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## *Conrad Wright's Search for a Usable Past*

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I was asked to write about Conrad Wright, James Luther Adams, and George Huntston Williams—perhaps because I was “present at the creation,” having studied at Harvard Divinity School when this famous Unitarian trinity was teaching there.

In his autobiography, Adams said: “In 1986 at the time of my eighty-fifth birthday, [Conrad Wright] spoke wisely of the difficulties [that] faculty members have among themselves.” Adams quoted Wright: “Of course, there are cases where colleagues are involved in close collaboration. But most of the time our familiarity with the concerns of our fellow faculty members is very much on a catch-as-catch-can basis.”<sup>1</sup> One gets the impression of two gentlemen edging past each other on a narrow sidewalk.

In fact, Wright, Williams, and Adams were “unity in diversity” personified. Wright and Williams were historians; Adams gave history a leading role in his social ethics, but his way of doing history was as broad-brush as Wright’s way was precise. Williams was over-the-top in *both* ways.

Williams had been Adams’s student beginning in 1938 when Adams began to teach and Williams matriculated at Meadville Lombard Theological School in Chicago. When Adams’s 1930s-era 8 mm. films from Germany were re-worked as videotapes, he and Adams provided the commentary. Adams’s laudatory essay about Williams was published in the collection, *An Examined Faith*.<sup>2</sup> Williams returned the compliment in his preface, “A Tribute to the Life of a Teacher,” written for Adams’s autobiography, *Not Without Dust and Heat* (1995). It includes the odd idea that Adams’s “thought is indeed Binitarian with God as the community-forming power and final Judge of human endeavors and with the Holy Spirit at once interiorizing and illuminating power for

clarification, consensus, and emboldenment to witness and to other kinds of social action and the source of energizing and healing grace both from within the disciplined group and from beyond, including the sodalities of literature, art, and music." Yes, he really wrote that way. But I must ask, "Binitarian"?<sup>3</sup>

They were indeed trinity-esque! Williams held joint fellowship with the UUs and the UCCs, and preferred the Cambridge Congregational church. Jim and Margaret Adams found the Cambridge UU church too politically conservative; in the 1960s they decamped for the Arlington Street Church. Wright remained a devoted member of the First Parish in Cambridge — a devotion that shined through on the every-other-year occasions when I took my high school age Affirmation Classes from Arlington, Virginia on pilgrimage to "the neighborhood of Boston." Professor Wright would meet us for a tour of the church, the Yard, and finally the tiny chapel in Divinity Hall, where Mr. Emerson himself famously spoke. He was warm with these young people and generous with his time.

My only course with Wright was a reading seminar organized by several of us Unitarians. We met with him weekly and read, almost exclusively, Channing. He made sure that we saw the bright line in Channing between Supernatural Rationalism (horrid oxymoron in my tender Unitarian ears!) and Transcendentalism: Channing may seem to cross over the line in "Likeness to God," but he did not accept Emerson's intuitionism. Channing's Bible remained the sacred historical text, not the world itself transcendently apprehended.

This was one of several corrections that Wright made to the propensity of historians to favor the "radicals" over the "conservatives," the intuitionists over the traditionalists, and the individualists over the institutionalists. He asks, "Why do scholars have a persistent urge to identify Channing with Transcendentalism, and to minimize the point he held in common with the more conservative Unitarians of his time?" It is because they are interested in American literature, not churches, with the result that Channing becomes a mere precursor. We should join in Wright's proposed "Rediscovery of Channing," as Gary Dorrien also urges.<sup>4</sup>

At this time Dr. Wright was a Lecturer in American Church History and Registrar. His *magnum opus*, *The Beginnings of Unitarianism in*

*America* (1955), gave us substantial understanding of our roots, running from early New England Calvinism, to Arminianism, to Unitarianism. His 1977 essay, "In Search of a Usable Past," notes that we tell the story of Unitarian Universalism as if it were "the doctrinal or ideological transformation from liberal Christianity toward Free Religion and then Humanism."<sup>5</sup> Wright notes that we ignore the institutionally significant story that runs from Bellows to the Eliots, Samuel A. and Frederick May. As a result we have failed to generate a "doctrine of the church," leaving a vacuum into which various secular models have rushed. If we told our story differently, we would see ourselves differently and, he implies, be more effective.

Wright develops a "doctrine of the liberal church," and in this context asks, "How is a liberal church constituted?"<sup>6</sup> Our history, rooted in the Cambridge Platform (1649), points to his answer, *mutatis mutandis*: not by an agreement of beliefs but by a covenant, an agreement to "walk together" with tolerance for differences of belief within some reasonable limits. For our Puritan forebears, covenant is the proper form of the church, and "the saints by calling," headed by Christ, is its matter. Wright dealt with the ecclesial form; the theological substance was not, he seems to have thought, a usable past.

Recent contacts and significant partnerships with Unitarian congregations in Transylvania have abetted the idea that our Unitarianism originated in the sixteenth century in Transylvania. Wright notes that this is something less than a half-truth; our Unitarianism is not a European import. As a parish minister I taught this "axiom" of Conrad Wright, even while my heart wanted to lift up the Transylvanian connection. But the very ability to live with complexity and its ambiguities is integral to our liberal religious identity. To interpret Unitarian Universalism by way of its complex history is to say: "I may not be able to say exactly *who we are*, but I can tell something of *how we got this way*."

Another intellectual fray with contemporary relevance that Wright got into is found in his paper, "John Cotton Washed and Made White," published in the George Williams *Festschrift* (1979). It concerns John Cotton's tract, "The Bloody Tenet of Persecution Washed and Made White by the Bloud of the Lambe" (1647), a reply to Roger Williams's "Bloody Tenent of Persecution for the Cause of Conscience Discussed." Spencer Lavan noted Wright's contribution to a fresh understanding

of John Cotton in his Collegium paper, "Conrad Wright, Washed and Made White." He later published under the title "Conrad Wright: Historian of American Unitarianism," perhaps having said to himself, block that metaphor!<sup>7</sup>

Lavan notes that Wright upheld the wisdom of John Cotton, weighty Puritan divine, against Roger Williams, fiery Baptist dissenter, despite the strong tilt of historians to Williams and his claims for the rights of individual conscience. Wright noted that "conscience" meant to Cotton an educated "consciousness" or capacity for moral apprehension, "in accordance with natural law or the revelation of Scripture," *not* an intuitive or "natural" sense of right and wrong. The latter view comes to full flower only with the Transcendentalists; elsewhere Wright noted that Theodore Parker was astonished at the very idea of "an educated conscience."

My impression is that in the latter part of his career Wright took on an increased number of opportunities to bring history to bear on current Unitarian Universalist concerns. Three important instances: First, by raising awareness and understanding of the roots of church covenants in our institutional history, he abetted the efforts some of us undertook to frame "a new covenant for our association." These efforts finally took shape in the new, 1984 statement of UUA "Principles" and "Sources." Here again Adams and Wright were in substantial agreement; together, they put "covenant" on our intellectual agenda.<sup>8</sup>

Second, Wright's writings on congregational polity had an impact on the seminal Commission on Appraisal report of 1997, *Interdependence: Renewing Congregational Polity*. The report sought to rescue congregational polity from the "strict constructionism" of absolute congregational autonomy; it said our polity is a covenant of interdependence among self-determining agents, and appealed to the pledges of mutual "support" and "correction" among congregations written into the Cambridge Platform.

Third, another effort to forge a new consensus among us was the compendium of essays published by the UU Ministers Association in connection with its 1995 Convocation, titled, *The Transient and the Permanent in Liberal Religion*. With an eye to discerning the enduring core within our chronically diffuse identity, the editors began the volume with two essays on "Our Covenant." The first was my essay, "The

Covenant of Spiritual Freedom," for which I had studied Channing's great address, "Spiritual Freedom," under Dr. Wright's tutelage. The second was Wright's essay, "Congregational Polity and the Covenant," in which he concluded: "[T]here is something to be said for the word 'covenant,' quite apart from its long currency. It emphasizes that the church is a community of mutual obligation, which involves a sense of commitment. Even the freest of free churches needs that much discipline if it is to last long enough to accomplish anything of value in this world."<sup>9</sup> This was Wright's doctrine of the church in a nutshell: "a community of mutual obligation," an idea that uses the past to help insure that we have a future.

Conrad Wright spoke with modesty and precision. I remember him at a Collegium meeting when we were in hot pursuit of a familiar topic: how to increase the intellectual heft and rightful influence of this motley band of "liberal religious scholars." All sorts of ideas were batted about—requiring advance preparation of papers, publishing our Proceedings, setting conference themes to which all would hew. Professor Wright remained silent for a long time. Finally he spoke up: "I think that we are getting from our contributors just about the quality of papers that we are going to get." We all paused, and smiled at ourselves. Thank you, Conrad, for your dose of reality therapy!

I also remember a story he told from Down East Maine. It seems that Ezra and Alfred had set off in their fishing skiff, far into the Atlantic, when the weather turned foul—really foul, with the wind whipping and the seas running ever higher and the dark sky swirling. As the skiff pitched to and fro, taking on water, Ez and Alf were thinking the same doleful thought: *this could be it!* "Well, Ez," said Alfred, "time to get down on your knees." So Ezra went to kneel down, right there. Just then Alfred looked out across the sea and saw the clouds lifting, just a bit, and the sun just startin' to break through. "Hold it, Ez," he said, "wouldn't want to be beholden!"

This is quintessential New England and quintessential Conrad Wright—not really disbelieving, but with that instinctual sense that too much religion can put your independence at risk. So be careful. You wouldn't want to be beholden!

My father, Stephen Beach, said to me, "They honor their fathers poorly who only imitate them." That is a liberating word to pass from

father to son. So too, from teacher to student. I have learned immensely, all of us have gained immensely, from Conrad Wright. He is indeed inimitable.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> James Luther Adams, *Not Without Dust and Heat* (Chicago: Exploration Press, 1995), 318.

<sup>2</sup> James Luther Adams, "George Hunston Williams, Church Historian," *An Examined Faith* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), 94ff.

<sup>3</sup> George H. Williams, preface to *Not Without Dust and Heat*, 3.

<sup>4</sup> Conrad Wright, *The Liberal Christians* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1970), 38. Professor Dorrien spoke of Channing and James Luther Adams as the two most important figures in American Unitarian history in his address at the UUA General Assembly in Charlotte, North Carolina, in June 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Conrad Wright, "In Search of a Usable Past," *Collegium Proceedings*, Vol. 1 (1979), 125.

<sup>6</sup> See "A Doctrine of the Church for Liberals," *Walking Together* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1989), 1ff.

<sup>7</sup> Spencer Lavan, "Conrad Wright: Historian of American Unitarianism," *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, 7: 2 (May 1986).

<sup>8</sup> James Luther Adams, "From Cage to Covenant," *The Prophethood of All Believers* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 136ff.

<sup>9</sup> George Kimmich Beach, "The Covenant of Spiritual Freedom," and Conrad Wright, "Congregational Polity and the Covenant," *The Transient and the Permanent in Liberal Religion*, edited by Dan O'Neal, Alice Blair Wesley, and James Ishmael Ford (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1995), 17ff and 29ff.