

"The Battle of Syracuse"

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Ed Atkinson has been a UU minister since 1964, settled in 1969 at Cohasset, Massachusetts.

The full article deals with the recognition of Christianity in our by - laws. The excerpts here relate to the tension over a denominational creed.

The "Battle of Syracuse" raises the large issue of whether freedom of religion precludes any definitive statement of purpose, as more than vague declaration.

How the issue was ultimately "solved" in terms of denominational schisms was the liberty clause first adopted in 1868 and then later considerably widened in 1882.

How is the issue handled today so that no UU congregation can be removed for heresy and yet there are strong denominational policies which claim to be based on our purposes.

In the early 1990's the issue takes such forms as shall exclusively pagan groups be admitted to the UUA? Should churches be forced to consider a gay or lesbian minister? Should a certain number of seats on the UUA board be "reserved" for people of color?

The tension between freedom of belief and organizational power to implement policy is a continuing issue in UUism.

The question might even be raised should it be solved? In any case, what principles can each side bring to the continuing discussion?

from THE BATTLE OF SYRACUSE

by Rev. Edward T. Atkinson

In the years immediately following the Civil War, the Unitarian movement entered into one of the most critical periods of its history to date. One of the key events of this period was the National Conference of Unitarian Churches held in Syracuse on October 10 and 11, 1866....

According to George Willis Cooke, a noted historian of the Unitarian movement, before 1865 Unitarianism was not in any real sense of the word a denomination. Cooke writes that:

There were Unitarian churches, and there was a Unitarian movement; but such a thing as a Unitarian denomination, in any clearly defined meaning of the words, did not exist.

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Theological controversies plagued the Association almost from the beginning....The conservatives would not support the Association unless the radicals were excluded, and the radicals would not support it unless their position within Unitarianism was recognized as legitimate. By the time of the beginning of the Civil War less than fifty churches were contributing to the Association and in 1863 general donations came to a meager \$3,056.03.

The period of the Civil War, however, was to bring a new sense of unity to Unitarianism. The source of this unity was neither theology nor social reform. Radicals and conservatives continued to differ in these areas, but they united their efforts in the cause of patriotism. For different reasons both groups were loyal to the Union, and both engaged energetically in the many tasks presented by the war....In the words of William G. Eliot writing in December of 1864:

The war has proved that our Unitarian faith works well in time of trial. No other church has been so uniformly and thoroughly loyal, and no other church has done more for the sick and dying.

A special meeting of the Unitarian Association was held on December 6 and 7, 1864, in the Hollis Street Church of Boston. At this meeting upon the suggestion of Edward Everett Hale it was decided that an attempt should be made to raise \$100,000 for the service of the next year. This was an amazing figure considering that the average yearly receipts of the Association had been only a little over \$8000 for the past forty years. In order to raise this large sum of money, Dr.[Henry W.] Bellows proposed that a convention be held in New York City with representation consisting of the pastor and two delegates from

each parish or church in the movement.

The First Convention

The New York Convention met on April 5, 1865; by this date pledged contributions were only a few thousand dollars short of the \$100,000 goal. Attending the meeting were delegates from two hundred and two churches. The convention was chaired by John A. Andrew, the famous "War Governor" of Massachusetts. Dr. Bellows, however, was the real organizing and directing force of the meeting.

Early in the convention several attempts were made by some of the more conservative churches to introduce a creed that would give a doctrinal basis to its deliberations, but these motions were quickly rejected. On the second day of the convention it was voted to organize permanently as the National Conference of Unitarian Churches. In the preamble to the constitution of the Conference it was stated that the delegates were "disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ," and in the first article of the constitution it was declared that the conference was organized to promote, "the cause of Christian faith and work." Objections to these phrases were raised by the radicals, but their protest was unorganized and debate on the subject was cut off. When a vote was taken, the constitution was accepted by the great majority of the delegates. In cutting off the discussion, however, Dr. Bellows promised that the "Broad Church question" would be taken up at the meeting on the following year, and thus the stage was set for the "battle of Syracuse...."

When the time for the Syracuse Conference arrived, the radicals had prepared a substitute preamble to the constitution....[The] alternate preamble affirmed that, "the object of Christianity is the universal diffusion of Love, Righteousness, and Truth," and that, "perfect freedom of thought is at once the right and duty of every human being...."

The alternate preamble was considered on the second day, and a hot debate ensued....The discussion continued for most of the day, but when the question was finally brought to a vote, [the] preamble was decisively defeated.

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Unitarianism was at this point turned against itself, for it was born out of a strong commitment to freedom of inquiry and belief as well as to Christianity. Late in his life Channing had foreseen this dilemma. In a letter to the English Unitarian James Martineau, he wrote as follows:

Old Unitarianism must undergo important modifications or developments. Thus I have felt for yearsIts history is singular. It began as a protest against the rejection of reason--against mental slavery. It pledged itself to progress as its life and end; but it has gradually grown stationary, and

now we have a Unitarian Orthodoxy. Perhaps this is not to be wondered at or deplored, for all reforming bodies seem doomed to stop, in order to keep the ground, much or little, which they have gained. They become conservative, and out of them must spring new reformers, to be persecuted generally by the old.

Underlying the question of Christianity at the Syracuse Conference was the issue of whether Unitarianism could exist as a Christian organization and still allow freedom of inquiry and belief....