in some churches but left them “powerless to establish uniform antislavery practices in them.”²²⁸ This roadblock to Unitarian preeminence in abolitionist circles created disgruntlement in some, and disunion in others. Abolitionist activism led to displacement from good standing within the Unitarian ranks, a fact May praised the late Charles Follen for his “faithfulness” in preaching the abolitionism that “was the cause of his separation from the society” of the Unitarian church he briefly held as a ministry.²²⁹ Parker differed from many of the Unitarian abolitionists in that while Unitarians reactively removed those such as Charles Follen for preaching abolitionism from the pulpit, Parker actively removed himself from the Unitarians in part due to their unwillingness to preach the same.

Tensions regarding the proliferation of abolitionism stemmed from the divergent ways that Unitarians conducted their religious lives. As McKivigan explained, the Unitarian’s theology “did not attribute social problems such as slavery to personal sin.”²³⁰ Abolitionist Unitarians contrasted heavily when they took every chance they could to label slavery as a sin for the individual, for the society, and even for the emancipated northern states. May talked about the effort to “redeem our country from the sin...of slavery,” Eliza Follen classified the participation of the Free States in allowing slavery to persist as a collective sin, Parker shared her

²²⁷ Theodore Parker, *A Sermon Preached at the Music Hall, Boston, on Sunday, July 4, 1858* (1858) *American Unitarian Association Letterbooks*, bMS 571/127, Andover-Harvard Library, Harvard Divinity School: 12.

²²⁸ McKivigan, *The War against Proslavery Religion*, 52.

²²⁹ May, *Mr. May’s Discourse*, 23.

²³⁰ McKivigan, *The War against Proslavery Religion*, 49.

criticisms, as did many other abolitionists.²³¹ Stange too commented on the “revivalist atmosphere of many of the abolitionist meetings” that differed from more conservative Unitarian practices.²³² Religious convictions served as a catalyst for the abolitionist worldviews from the start by catalyzing it with the moral force needed to advocate for immediate emancipation.

However, the Unitarian abolitionists grew out of Unitarian principles despite their frequent disagreements with fellow religious devotees. Historian Betty Fladeland, in her book *Men and Brothers: Anglo-American Antislavery Cooperation*, pinpoints the belief that slavery was sinful, and not merely a social ill, with the First Great Awakening and Quaker constructions of the idea in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.²³³ Daniel Yacovone’s biography on Samuel J. May explained May’s developing opinions on sin in a similar fashion. He describes that as May grew older, he “increasingly externalized sin; in later years he saw sin more as the result of collective national behavior...” rather than focusing on personal flaws and failings.²³⁴ While the main body of Unitarians described sin in personal, internal terms, the abolitionists grew their activism out of a theology that externalized sin. For if slavery was an external, societal sin, then so too must its penance be carried outside of the church walls.

James Freeman Clarke, a minister in the slave state of Kentucky, demonstrated that not every Unitarian opponent of slavery felt the same through his refusal to denounce every individual slaveholder as necessarily complicit in the sin of slavery. He wrote that “it does not follow that immediate emancipation is right, or that the slaveholder is a sinner,” in a commentary

²³¹ May, *Mr. May’s Discourse*, 17.

²³² Stange, *Patterns of Antislavery*, 63.

²³³ Betty Fladeland, *Men and Brothers: Anglo-American Antislavery Cooperation* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972), 4-5.

²³⁴ Yacovone, *Samuel Joseph May*, 39.

on Channing's work "Slavery."²³⁵ Although he personally felt a "disgust and horror" regarding slavery, Clarke believed that abolitionist tactics did more to harm the conditions of slaves, masters, and stable relations between free and slave states than it did toward actually ending slavery. Clarke argued that abolitionists principally achieved further animosity with divisive rhetoric instead of advocating for an atmosphere of détente whereby slaveholders might realistically be able to release their slaves without compromising the peace of their own communities. "The *system* must be judged by its consequences, the man by his *motives*."²³⁶ This demonstrated Clarke's insistence on viewing the issue of slavery with a level of nuance he did not perceive in abolitionist tracts. Clarke opposed slavery, but unlike abolitionists such as May surmised that many slaveowners did not own slaves simply because they selfishly perpetuated the system despite awareness of its evils. Clarke preached in a slave state, but unlike ministers such as Gilman did not come around to excuse or defend the institution of slavery itself.

However, the majority of views on the subject were not as measured as those of Clarke, instead sliding more towards apathy or zealotry. Antislavery adherents and abolitionist activists alike increased usage of the language of disgust and impurity to describe slavery. Whereas Clarke thought it foolish to describe slavery as an inescapable personal sin, abolitionists went a step further and attached a visceral sense of moral repugnance to the term. Channing confided in an 1839 letter that he perceived slavery as a "cloud from hell" that threatened to "overwhelm and destroy" the freedom and moral virtue of America.²³⁷ Channing was far less forgiving of slavery as he aged and a few years after that letter his words were both harsher and more public. He

²³⁵ James Freeman Clarke, *Autobiography, Diary, and Correspondence*. Ed. Edward Everett Hale (Boston: The Riverside Press, 1891), 219.

²³⁶ Clarke, *Autobiography*, 220.

²³⁷ William Ellery Channing, May 10, 1839, in *Correspondence of William Ellery Channing, D.D., and Lucy Aikin, From 1826 to 1842*, ed. Anna Letitia le Breton (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1874), 341.

characterized slavery as a “moral contagion” that “spread from the South through the North and deadened our sympathies with the oppressed” in his address regarding the anniversary of the emancipation of the British West Indies.²³⁸ Again, Channing categorized slavery not merely as an inefficient labor system or as immoral exploitation perpetuated throughout time, but a sin so vile that it acted like an epidemic.

Theodore Parker held very similar views in that regard to Channing despite their wide theological differences and the former’s greater outspokenness on the terrible nature of slavery. Parker described slavery in the United States as that which “stains its own integrity” during a sermon denouncing the rendition of an escaped slave back into bondage under the auspices of the Fugitive Slave Law.²³⁹ Of note here is that slavery did not stain the slaveowner nor the slave states uniquely, but that it stained the entirety of the country. In another sermon he employed a metaphor regarding the “moral degradation which is contagious not less than the plague.”²⁴⁰ He argued that one would not feel safe if one seventh of every Boston house had the plague so why then should his listeners not have concerned themselves when one seventh of the population of the United States was enslaved?²⁴¹ A single crime does not make a crime wave, and does not require a mass mobilization of resources and societal will. Both Channing and Parker described slavery not as an individual problem to be solved piecemeal but spoke of it in the language of totality. A stain must be utterly cleansed to be clean; a plague must be totally quarantined to be cured, and therefore slavery had to be totally abolished and as soon as possible. Under this

²³⁸ William E. Channing, *An Address Delivered at Lennox on the First of August, 1842, The Anniversary of Emancipation in the British West Indies* (Lennox, MA: J. G. Stanly, 1842), 5.

²³⁹ Parker, *The Boston Kidnapping*, 8.

²⁴⁰ Parker, *A Sermon Delivered at the Music Hall*, 9.

²⁴¹ Parker, *A Sermon Delivered at the Music Hall*, 9.

perspective, more reserved approaches such as Clarke's were tantamount to tolerating a wound to fester.

In the minds of the Unitarian abolitionists, the sinfulness of slavery did fester and infect the northern states and even the abolitionists themselves. Even those without direct contact with slavery still suffered from its effects. Eliza Lee Follen claimed in the opening line to her tract, *To Mothers in the Free States*, that "American mothers are responsible for American slavery."²⁴² In it, she held northern mothers accountable for not raising children to advocate for abolition, as well as not advocating for it themselves out of what she believed to be a "selfish fear."²⁴³ Abolitionists argued that while preachers like Gilman were themselves converted by travelling into the South, northerners were not safe because slavery altered conditions at the national level. In *A Protest against American Slavery by One Hundred and Seventy-Three Unitarian Ministers* the aforementioned ministers observed that "Northern men, going to the South, often become Slaveholders and apologists for Slavery," as in the case with Gilman.²⁴⁴ They concluded that "Our silence is therefore upholding Slavery, and we must speak against it...."²⁴⁵ This expressed a similar idea to Eliza Follen; that active opposition to slavery was necessary and that passive disapproval of the institution constituted support for it.

Unitarianism's forays into the South through missionary and social work reflected upon adherents and abolitionists back in the North in ways that sometimes brought contemplation, and at other times brought disgust. Although influential theologians such as Channing and Parker differed in their beliefs regarding involvement in politics their writings revealed considerable

²⁴² Follen, *To Mothers in the Free States*, 1.

²⁴³ Follen, *To Mothers in the Free States*, 3.

²⁴⁴ Henry Sullings, Joseph Blackman, et al., *A Protest against American Slavery by One Hundred and Seventy-Three Unitarian Ministers* (Boston: B. H. Greene, 1845), 5.

²⁴⁵ Sullings, *A Protest against American Slavery*, 5.

concern with how southern slavery cast aspersions upon the North generally, and the Unitarians specifically for their unwillingness to achieve total rejection of slavery within their churches. The years preceding the Civil War brought along greater national awareness of the institution of slavery and how slavery affected the national character. In a similar fashion, as Unitarians spread their beliefs beyond the relatively narrow confines of the greater Boston area, they were forced to deal with the practical realities of an entrenched and intransigent slavery economy that culture. This in turn galvanized many of the Unitarian abolitionists to adopt more proactive approaches to ending slavery.

CONCLUSION

Religious fragmentation preceded the political fragmentation of the Civil War as churches were forced to reconcile their moral standards with the looming specter of slavery. During this time religious convictions often set the tone for antislavery positions by attaching the weight of moral force to the desire for an immediate end to slavery. The history of abolitionism within the Unitarians offers a valuable insight into a group that had several high profile opponents of the practice of slavery and yet it neither fractured due to the dispute over the proper response to the institution nor did it embrace the positions desired by antislavery activists such as Samuel J. May or Eliza Follen.

The Unitarian's dedication to their foundational values of rationality, lived virtue, and unity but without a strong degree of centralization allowed them to thrive despite their early trials of reform and calls for more rigid dogma. These guiding principles compelled their abolitionists towards action beyond tract writing and pamphleteering, as members spoke against the renditions of fugitive slaves, led rallies opposed to slavery, and more. May put aside the tenets of Liberalism in favor of warning that the continued existence of slavery threatened God's wrath and wrote that "the law of retribution is the foundation of Divine Government," rather than constitutional government.²⁴⁶ By the 1840s, Parker began preaching exclusively in abolitionist venues, and cultivated political connections as he implored that abolitionists must send "men to legislate" to abolish slavery and amend the Constitution.²⁴⁷ The abolitionists finally woke up to the challenge of slavery, and roused to action, went forward to fight it.

²⁴⁶ Yacovone, *Samuel Joseph May*, 183.

²⁴⁷ Grodzins, *American Heretic*, 469, 474.

However, these Unitarian virtues still made it virtually impossible for abolitionists to encourage the singular issue of slavery to dominate church life. Further attempts to expand the influence of Unitarianism outside the greater Boston/New York area resulted in unforeseen problems for the activists. Oftentimes Unitarianism survived due to its tolerance for slavery as seen in the case of Samuel Gilman, or brought about a reluctance to condemn every slaveholder as inherently evil as in the case of James Freeman Clarke, which proved to be antithetical to the abolitionists aims of denouncing slavery as always and everywhere a sin. The growing pains of territorial expansion and lack of centralized response to the preeminent issues of the day ultimately compelled many Unitarian abolitionists to pursue their goals either completely outside the broad banner of Unitarianism or through dual investment in religiously heterogenous antislavery societies.

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