

PREFACE TO FIRST EDITION OF
BLACK PIONEERS IN A WHITE DENOMINATION by Mark Morrison-Reed
(Skinner House Books, 1980)

It was not hyperbole which led Samuel J. May, a leading Unitarian abolitionist, to write in retrospect in 1869:

The Unitarians as a body dealt with the question of slavery in any but an impartial, courageous, and Christian way. Continually in their public meetings the question was staved off and driven out, because of technical, formal verbal difficulties.... We had a right to expect from Unitarians a steadfast and unqualified protest.... They, of all other sects, ought to have spoken boldly. But they did not.

Douglas C. Stange tells this story of equivocation in *Patterns of Anti-Slavery Among American Unitarians, 1831-1860* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, Inc. 1977).

Universalism as an institution did little better. Though an anti-slavery resolution was adopted by the Philadelphia convention in 1790, it was virtually the last word to be heard on the subject from the denomination for the next fifty years. "Many leading Universalists," writes Russell E. Miller in his monumental work, *The Larger Hope* (Boston, MA: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1979), "were reluctant to discuss [the slavery question] or become involved in debate over it for fear it would divide and disrupt the denomination."

The division could indeed run deep. Though Unitarianism was the religion of William Lloyd Garrison and Theodore Parker, Maria Chapman and Lydia Child, it was also the faith claimed by Millard Fillmore, the President who signed the Fugitive Slave Law; Daniel Webster, the Law's champion; Samuel A. Eliot, one of only three northern Whigs in Congress to vote for it; George Ticknor Curtis, who issued the first warrant in compliance with it; and Ezra Stiles Gannett, who pleaded from his pulpit for its enforcement. The division could indeed run deep. "Yes," said Parker of Gannett, "[he is] calling on *his* church members to kidnap mine...."

Below the schismatic surface, however, lurked an even more profound ambivalence. "I should expect from the African race....," William Ellery Channing had written, "less energy, less courage, less intellectual originality, than in our race...." And even Parker entertained "no doubt [that] the African race is greatly inferior to the Caucasian in general intellectual power, and also in that instinct for Liberty which is so strong in the Teutonic family...."

If Channing and Parker fell victim to the presumptions of their age, perhaps it is little wonder that some denominational leaders of our own century did too. In part, *Black Pioneers in a White Denomination* is an extension of the story of division and ambivalence within that "white denomination."

But it is even more poignantly the saga of those “black pioneers,” Egbert Ethelred Brown and Lewis McGee.

Gloster Dalton was among the eighty-five signatories of the Charter of Compact of the Gloucester Society in 1785 and hence, according to Miller, “the first black man known to have been associated with [Universalism].” At the Autumnal Convention of the American Unitarian Association in 1860, relates Stange, a Reverend Mr. Jackson of New Bedford, Massachusetts, testified to his conversion to Unitarianism, thus becoming the first black Unitarian minister in America. Mr. Brown and Mr. McGee were Dalton and Jackson’s proud successors.

When I first read Mark Morrison-Reed’s doctoral thesis in the summer of 1979, I was fascinated by it. As Director of Social Responsibility for the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA), I had yearned to help re-focus our wandering eyes on matters of racial justice. Regardless of how one viewed the controversies over race within the denomination *circa* 1968-70, it appeared indubitable that with the decision in 1970 to end UUA funding of the Black Affairs Council, all effective UUA attention to racial justice ended too. Our relief translated itself into inaction. Like children with hot stoves, we shunned the burner. For us, indeed, no “fire next time.” How might we notice again?

Mark’s thesis suggested part of an answer. There was, he pointed out, much history of our denomination’s struggle with race even before the turn of the last decade which had never been retrieved. To bring it to our attention was one way to encourage us to reflect upon our current predicament. With Mark’s concurrence, financial support from the UUA, Meadville Lombard Theological School, and, most importantly, members of Mark’s home church, First Unitarian Society of Chicago (solicited by Jack Mendelsohn), and Carl Seaburg’s editorial assistance, we determined to publish.

There was, however, one more hurdle which I had not anticipated, one which revealed much about the complexity of black-white relations, even between the warmest of friends. Some time after Mark had agreed to publication of his work, he came to UUA headquarters for a seminar on race with the Department of Ministerial and Congregational Services and during the course of that seminar he said, “Part of my experience of being black in this culture is that I am never sure whether people are relating to me, either positively or negatively, because of who I am or because of my skin color. I’m not even sure inside myself yet, for instance, whether Bill has praised my thesis so highly because it’s *really* good or because a black person wrote it.” When you have finished reading this book, I am confident you will know which it was.

This is a terribly important book. It calls upon us to transcend both apathy *and* guilt because they both deal cruelly with vision.

I have a very personal investment in this publication’s message. My precious stepdaughter, now age twelve, is bi-racial. Jeneanne is very proud of her black heritage.

At the moment she is also very proud of being a Unitarian Universalist. I hope she will stay that way. I hope she will never come to the conclusion that her two prides are incompatible. If my wish is granted, it will be in large part thanks to Ethelred Brown and Lewis McGee—as well as Mark Morrison-Reed. Someday perhaps Jeneanne's presence among us will no longer be that of a pioneer.

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