"Nineteenth Century Unitarianism in the South" by Israel Rapoport

Talk presented to The Unitarians and Universalists of Coastal Georgia, March 16, 2003.

This program is based on the book, "Unitarianism in the Antibellum South", written by John Allen Macauly. The subtitle is: "The Other Invisible Institution" published in 2001 by the University of Alabama Press, as part of its "Religion and America Culture" series. It was suggested by Bill Goodyear, who read its review in the "UU World" magazine.

We who are transplanted Yankee UU's, are in the habit of looking to our "holy city" Boston, the headquarters of the Unitarian Universalists Association, formerly the Americian Unitarian Association, for information, guidance, or what-have-you.

Southern Unitarians always felt independent of the national organization from its inception in 1825. Although all Unitarians rejected the triune God, and the divinity of Jesus, they came from different theological roots.

Northern Unitarians developed from the Puritan/Congregationalist churches with the exception of Boston's Kings Chapel, an Episcopal church that became Unitarian in 1784.

Southern Unitarians developed from the liberal wing of the Anglican/Episcopalion tradition. Joseph Priestly, the famous scientist and Unitarian minister, who was driven out of England and settled in Philadelphia, had much more influence with the southern Unitarians, than he had in the north.

When the AUA came into existence, there were already several strong Unitarian churches established in the south. The AUA with their new-found zeal felt that they were needed to spread the word, but ran into opposition from southern Unitarians, a distinctly southern viewpoint that was not understood by Boston. They felt that they should be treated as equals, rather than Unitarian planets circling around an AUA sun.

All Unitarians were similar in the 19th century in that they strongly felt that they were Christians, notwithstanding what others might say about them. They felt that what passed for mainstream Christianity was a muddle of man-made myth and a corruption of the original: "the pure and primitive faith." This is best described in a letter by Thomas Jefferson in reply to several Unitarian semons sent to him to read: "...I have read them (the sermons) with great satisfaction, and always rejoice in efforts to restore us to primitive Christianity, in all the simplicity in which it came from the lips of Jesus. Had it never been sophisticated by the subtleties of commentation, nor paraphrased into meanings totally foreign to its character, it would at this time be the religion of the whole civilized world. But the metaphysical abstractions of Athanasius, and the maniac ravings of Calvin, tinctured plentifully with the foggy dreams of Plato, have so loaded it with absurdities and incomprehensibilities as to drive into infidelity men who had not the time, patience or opportunity to strip it of its meretricious trappings and to see it in all its native simplicity and purity." They cited the Bible as their primary source and found in it no basis for the trinity, as did Bishop Arius in the 2nd century and Michael Servatus and Faustus Socinius in the 16th century, and many others. They differed in the exact status of Jesus. For example, Joseph Priestly felt, although not divine, Jesus was the promised messiah and had a special mission. One historian wrote that southern Unitarian ministers while rejecting the trinity, nevertheless still blessed people, "in the name of the Father, the Son and Holy Ghost."

Because Unitarianism has never been a static religion, ideas have changed dramatically since the 19th century. For example, a poll taken a few years ago showed only 10% of Unitarians thought of themselves as Christians, while the largest percentage thought of themselves as humanists. The remainder were divided among Deists, Pagans, Jews, etc. An almost standard subject of Sunday sermons, and Fellowship discussions was the question, "Are Unitarians Christians?" It was usually answered, in true Unitarian fashion with a resounding, "maybe," and still is a topic today. In January of 2001, I presented a sermon given by the Reverend Edward Frost of Atlanta, entitled, "Are Unitarians Christians...or What?"

Unitarians in the 19th century were identical in that they were mainly located in urban areas, and Unitarianism appealed to the educated, professional, commercial, and business classes. We have all heard of the so-called "Boston Brahmins," who were at the top of the

Boston/New England social ladder and were mainly Unitarians. In the 19th century, Harvard University and Unitarianism were practically synonymous. If possible, it was even stronger in the south. Unitarians were tightly enmeshed into the higher reaches of southern society. It attracted many influential, literary, professional, commercial, and mercantile people. They had a greater influence than their numbers would indicate. Author Macauly states: "...they had intimate social relationships with the power elites of that period." They played an important part in the charitable, benevolent, literary and educational organizations, both locally and nationally.

The Rev. Samuel Gilman of Charleston, South Carolina, the preeminent Unitarian minister in the south, was a popular speaker at many clubs and organizations there. Macauly's book subtitle refers to "the other invisible institution." The first invisible institution was that of the blacks, at the bottom of the social ladder, who had developed their own vibrant Christian community, hidden from their masters. The other at the top of the social ladder, were the Unitarians, who despite their small numbers had established a nebulous network of liberal faith and enlightened religious rationalism in an increasingly evangelical culture. Many members of the Episcopal and Presbytarian churches in Charleston and New Orleans were in the habit of attending Unitarian services in addition to their own.

Influence can run in both directions. Unitarians may have influenced others in a theological sense, but the majority of Unitarians were imbued with what can be called the "southern way of life." The south was an agrarian society, with the top of the social pyramid being the land-owning planter class; even the urban dwellers looked up to them as trend setters. Although most Unitarians lived in the cities, they owned or rented slaves: they were household help. Slaves were looked upon as symbols of their master's gentility and prestige, also for social position. There is even the example of an Unitarian minister from Augusta, Georgia leaving the pulpit to purchase a plantation in South Carolina.

There were three main theological influences on southern Unitarianism. The first was Arminianism, taken from the teachings of James Arminius, a contemporary of John Calvin. Calvin preached what is called "Predestination" or God chose those who were to be saved or damned before they were born: these were the "Elect." This was unconditional because of the "utter depravity of mankind" which left no choice. Arminius, on the other

hand, felt that there was "Conditional Predestination." God predestines those he knows will accept him. He also said that man is a free moral agent and can choose to accept or reject God. Calvin said that Christ died only for the elect, while Arminius said that there was unlimited atonement, meaning that Christ had died for more than the elect.

The second influence was Latitudinarianism, which developed in 17th century England among certain circles of the Anglican church as a counter argument against the enlightenment foes of the Christian religions as expressed by Thomas Hobbes, Spinoza and the Deists. Latitudinarianism advanced the alliance of religion and science. Further, it emphasized reason in religion and practical morals over "credal speculation" or the argument over biblical minutia. They said that the chief aim of Christianity was to "make men moral." They alligned themselves with the progressive and liberal movements in their contemporary intellectual world.

The third influence was known as "Scottish Comon Sense Realism." It was an ethical/philosophical system, not a theological system. It was a way of thinking about the world. It was also a product of the Enlightenment, but was a rejection of its more extreme tendencies, such as the sceptical philosophy of David Hume and John Locke, who felt we know nothing immediately, but only through the intervention of the mind. Scottish Common Sense realism said that, "we perceive external objects directly through intuitive knowledge." They were striving for order and logic saying our mind is constituted by God to know reality directly. Principles do not have to be proved, they are "self evident" to the common experience of mankind. Among these principles are the existence of external objects' cause and affect, and the obligation of morality. Those philosophies which deny these common sense principles are, therefore, defective.

The Rev. Gilman and other southern Unitarians felt that the other denominations were not biblical enough. Instead they believed devoutly in the truths of the Bible, as they saw them. Gilman said that the Bible would not back Trinitarian beliefs. The southern Unitarians also rejected the Deists, who believed in the sufficiency of natural religion, or those principles that can be established by reason alone. Gilman separated himself from "...the disreputable Thomas Paine." Paine had written that God could reveal anything to an individual or individuals, but when these revelations were

revealed to others, it was no longer revelation but "heresay." Southerners felt that Deism was too radical, they believed in "supernatural rationalism. They denied the correctness of "natural religion," saying that you need "revealed religion." In our modern Unitarianism we still have remnants of that controversy. There are Humanists (who have gone further than the Deists) and those who use the word "Spirituality," a general term that includes various beliefs and insights that, while cannot be scientifically proved, still remain valid to them.

Now, let us look at the development of some southern Unitarianian churches. The dominant Unitarian church was located in Charleston, S.C. Its origins were linked directly to the "Independent or Congregational" church of Charleston dating back to 1680, which had a history of liberal Protestant thinking. With the death of their minister in 1819, the Second Independent Church of Charleston asked the President of Harvard to send a replacement. Samuel Gilman, an avowed Unitarian and his wife, Caroline were chosen. In 1832, the name of the church was changed to The Unitarian Church of Charleston. Gilman served for forty years and became an important figure in Charleston society and southern Unitarian circles. Through his efforts, churches were established in Augusta and Savannah, Ga., Spartenbury, S.C., and Mobile, Alabama. He became a leading defender of the southern way of life and of slavery. He wrote: "The genteel notion of balance, harmony and structure in the hierarchical world view of the south was completely congruent with the simplicity, symmetry and purity of the Unitarian faith."

The other important Unitarian church was in New Orleans. The Minister, Theodore Clapp, started out as a Presbytarian Minister, but throught his own independent study came to believe in the Universalist and Unitarian positions. He was asked to become the leader of the Congregational church after the previous Minister died of yellow fever. But when he found out the church was in debt for $45,000, he refused to take over until the debt was paid off. The Congregation paid some of the debt, but most of it was paid by a Mr. Judah Touro, a Jewish philanthropist in the city, who continued to support the church although he never left his own faith.

Rev. Clapps' Universalist and Unitarian beliefs led to his expulsion from the presbytarian church on a charge of heresy, but most of his congregation stayed with him. It became known as The First Congregational Unitarian Church in 1853, but two years later the name was changed to the more

general: Church of the Messiah. Although the AVA listed the New Orleans church in their directory, they had problems with Rev. Clapps mixture of Unitarianism and Universalism. Universalism was not popular in Boston Unitarian circles at that time. Clapp was referred to as a "Trinitarian" and a "Restorationist." Since Universalism began as a reaction to predestination, an Universalist Restorationist believed that everyone was saved, but would continue to be miserable until reconciled to God. Clapp like Gilman became an important figure in New Orleans society, and was popular among all sectors of the population.

Another church that flirted with Unitarianism and Universalism was in Richmond, Virginia. In 1824, several Universalist missionaries visited Richmond speaking to various groups. In 1830 scattered Unitarians and Universalists came together from the Unitarian-Universalist Society of Richmond and started a church. It was referred to as, "the uni-uni church." Later to reassure the community of its Christian status and to minimize differences among its members, it changed its name to "the First Independent Christian Church of Richmond."

The Richmond Church, like New Orleans, was listed in the AUA register despite its "deviant theologies." Both Unitarians and Universalists disdained the evangelical revivals sweeping across the nation at that time. Besides their differing theologies, the big stumbling block in uniting at that time was that of class. Universalists were made up mainly of small town and rural people; Unitarianism had a more wide-spread appeal for the urban, upper class.

Southern Unitarians worked with others to relieve the evils of society, but not neccessarily as a denomination, rather as individuals. Rev. Gilman felt that the various benevolent societies were the best venue for reform, for "quiet, calm, reasonable change." They worked against such sins as drunkeness, Bible illiteracy, Sunday revelry, and poverty. In the north they tended to see poverty as a direct result of degeneracy, and used their wealth as a means to encourage virtue.

The south had an aristocratic view of reform. It was part of "honor, duty and benevolence," a sort of "Nobless Oblige." They saw poverty as part of God's ineffable world. Southern Unitarians championed those reforms that strenghtened family relationships, and cultivated intellectual and moral improvement. Along with others they worked for seamen's rights, literacy and worker's rights.

In the case of worker's rights, this was an implicit criticism of northern industrial capitalism. Rev. Gilman wrote, "wealth has no value except as a means to a higher end." He lamented the huge gulf between, "lordly capital and panting labor." Why, he asked, are so many working men denied a day off? In the southern agrarian economy, labor came under the auspices of "household relationships." By household relationships, they meant the extended family which included servants and slaves. In their defense of slavery, they compared the miserable working conditions of northern labor with the much better conditions of the southern slaves.

Despite their deep involvement in southern society, Unitarians were attacked in pamphlets and tracts by the more orthodox denominations such as Atheists, Deists, and Socinians. They countered with their own publications. Most were published by the Charleston Book and Tract Society. Rev. Gilman did not use the pulpit to respond to these attacks. He felt the pulpit was only used for religious teachings and that the Unitarian position would win out, with well thought-out reasoned arguments, based on the Bible.

There were differences in theology between northern and southern Unitarians. They also differed in how they should be organized. From the beginning of the AUA, southern congregations felt they would lose their unique heritage in a national organization. They even resisted inclusion in the Annual Report. In 1834, Rev. Gilman proposed to the AUA to establish an "Association of Southern Unitarians" with Charleston as the center. The AUA never bothered to reply.

They also felt that the AUA was stingy with its money and refused or censored AUA publications. The AUA continued their missionary work in the south, but had decided that the west seemed a more promising area for future growth. These problems, over time, might have been able to be

resolved or mediated, but the central struggle remained about the institution of slavery.

The south felt that slavery was a political problem that would be solved by the states. To many northern Unitarians, slavery was a deeply disturbing moral problem. Rev.William H. Channing, nephew of William Ellery Channing declared that, "...if Unitarians do not condemn slavery then Unitarianism was an empty profession." Southern Unitarians called the statement, "untactful, uncharitable, and fanatical." Charleston refused to accept the 19th Annual Report because that statement was included in it. Southerners saw their northern counterparts as "traducers," with an "obnoxious sense of moral superiority."

In August of 1840, the Rev. Orville Dewey spoke to a large crowd in Sheffield, Mass. during which he called for the immediate abolition of slavery. Rev. Dewey had just returned from an extended visit to the south where he made many friends. He had said that slavery was not sinful, although he thought it was a moral problem rather than a political one. When news reached the south, they felt betrayed. The news was met, in their, words, with "aversion and disgust." The Unitarian Book and Tract Society of Charleston, in the name of the church, declared their independence of the AUA.

Another point of conflict was the so-called "Motte Affair." In 1842, the Savannah Church asked the AUA to recommend a minister to them. The AUA proposed the Rev. Millish Irving Motte, a former southern Episcopal minister. Before he arrived, Savannah rejected him becaused he "abjured" southern principles and was an avowed abolitionist. The AUA reacted with anger and informed Savannah theywould have nothing more to do with them in the matter of supplying ministers.

Southern Unitarians felt that the southern agrarian system was humane, tolerant, progressive and Christian. They felt that slavery through gradual reform would eventually give way to a milder form of personal servitude and racial relationships, while retaining the fundamental committment to the southern household. Personal servitude was condusive to a Christian social order. Free labor, on the other hand, was a source of alienation, and spiritual

and moral degradation. This, also, was a criticism of northern industrial capitalism.

They compared the wretched conditions of the "white slaves" of the British and United States northern manufacturing systems, with the physical comfort of the southern slaves. They said that those systems had little or no regard for the interests of the workers. They also compared, in their words, "the lazy, discontented and disappointed black freemen of the north, with the advances in physical comfort, religious instruction, and the moral and mental development of the black slaves of the south.

The three main defenses of slavery used by the southern Unitarians were: the Bible; moral philosophy, and natural law.

Southern Unitarians believed that scripture was the primary foundation of truth. From their point of view, it was the basis of their belief in the unitary God. Scripture also offered conclusive proof of the divine sanction of slavery. In Genesis, did not God give slaves to Abraham as a reward? Would Jesus Christ, who lived among a slaveholding society, not say something if it had been such a monstrous evil? Would He have not condemned it? In fact, He told his disciples to obey the civil authorities who condoned slavery.

Moral Philosophy, (Scottish Common Sense Realism) spelled out the relationships of the family. The slaveowner was obligated to rule over his family, his "little kingdom," and slaves were part of that family and kingdom.

Both Revs. Gilman and Clap believed that the emphasis moral philosophy placed on "rights, duties and relations," especially those involving family and household, provided the best categoriesfor a defense of slavery. Clapp declared: "Christianity attempts to remove the evils of slavery -- not by destroying the relation, but by inforcing the duties. Obedience to parents can not exist if you abolish the relation of parent and child." Gilman said, "I believe that occasional acts of private cruelty and oppression due not arise from the nature of the institution, but from the imperfection of man." He also felt that these acts of cruelty and oppression would still be exercised by the whites over the blacks if the latter were set free.

Natural Law. God had created a diversity of races, rather than a unity of mankind. Because there were various degrees of dependence existing between human beings, the resulting inequality was inherently natural. Rev. Gilman wrote, "I believe that their (blacks) natural insolence and improvidence would reduce them, if left to themselves, to vastly greater misery than the occasional privations they are now called upon to sustain. I believe that the vices of the blacks are not necessarily caused by slavery, but are characteristic of the race, as is proved by the testimony of all intelligent travelers to Africa."

This attitude was not exclusively southern. Many northern abolitionists were not proponents of integration. The Rev. Dewey, whose speech so incensed southern Unitarians, proposed some vague ideas about settling the freed slaves, "somewhere over the mountains in California." Others talked about returning them to Africa.

An example of northern attitudes is this quote from Rev. Channing, who the south reviled as a fanatical abolitionist: "I should expect from the African races if civilized, less energy, less courage, less intellectual originality, than in our race, but more amiableness, tranquility, gentleness, and content. They might not rise to an equality in outward condition, but would probably be a much happier race. There is no reason for holding such a race in chains, they need no chain to make them harmless."

By 1850, there were less Unitarian churches in the south than there were in 1830. Southern Unitarians put the blame squarely on northern Unitarian abolitionists, who they felt caused much more harm than all the attacks from the evangelicals. One said, "The curse of abolition and puritan preaching hangs over us and will not die down." Another quote was, "Had the clergy of that denomination confined their preaching to the truths of Christianity and the abolition of sins prevailing among their own people, and leave political matters and institutions of other states and peoples to be governed by those interested, quite an important sum of money might annually flow into their treasury."

In 1850, a sermon by Rev. Clapp, printed on the first page of the leading New Orleans newspaper, stated that the abolitionists were the "aggressors and the authors of the late agitation in our political world." He also said that they preached absurd, impractical theories on the subject of slavery.

The members of the Charleston Book & Tract Society issued a statement that said, "they loathed the insane interference into their peaceful occupations, privileges and rights." As much as the southern Unitarians tried to distance themselves from the northern Unitarians, most southerners lumped them all together.

By the outbreak of the war, only Charleston and New Orleans were organizationally active. The Augusta, Georgia church had closed, although the members kept the society going for some years and the AUA kept them on their books. In 1856, the building was sold to a Jewish group. In Savannah, the minister left for Roxbury, Mass. In 1846, debts forced them to sell the building to the Episcopal Diocese and it became a black Episcopal church, and was later sold to the Baptists. Today, however, the Church building is back in Unitarian hands.

Author Macauly feels, with no hard proof, that displaced Unitarians "infiltrated" other Protestant churches in their cities, and may have influenced these churches to become more liberal. He also writes that the network of charitable organizations, publication societies, and civic institutions continued even after most of the Unitarian churches had dissolved.

Today, my research shows us that the Unitarian Universalist denomination is thriving in the South. Within the Thomas Jefferson and the Mid-South districts, there are a total of 122 congregations. These districts comprise the states of Georgia, North and South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. The Florida district adds 43 additional congregations. These southern congregations vary in size from small Fellowships to large ones. For example, the Eno River Church in North Carolina has almost 700 members, and the Richmond, Virginia congregation has 450 members.

I found Macauly's book a fascinating look into a little known facet of Unitarian history in America. No longer can we see Unitarian history solely centered in New England and as one of the leaders in the abolitionist movement in the nineteenth century.