

LIBERTY, FAITH, ZEAL, LEADERSHIP, ORGANIZATION

In November 1869, the Rev. Henry W. Bellows, the great organizer of mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Unitarianism in America, wrote to an English colleague, the Rev. John Kenrick, of the condition of Unitarianism in the United States as compared with that of England. Here are some excerpts.

“New York, Nov. 22, 1869

“My dear Mr. Kenrick,

“In this free America, we do not suffer many of the hardships of Non-conformity (as in Britain). The Government is without any Religious Establishment, and we are so subdivided, that Dissent means little. Yet Unitarians even in America, out[side] of favored regions like Massachusetts, have strong public sentiment of Trinitarian Orthodoxy to contend with, which it requires much strength of conviction and force of will to overcome and before which the lovers of majorities, the socially ambitious and the less seriously convicted are often succumbing.

“There is too in these times less discrimination and less interest in the *outlines* of religious opinions. Social reasons prevail over theological ones; forms of worship & ecclesiastical usages over doctrinal convictions; the pulpit has ceased in all Protestant bodies to insist with any distinctness upon *opinions* & the orthodox theology is merely implied or suggested, not explained and enforced. This is not favorable to the progress of Unitarianism. Nothing would do *us* so much service as an uncompromising fidelity of teaching on the part of trinitarian and Calvinist orthodoxy! But it is against the spirit of the age. Meanwhile there is a great drift into Indifference among our American people. A large minority of the better educated have ceased to frequent Churches. ... I think you had in England, a half century ago, in the [ Anglican] Establishment, very much the same luke-warm toleration and vagueness, which prevails in our American Christendom among the more intelligent classes.

“Still, spite of all, Unitarianism advances and was never so hopeful, enterprising and successful as within the last five years. ... We are striving to have the advantages of Liberty and Church organization, *combined*; a difficult, but not impossible Union! We see the fruits of our systematic co-operation very unmistakably – & it grieves us that Great Britain does not exhibit in its Unitarian Communion, a spirit of confidence & of mutual helpfulness & missionary zeal such as we now rejoice in here.... It needs, I am persuaded nothing but zealous & capable leadership. One truly able & earnest leader believing in organization, & full of faith & zeal & liberty, could overcome all the disintegrating & centrifugal tendencies in English Unitarianism.”

“Henry W. Bellows”

One might wonder how Bellows might have viewed the character of religion in America today and how Liberal Religion is faring and might fare among the Christian Evangelicals today compared to how it fared among the orthodox of his day.

Ref: *Transactions of the Unitarian Historical Society*, vol. 5, no. 4 (November 1934), pp. 435-438.