

'TO ADMIT THE TRUTH WHEREVER WE FIND IT'

Religious Dissenters in England were developing the Unitarian and similar movements in liberal religion through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Integral to this development was the building of the Octagon Unitarian Chapel in Norwich, Norfolk County, which opened its doors for worship for the first time in May 1756, an event 250 years ago that at this moment is celebrated by Octagon Unitarians as a signal anniversary. This is the first of two articles honoring this anniversary.

The rise of Unitarianism in Norwich faced great challenges. By the time of the English Civil War and its aftermath in the mid 17th century, Norwich was already known for its religious diversity and harmony. Yet with the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660, Anglican orthodoxy returned and Unitarianism remained illegal as a severely punishable offense. Liberal congregations, as that led by Dr. John Collinges, had to worship in secret. "To secure my liberty" and to "keep my soul free from any violation," as Collinges put it, he and other religious liberals had to be wary and covert.

By 1672 some religious liberals emerged from the closet, and in 1686 they leased the site, where the Octagon would later be built, on which to build a meeting house. The congregation still remained wary, despite the Glorious Revolution of 1688 that brought William and Mary to the throne and a degree of toleration to religion, as orthodoxy might yet reap its vengeance and Unitarianism still remained illegal. So the meeting house as constructed in 1689 was disguised as a private house and set down a narrow alley to hide it from view and to allow some protection against possible popular wrath against liberal heresies. Yet within its walls, it was clearly a house of worship, which, it was said, could seat 1000 congregants. The form of governance was presbyterian and the theology shifted progressively from a liberal trinitarian to an avowed unitarian orientation. By the 1750s, however, the old meeting house had become unsafe and had to be replaced.

The inspiration for avowing Unitarianism and for the building the Octagon Chapel on the same site as the dilapidated meeting house, came from Dr. John Taylor, then associate minister to the congregation. Taylor had been appointed in 1733, straight from the Dissenting Academy at Whitehaven (universities being only open to the Orthodox), and was the first openly to describe himself as a Unitarian, although the threat of prison still hung over the faith. Like William Ellery Channing later in America, Taylor preferred just the label "Christian," by which he meant to follow the dictates of love and reason "by dilating the Heart to universal Goodness and Benevolence, by opening the Understanding, by giving Freedom of Mind to admit the Truth wherever we find it. *Behold how good and how pleasant it is for Brethren to dwell together in Unity.*" With the mind and heart as one's guide, Taylor thus opened the door for a free religious community to broaden the faith even beyond liberal Christianity itself.

Taylor's ideas came to have a great influence on British and then American Unitarianism, as his inspiration lay behind the design of the new chapel in Norwich appropriate for a free religious community. The Octagon's anniversary is thus ours too.

To be continued.

Ref.: *The Octagon Unitarian Chapel, Norwich* (Norwich, 2000), pp. 1-7; Conrad Wright, *The Beginnings of Unitarianism in America* (Boston: Starr King Press, 1955), pp. 76-78.