

“I ACKNOWLEDGE MY OBLIGATION TO THE REV. DR. JOHN TAYLOR OF
NORWICH”

The inspiration for moving the Norwich congregation, in the mid-18th century still led by the venerable but semi-conservative Rev. Peter Finch, to the more radical position of Unitarianism, and then for the building the Octagon Chapel on the site of the unsafe old meeting house, came from Dr. John Taylor, then associate minister to the congregation.

Taylor, under the influence of the liberal thought of Samuel Clarke and others and from his appointment in Norwich in 1733 quickly developed and disseminated a set of ideas that formed the basis of Unitarianism in England and America. Human beings have free will, are free moral agents, and are not predestined to absolute moral depravity. Human beings are rational creatures, with the ability through nurture and reflection to know what is right, and are not dependent on the divine inside-track of others to chart one’s course in life. Human beings have the ability to do what is right as well as what is wrong, and thus are not steeped in original sin empty of redemptive ability, but, with God’s grace, may overcome sin. Human beings have the right and obligation of private judgment “to admit the truth wherever we find it,” for which seekers who “dwell together in Unity” may inquire into the true and good and put the insights gained into practice.

This constellation of ideas of *freedom, reason, responsibility, and community* spread rapidly from the 1730s out from Norwich across Britain and by the 1740s were deeply influencing the minds of New England and then of other American colonies. In Boston the Rev. Charles Chauncey and the Rev. Jonathan Mayhew were leaders in adopting and disseminating Taylor’s teachings. These ideas even inspired Chauncey to go beyond Taylor to embrace the idea of a loving God’s intention to nurture all human souls to salvation, a Universalist insight for which Chauncey wrote that “I...publically...acknowledge my obligation to the writings of the late reverend Dr. *John Taylor of Norwich.*” Taylor’s books were on the top of the reading lists for religious inquirers in Boston. Minds in England and America, thus stimulated by Taylor to think for themselves, were also drawn to see Jesus as a human being, and not as a special divine figure, thus to define a Unitarian theology that marked Taylor and the rising movement in Britain and America.

In 1753, on the death of Finch and Taylor becoming the senior minister of the Norwich congregation, and with clear Unitarian values to guide them, the congregation set about to build a new chapel. Under the inspiration of Taylor and the plans of architect Thomas Ivory, the “new chapel” rose in 1754-56. The constricted site happily produced the idea of a chapel in which the worshipers were in as intimate connection with each other as with the pulpit. The structure was light and airy, rationally symmetrical, and wholly appropriate as the religious home for a free, responsible, worshipping community, as it remains today. Even John Wesley, on visiting it, remarked: “How can it be thought that the old coarse gospel should find admission here?” Methodists adopted the design for their own chapels. Some Anglicans, however, grumbled that it was “the Devil’s cucumber frame.” After the name “Unitarian” ceased to be illegal in 1813, it was thenceforth and is known today as the Octagon Unitarian Chapel.

As Taylor’s ideas informed British and American Unitarianism, this month’s 250th anniversary of the completion of the Octagon Unitarian Chapel may be celebrated by all on both sides of the Atlantic who value *freedom, reason, responsibility, and community* in the religious life. The Octagon’s anniversary is ours too.

Ref.: C, G. Bolam et al, *The English Presbyterians: From Elizabethan Puritanism to Modern Unitarianism* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1968), pp. 184-185; Roland N. Stromberg. *Religious Liberalism in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1954), pp. 110-111; Conrad Wright, *The Beginnings of Unitarianism in America* (Boston: Starr King Press, 1955), pp. 76-80; *The Octagon Unitarian Chapel, Norwich* (Norwich: The Octagon, 2000), pp. 1-17; Frank Meeres, *A History of Norwich* (Chichester: Phillimore, 1998), p. 122.