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## *Conrad Wright and the Course of American Intellectual History*

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It was a privilege to study with Conrad Wright at Harvard Divinity School in the 1970s, which in retrospect was a great era for Unitarian historiography. Wright's essay collection *The Liberal Christians* appeared in 1970, and he co-authored and edited *A Stream of Light* in 1975. Meanwhile others who were not Unitarian historians had begun to make significant contributions to Unitarian history. They saw Unitarianism not so much from within, but rather as part of a larger fabric of United States cultural and intellectual history. Daniel Walker Howe's *The Unitarian Conscience* was published in 1970; Lawrence Buell's 1973 *Literary Transcendentalism* recognized the aesthetic and literary impact of Unitarian discourse in America. William R. Hutchison began his important 1976 study of *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* with a chapter on "The Unitarian Movement and the 'Spirit of the Age,'" and in 1981, Andrew Delbanco published *William Ellery Channing and the Liberal Spirit in America*.<sup>1</sup> These were groundbreaking works by scholars who rose to great prominence in their fields, and whose cumulative impact suggests the influence of Unitarian thinking in the shaping of progressive thought in the antebellum United States. Grounding this outpouring of historical rediscovery was Conrad Wright's *The Beginnings of Unitarianism in America* published in 1955.<sup>2</sup> In this pivotal work Wright traced the origins of the American Unitarian churches, and was the first scholar to explain the decisive impact of the eighteenth-century New England liberals in splitting the traditions of Puritan Calvinism and dividing the original churches in Massachusetts.

The "unitarian" thinking that Wright described was not yet, of course, Unitarian. But his account of the liberal ministers emerging as a group to challenge both the Great Awakening and the theological premises supporting it has enormous importance for our understanding

of the currents of American thinking in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>3</sup> The religious controversies that brought Unitarianism into being were rooted in Calvinism, the body of doctrines embraced and adapted by the original Massachusetts churches in the seventeenth century. This powerful set of interlocking propositions supported the church, but also influenced the laws and customs of New England society. The decline of this body of doctrines in the eighteenth century is one of the most significant intellectual shifts in American history. Wright recognized the liberal ministers in the Boston area as catalysts for this change.

The scholar who played the central role in bringing the history of New England Calvinist thinking back to life, after a slumber of two centuries, was Perry Miller. Conrad Wright was Miller's doctoral student at Harvard, and the first version of *The Beginnings of Unitarianism in America* was Wright's doctoral dissertation, written under Miller's supervision and completed in 1946. There is irony in the fact that the essential history of the religious movement that affirmed human capacity was written by a student of the leading historian of the religious movement that avowed human depravity. Wright published his revised dissertation in 1955, at very nearly the same time that Miller, who had become an academic Titan in the post-World War II boom years of university expansion, brought out a collection of his essays and addresses in the volume *Errand into the Wilderness* (1956). This collection included what is arguably Miller's greatest and most influential essay, "From Edwards to Emerson," which had first appeared in the *New England Quarterly* in 1940.<sup>4</sup> Miller's argument for the kinship of Jonathan Edwards and Ralph Waldo Emerson casts an important light on the significance of Wright's study of American Unitarianism's eighteenth-century origins.

Miller's essay was appealing to American historians and literary scholars because it linked Edwards and Emerson, two powerful and influential religious thinkers who seem to represent diametrically opposite poles on the theological spectrum, Calvinism and Transcendentalism. Miller had made Edwards and Emerson into exemplars of religious experience, and argued that the Puritan sense of grace resurfaced after a century as Emerson's transcendental mysticism. By suggesting a kinship or continuity between Edwards and Emerson, Miller offered the outlines of something like an Einsteinian unified field theory of

New England intellectual history, one that affirmed the centrality of Edwards, and rendered Emerson in the Edwardsean lineage, albeit in a somewhat diminished condition. Emerson was, as Miller put it in his headnote to the essay, "an Edwards in whom the concept of original sin has evaporated" (p. 185).

Neither Miller nor Wright fully approved of Emerson, though they disapproved on different grounds. Miller found Emerson's optimism about human capability a sign of shallow optimism, and Wright objected to Emerson's individualistic lack of commitment to religious institutions. Miller's argument, powerful as it is in many ways, distorted Emerson, who struggled mightily with access to the mystical and was increasingly pulled to ethical action, or "works," as Edwards and other Calvinists might have called it.<sup>5</sup> But Miller's narrative also left, to those who were attentive, a strange discontinuity in the development of theological ideas in New England. What, after all, had happened theologically between Edwards and Emerson? Although his work did not engage Miller's explicitly, Conrad Wright offered the answer. In engaging the texts of the New England liberals that Miller had omitted, Wright provided the missing narrative of one of the greatest shifts in American intellectual history, as noted above, the decline of New England Calvinism and the rise of its liberal alternative. Wright did not write explicitly against Miller, and his *Beginnings of Unitarianism* was not conceived as a refutation of Miller's work. "To him my indebtedness over many years is great," he wrote in his prefatory acknowledgments. But in examining eighteenth century liberal theology, he saw the course of ideas in early American culture quite differently, and that difference had important implications.

Wright's narrative focuses not on Edwards but on his nemesis, Charles Chauncy, minister of the First Church in Boston. Chauncy was skeptical about the spiritual reliability of the outpouring of emotion in the revivals of the Great Awakening, and he was alarmed about the disturbances within the New England churches that such outpourings were causing. Allying himself with his colleague Jonathan Mayhew of Boston's West Church, he became the central critic of the revivals, and unwittingly launched a counter-movement that became a crucial alternative not only to the revivals, but to Calvinism as a reigning theological orthodoxy. Chauncy was not a rebel or a revolutionary. As Wright noted, Chauncy and his allies "regarded themselves as defenders

of the traditional New England way." Even in matters of doctrine, Wright adds, "they insisted that the revivalists were the innovators, and they called to their support the shades of John Winthrop and Thomas Shepard, of Increase and Cotton Mather" (p. 45). Chauncy, Mayhew, and other "Arminians" as they came to be called, were protecting a beloved institution, and this sense of the critical importance of creating and maintaining vital institutions would become a central theme in Wright's later work on Unitarian history. Frederic Henry Hedge and Henry Whitney Bellows were his exemplars, not Ralph Waldo Emerson. He once remarked, when I mentioned James Freeman Clarke, "Now there is a Transcendentalist worthy of respect."

Thus it was the spread of the proto-Unitarian ideas of the Arminians in the mid-eighteenth century that represented the lost, or overlooked, or perhaps repressed connecting link between Edwards and Emerson.<sup>6</sup> But it was a link based in change, in theological controversy and counter-development, not in a kinship of shared ideas. And as Wright noted, it was a very significant change: the development of "a new set of basic assumptions about human nature and human destiny" (p. 3). Perry Miller himself identified the key aspect of this change when he described Emerson as Edwards with no sense of original sin. We all, of course, consider a doctrine such as original sin reasonable when applied to others, but not so reasonable when applied to ourselves. As Emerson wrote, "We permit all things to ourselves, and that which we call sin in others, is experiment for us."<sup>7</sup>

Wright demonstrated in detail that "the point at which Calvinist theology first came under sustained attack [this was in the 1740s and 1750s] was the doctrine of original sin." Indeed, he goes on to comment that some of "the orthodox seemed to realize that the battles with Arminianism would be won or lost on this issue, for if the concept of total depravity should disappear, the rest of the orthodox scheme would become irrelevant" (p. 60). Chauncy and his allies, with the assistance of English dissenting theologian John Taylor of Norwich, developed a theory of individual human agency to counter Calvinism, one that did not paint men and women as saints, but as "a mixture of good and evil tendencies" (p. 88), capable of virtue but only through the exercise of reason, judgment, and discipline. This was the basis of the doctrine of "probation, life as a process of moral proving and trial," which was

central to the Unitarianism of the later generation of Channing and the Wares, and influential in Emerson's development as well.

Wright elucidates another essential belief of the eighteenth-century liberals that is of particular historical importance to the Unitarianism that followed. Chauncy and his colleagues resisted the concept of the instantaneous conversion experience expounded in the Great Awakening revivals, the source of much of the dramatic emotionalism of these events. Wright explains that Chauncy and others asked whether it is possible for one to be saved without experiencing "the intense emotional experiences to which the revivalists pointed as evidence of their gracious estate" (45). Their answer was that conversion might come in many forms and in different frames of time, incorporating mind and action as well as emotions. The Arminians regarded conversion as more characteristically an extended process rather than a discrete experience. This defense of what Wright calls "the possible variety of Christian experience" (50) would become a hallmark of the Unitarian movement. Chauncy and his supporters advocated an expanded notion of the conversion experience that entailed a much richer definition of the spiritual life, and included both spiritual experience and moral action. Chauncy and his allies contended, in Wright's words, that "the test of conversion is the fruit of the process" (48). This view linked the spiritual with the ethical, grace with works. A series of Unitarian thinkers, from William Ellery Channing to Theodore Parker to Francis Greenwood Peabody to James Luther Adams, would embrace this conception of religion as envisioned practice.

One of the most important elements of such practice is the building and nurturing of the crucial institutions that enable both individual fulfillment and social justice. Remembering Chauncy as a protector of institutions, as well as a theological innovator, is thus important. The imperative of building and sustaining liberal institutions was close to Conrad Wright's heart and became the central focus of his later work. His role as historical chronicler, and yes, as advocate, for an institutionally focused religious life, may well be the way that contemporary Unitarian Universalists know Conrad Wright best. With crucial liberal institutions of all kinds—from churches to schools, museums, and governmental programs—now under serious attack, Conrad's work has, I think, a new significance and immediacy.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Conrad Wright, *The Liberal Christians: Essays on American Unitarianism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970); Conrad Wright, ed. *A Stream of Light: A Sesquicentennial History of American Unitarianism* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1975); Daniel Walker Howe, *The Unitarian Conscience: Harvard Moral Philosophy, 1805-1861* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970); Lawrence Buell, *Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973); William R. Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976); Andrew Delbanco, *William Ellery Channing and the Liberal Spirit in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).

<sup>2</sup> Conrad Wright, *The Beginnings of Unitarianism in America* (Boston: Starr King Press, 1955). Further citations from this book will be cited by page number in the text.

<sup>3</sup> For comment on Wright's work as a historian of Unitarian Universalism, see my "Unitarian History and the Unitarian Universalist Identity: The Work of Conrad Wright," *Proceedings of the Unitarian Universalist Historical Society* 22, 2 (1992-94), 1-11.

<sup>4</sup> Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1956). Further citations from this book will be cited by page number in the text.

<sup>5</sup> For an elaboration of this argument about Emerson's struggles with mysticism and turn to ethical action, see my *Emerson and the Conduct of Life* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). For further details on Emerson's theological background and his sense of "grace," see my "Grace and Works: Emerson's Essays in Theological Perspective," in *American Unitarianism, 1805-1865*, ed. Conrad E. Wright (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society and Northeastern University Press, 1989), 121-42.

<sup>6</sup> For an elaboration of this argument, see my essay "The Road Not Taken: From Edwards, Through Chauncy, to Emerson," *Arizona Quarterly* 48 (1992), 45-61.

<sup>7</sup> See "Experience" (1844) in volume 3 of *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Alfred R. Ferguson et al. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971-), 45.