

Discussion Guide for Video

Long Strange Trip, Part 3: American Unitarianism, 1620-1860 (01:05:02)

Opening and Chalice Lighting

Light the chalice. Share these excerpts from William Ellery Channing's "Spiritual Freedom," written in 1830:

I call that mind free, which masters the senses... which penetrates beneath the body and recognizes its own reality and greatness, which passes life, not in asking what it shall eat or drink, but in hungering, thirsting, and seeking after righteousness...

I call that mind free, which jealously guards its intellectual rights and powers... which opens itself to light whencesoever it may come...

I call that mind free, which sets no bounds to its love, which is not imprisoned in itself or in a sect, which recognises in all human beings the image of God and the rights of his children, which delights in virtue and sympathizes with suffering wherever they are seen....

I call that mind free... which is not swept away by the torrent of events ...[and] is not the creature of accidental impulse, but which...acts from an inward spring, from immutable principles which it has deliberately espoused.

I call that mind free, which, through confidence in God and in the power of virtue, has cast off all fear but that of wrong- doing, which no menace or peril can enthrall, which is calm in the midst of tumults, and possesses itself though all else be lost.

...I call that mind free, which is jealous of its own freedom, which guards itself from being merged with others...

...[In fine,] I call that mind free, which, conscious of its affinity with God, and confiding in his promises by Jesus Christ, devotes itself faithfully to the unfolding of all its powers, which ever passes the bounds of time and death, which hopes to advance for ever, and which finds inexhaustible power, both in action and in suffering, in the prospect for immortality.

Discussion Questions

Choose among these questions and lead a discussion:

- Which events or stories highlighted in the video surprised you? Made you feel proud, or, not so proud? Which events or stories intrigue or unsettle you?
- Which people, stories, and events in the video strike you as important pointers to Unitarian Universalism as we know it today?
- Do the theological conflicts within 18th- and 19th-century American Unitarianism—that is, the conflicts between Arians and Socinians, and between Unitarian Christians and Transcendentalists—matter to us today? Why or why not? What, if anything, can we learn that is relevant for our own time from this history?
- Why do you think theological differences of opinion so occupied Unitarians, who professed to honor freedom of thought and conscience?
- What role did factors such as geography and local culture play in the various conflicts and their eventual resolution?
- In his Divinity School Address, Emerson said that religion should be a “vital personal experience”? To what extent do his words describe your own religious faith and practice?
- Channing, Priestley, and others based their unitarian beliefs on their interpretation of the Bible. Transcendentalists Emerson, Fuller, and Parker offered a radical departure from Bible-based Christianity. What role does the Bible play in your religious life? Do you find your ideas about the Bible reflected in the ideas of our forebears profiled in this video?
- Parker preached that the teachings of Jesus are “permanent” because they are self-evident, true, and not reliant on the divinity of Jesus to make them so, whereas the forms and the doctrines of Christianity are “transient.” What is “permanent” for you about religion and religious practice? What is “transient?”

- Have you heard or seen stories from this period of Unitarian history told from a different angle, or stories that highlight people other than those highlighted in this video? What are the differences? How does the selection of stories reflect the point of view of the teller about the meaning of history for us today?

Closing Reading

Share words by Theodore Parker, Reading 683 in *Singing the Living Tradition*, the Unitarian Universalist hymnbook:

Be ours a religion which, like sunshine, goes everywhere;

its temple, all space;

its shrine, the good heart;

its creed, all truth;

its ritual, works of love;

its profession of faith, divine living.

Extinguish the chalice.