

THE NECESSITY OF FREE INQUIRY IN RELIGION

Early New England persecuted religious deviants. Yet the concept and practice of the right of private judgment in religion grew in the 17th and 18th centuries to become a foundational religious and civic value. This reliance on freedom of thought as the only path toward truth derived from sources as diverse as Roger Williams of Rhode Island in the plea for the right of conscience in his *Bloudy Tenent of Persecution*, the English Unitarian John Locke's ringing *Letter Concerning Toleration*, and the Arminian rejection of inherent and original sin in favor of God-given reason and conscience that provides human beings with the capacity to do right or wrong.

By the mid-eighteenth century individual religious liberty, not the rulings of magistrates, had become a core value of the emerging Unitarian movement in America. Charles Chauncey and Jonathan Mayhew, open-minded ministers of prestigious churches of Boston, voiced their own evolving ideas that encouraged their influential congregations to explore new realms of open-ended thought, which led a whole province toward what would be identified as Unitarianism. In Virginia at the College of William and Mary, alert and inventive students, foremost among them Thomas Jefferson, inspired by John Locke and his Unitarian professor William Small, followed a similar path. Jefferson in his 1770s draft of his *Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom* wrote "that truth is great and will prevail if left to herself, that she is the proper and sufficient antagonist to error and has nothing to fear from conflict, unless by human interposition disarmed of her natural weapons, free argument and debate, errors ceasing to be dangerous when it is permitted freely to contradict them." And in 1801, Unitarian minister David Barnes of Scituate, Mass., declared that "different opinions produce inquiry, freedom of inquiry excites discussion, and discussion promotes knowledge. Let mankind by perfectly united in opinion, and paradoxical as it may seem, in a short time they would have no religion at all."

If to Barnes uniformity would stifle religious thought, to the young William Ellery Channing in 1811 free religious inquiry would expose the false pretenses of the multitude of sects and rather lead patient inquirers toward a common religion of truth and right. To Channing, "vassalage of mind cannot for ever be maintained. There is an elastic force in the human understanding which resists this weight of oppression; and when the enslaved world once obtains freedom, and begins to think for itself, it will by reaction become more devious and extravagant in its operation than if no burden had been imposed." The newly freed mind could be drawn to extremes. But patient inquiry and sharing of perspectives could lead to an insight that all truth is one. "Claiming for themselves the right of inquiry, and taught by inquiry that they are prone to err, they become more diffident of their own judgment, and lay aside their censoriousness toward others. And if they do not agree entirely in sentiment with those around them, they still live in peace, and give and receive light; and thus a foundation is laid for real and increasing uniformity of opinion."

Thus, to early Unitarians in America, an imposed uniformity stultifies, truth may be attained only by free inquiry, and free minds in conversation may attain a one whole truth.

Ref: Conrad Wright, *The Beginnings of Unitarianism in America* (Boston: Starr King Press, 1955), pp. 223-240, with quote on p. 239; Thomas Jefferson, *The Jefferson Bible: With the Annotated Commentaries on Religion*, ed. O.I.A. Roche (New York: Potter, 1964), pp. 363-364; William Ellery Channing, *Memoir*, vol. 1 (Boston: Crosby, Nichols, 1854), p. 364.