

Historical Overview of Women Preachers and Women in Unitarian Universalist Ministry

By Rev. Dr. Qiyamah A. Rahman

The Great Awakening in the New World

The Great Awakening, a religious revival that impacted the English colonies in America during the 1730s and 1740s, did a lot to break down colonialism, however, it did little to change gender roles and authority in the churches.¹ The Second Great Awakening, a Protestant revival that occurred during the early 19th century coincided with the nation's population growth from five to thirty million. It further pushed the movement's boundaries westward. The Second Awakening emphasized personal piety over schooling and theology. During this time, social activism spawned groups that focused on abolition, temperance, prison reform, care for the disabled and women's suffrage. Many new denominations were formed during this period. Some scholars attribute the spread of liberal, competitive and market-driven values to The Second Awakening. While some of the evangelicals during the Second Great Awakening celebrated freedom, individualism, and economic mobility, others condemned the materialism associated with the market revolution. It was during this period that women were "allowed" to preach.

Historical Progression of Women's Preaching

Historically, women have suffered from the oppression of patriarchy. Their roles as daughters, stewards of the faith and handmaidens did not protect them from religious discrimination. Puritans, along with many other religious traditions, believed women were

¹ Catherine A. Brekus. *Female Preaching in America: Strangers & Pilgrims 1740-1845*. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press. 1998, 11.

innately inferior to males. It was believed women suffered from inferior spiritual capacity, weak character, uncontrolled passions, and thus were incapable of reason and judgment. Furthermore, women were perceived as easily influenced and manipulated. Some ministers and magistrates according to Marilyn J. Westerkamp believed women were “congenitally inclined toward evil” and therefore, essentially evil.² Many of the early women preaching were subjected to ridicule and labeled “eccentric or crazy.” Neither race nor class shielded these women from the oppression of sexism. Harriet Livermore, a white woman and daughter of an affluent New England family, was one of the first among one hundred evangelical women in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century that dared to defy the cult of domesticity that relegated women to the home. Livermore preached to Congress and published sixteen books over the course of her career as a minister.³ Female preachers endured many stereotypes and were often accused of being masculine. Many of them in fact had strong and powerful voices that allowed them to be heard by their audiences. During the 1830s and 1840s there was a strong resistance against females preaching and their denominations erased their existence from their archives.⁴ Unfortunately, it was not merely males that sought to silence and erase female preachers. According to Brekus, the female preachers that followed in the 1840s and 1850s tended to be more educated and middle class and appeared embarrassed by their sisters emerging from

² Marilyn J. Westerkamp. *Women and Religion in Early America 1600-1850: The Puritan and Evangelical Traditions* New York: Routledge. 1999, 36.

³ Catherine A. Brekus. *Female Preaching in America: Strangers & Pilgrims 1740-1845*. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press. 1998, 4.

⁴ Catherine A. Brekus. *Female Preaching in America: Strangers & Pilgrims 1740-1845*. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press. 1998, 8.

working class origins. They were perceived as “uncouth, continuous(ness), course ... and lower class enthusiasm.”⁵

Sojourner Truth, a Black woman, and self proclaimed preacher was often met with queries about her gender identity. “Your voice is not the voice of a woman, it is the voice of a man and we believe you are a man,” touted a group of white men.⁶ She and other women preachers were not intimidated by such accusations and they rejected social constructs that dictated rigid feminine behavior and norms. Their chosen paths of ministry had already placed them squarely at odds with patriarchy as they challenged concepts of acceptable female stereotypes and lifestyles. Some women went so far as to leave their husbands to preach the gospel.

While most women did not venture into preaching until after the Civil War, those that predated them were often met with resistance and even physical violence. These women did not conform to the genteel stereotype of good women. Not only were they labeled masculine, but they were accused of being radical and guilty of flouting domesticity and socially prescribed roles. They more often than not came from lower working class or lower middle class backgrounds. Most were relatively poor and uneducated. Many were literally homeless as a result of their deep convictions not to be tied to material possessions. Their denominations did not pay their preaching expenses, nor did they pay them salaries. Many of them supplemented contributions from meetings with sewing, housecleaning and occasional stints as washer women.

⁵ Catherine A. Brekus. *Female Preaching in America: Strangers & Pilgrims 1740-1845*. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press. 1998. 338.

⁶ John Carroll, *Case and his Contemporaries or, The Canadian Itinerants; Memorial* (Toronto: Methodist Conference Office, 1867-77, 3:184; Olive Gilbert, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Bondswoman of Olden Time, With a History of Her Labors and Correspondence Drawn from Her “Book of Life.”* Battle Creek, Mich., 1878; reprint, NY: Oxford University Press, 1991, p 119, 138.

Zilpha Elaw, a Black preacher woman, reported that “every congregation voluntarily made a collection for my aid, and every person at whose house I visited, gave me something for my journey.”⁷ Mary Cook, a Universalist preacher earned more money than any of her male colleagues because of her popularity.⁸ In contrast, Elleanor Knight preached in Randolph, Vermont, in 1836, with no compensation. As a result of her destitute state, she was forced to ask her friends for help. They scraped together nine shillings.⁹

While few women were able to achieve financial security as preachers, Clarissa Danforth and Ann Rexford did so through marriage. Yet they sacrificed their calling as a result. While Rexford never returned to ministry after marriage, Danforth briefly came out of retirement in 1834.

The Life of the Female Preacher

Life as a female preacher was grueling. In addition to the financial instability the work itself was grueling. Brekus describes the emotional toll as follows: “separated from their loved ones and ridiculed by strangers, they could not always keep themselves from succumbing to despair.”¹⁰ Nancy Towle, a popular preacher who spoke to thousands in churches, schoolhouses, and open fields between the 1820s and the 1830s, traveled across America on horseback or on foot, often speaking alongside other female preachers. Her travels took her to a total of twelve

⁷ Catherine A. Brekus. *Female Preaching in America: Strangers & Pilgrims 1740-1845*. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press. 1998, 252.

⁸ Catherine A. Brekus. *Female Preaching in America: Strangers & Pilgrims 1740-1845*. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press. 1998, 252.

⁹ Catherine A. Brekus. *Female Preaching in America: Strangers & Pilgrims 1740-1845*. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press. 1998, 252.

¹⁰ Catherine A. Brekus. *Female Preaching in America: Strangers & Pilgrims 1740-1845*. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press. 1998, 253.

states as well as Canada, England and Ireland. She acknowledged that she did not have a single “farthing laid up in store.”¹¹

Travel was not only arduous but many worried about their physical safety and the possibility of being robbed, or sexually assaulted. Most of the women feared traveling south because of the conservative nature of religious communities and southerners’ refusal to accept female preachers. However, Black female preachers had an additional concern. Most southern states allowed free Blacks to be sold into slavery if they did not have legal certificates proving their status. Zilpha Elaw, Jarena Lee and Elizabeth, Black female preachers, believed God had called them to minister to slaves. Zilpha once ignored the threats of white slave owners and traveled to a small town in Virginia, quite literally risking her freedom to preach the gospel.¹² Almost all female preachers traveled with female friends who served as escorts and protection. Harriet Livermore on the other hand took pride in traveling alone, while others were disposed to the safety of numbers. Cheap accommodations and home hospitality were additional barriers female preachers endured, including sharing a room or a bed with strangers, and eating meals of questionable quality. On the other hand, many female preachers were the objects of their hosts’ affections and were lavished with clean linen and hearty meals. However, the uncertainty of what to expect was ever constant.

According to Brekus some of the female preachers articulated strong ambivalence about the growing trend of individualism and consumerism of American culture.

¹¹ Catherine A. Brekus. *Female Preaching in America: Strangers & Pilgrims 1740-1845*. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press. 1998, 251.

¹² Catherine A. Brekus. *Female Preaching in America: Strangers & Pilgrims 1740-1845*. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press. 1998, 248-249.

While these early female preachers were courageous and bold their evangelical zeal was not necessarily motivated out of a desire for women's equality. Most of the women were biblical rather than secular feminists, that is, they based their claims to preach on scriptural revelation and not natural rights.¹³ For example, although they were responsible for bringing hundreds of new recruits to the pews, these same women never pushed for ordination, or permission to baptize or give communion. Thus, history's recall of these women is ironically colored by the progressives who felt the women were too conservative in their theology and their rights as women to be remembered by women's rights activists and yet the conservatives perceived them as too radical to be remembered by evangelicals. And because most of these nineteenth century women preachers preached extemporaneously, few sermons were left to inform us of their content, styles and length, their topics and humor or lack of same. Their own faith communities did not recognize their pioneering spirits and few wanted to pass down their stories.

Myths and Biblical Ways to Discriminate. Classical Debate Over Women's Right to Preach – "Let your women keep silence in the churches"

Most Protestant churches in the early nineteenth century opposed female preaching on the grounds that it violated the Pauline injunction to "Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law" (1 Corinthians 14:34-35, KJV). They also cited two additionally popular Pauline texts: "the head of the woman is the man" (1 Corinthians 11:3b, KJV), and "Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence" (1 Timothy 2:11-12, KJV).

¹³ Catherine A. Brekus. *Female Preaching in America: Strangers & Pilgrims 1740-1845*. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press. 1998, 6-7.

18th and 19th Century Unitarian and Universalist Women's Entry into Ministry

The emergence of the Sisterhood of Unitarian and Universalist female ministers in the frontiers of the Great Plains in Iowa and surrounding states was due to several factors. New states joining the Union with new sets of ground rules and laws gave women unprecedented domestic rights and political voices, thus allowing them to be less bound to old ways of doing things.¹⁴ An additional factor that allowed women to occupations previously barred was the fact that men were in short supply. This provided the space and rationale for women to break out of old roles and enter new professions, including ministry. Additionally, the West afforded women doctors, dentists, and lawyers who were unable to obtain licensure in the East, opportunities to practice unlicensed in the frontier. Few Unitarian and Universalist male ministers had responded to the call to plant new churches, recognizing they came with low pay and grueling work. Women readily filled these roles and provided denominational growth for the next twenty years.¹⁵ The work was "isolating and lonely" according to Cynthia Grant Tucker, author of *Prophetic Sisterhood*. In 1870 only five women had sought their place alongside their male colleagues. Denominational leadership regarded these women not as colleagues but as Tucker describes them, "a blotch on their image." Often clergy women married to clergy men were obscured or overshadowed by their husbands.

In 1895, the Unitarians and Universalists combined had only ordained about seventy women and far fewer actually had been called to full time ministry. Usually, they were called to

¹⁴ Cynthia Grant Tucker. *Our Prophetic Sisterhood. Liberal Women Ministers of the Frontier, 1880-1930.* Bloomington and Indiana, Indiana University Press. 1990, 4.

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small congregations or those male clergy had rejected. These women's presence, according to Tucker, went unnoticed until the 1880s and 1890s.¹⁶ She further asserts that there was no great rush of women into the ministry in the late 19th century.

Olympia Brown, a white female Universalist, was ordained in 1863, in spite of a last-minute case of cold feet by her seminary who feared adverse publicity. After a decade and a half of service as a full-time minister, she became part-time, in order to devote more of her efforts to the fight for women's rights and universal suffrage. Eight years later, in 1871, Celia Burleigh, a Unitarian woman was ordained.¹⁷ Antoinette Brown Blackwell^[1] was ordained by a church belonging to the Congregationalist Church in 1853, a decade before Olympia Brown. However, her ordination was not recognized by the denomination. She later quit the church and became a Unitarian. In 1878, the American Unitarian Association recognized Blackwell as a minister.

Phoebe Hanford, was ordained as the first female Universalist minister in New England and in the state of Massachusetts as the third woman ordained in America.¹⁸ These token inclusions of women into ministry failed to satisfy many, including a woman in 1875 who complained that among almost seven hundred (700) Universalist ministers, only ten women had been ordained and half that number by Unitarians.¹⁹

¹⁶ Cynthia Grant Tucker. *Prophetic Sisterhood: Liberal Women Ministers of the Frontier, 1880-1930*. Bloomington and Indiana, Indiana University Press. 1990, 4.

¹⁷ The following time line lists the first three women ordained in America: In **1815**: [Clarissa Danforth](#) was ordained in New England. She was the first woman ordained by the [Free Will Baptist](#) denomination. In **1853**: [Antoinette Brown Blackwell^{\[1\]}](#) was ordained by a church belonging to the Congregationalist Church.^[2] However, her ordination was not recognized by the denomination.^[3] She later quit the church and became a Unitarian. In **1861**: Mary A. Will was the first woman ordained in the Wesleyan Methodist Connection by the Illinois Conference in the United States.

¹⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phebe_Ann_Coffin_Hanaford.

¹⁹ Cynthia Grant Tucker. *Our Prophetic Sisterhood and the Universalist Experience: The Sixteenth Annual Address on Universalist History, Ethics and Theology*, 1-10.

Contemporary UU Women

Unitarian Universalist records indicate that between 1957 and 1978, among five hundred and thirty eight (538) ministers only nine (9) were female, and of those women, none were settled, that is, called as parish ministers.²⁰ Despite the uneven playing field and their late start, by the 1980s the number of ordained female clergy surpassed males ordained in UU congregations.²¹ According to Cynthia Grant Tucker, in the mid 1990s, of 1,200 ministers, one out of every four (4) was female. Currently, female clergy comprise fifty-one percent of fellowshipped ministers in the UUA.²²

Drawing her conclusions from the larger societal context, UU historian, Cynthia Grant Tucker, linked the remarkable and rapid progress of female clergy to the 1963 debut of Betty Friedan's book, *The Feminine Mystique*. While most scholars address Friedan's impact on dissatisfied homemakers, Tucker draws an astute observation, that is, church women, specifically UU church women, were impacted by Friedan's feminist revolution, which resonated with their activist/woman-centered values. Just how did the presence of female clergy make a difference in the male culture of ministry in Unitarian Universalism? As

²⁰ Cynthia Grant Tucker, "Women and the Unitarian Universalist Ministry: A Historical Overview" in *Leaping From Our Sphere: The Impact of Women on Unitarian Universalist Ministry*, ed. Gretchen Woods (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Ministers' Association, 1998), 25.

²¹ Cynthia Grant Tucker, "Women and the Unitarian Universalist Ministry: A Historical Overview" in *Leaping From Our Sphere: The Impact of Women on Unitarian Universalist Ministry*, ed. Gretchen Woods (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Ministers' Association, 1998), 46.

²² Fellowshipped ministers are credentialed by the UUA and thus receive the "Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval" that they are in good standing with the UUA and all the requirements. Thus, making them eligible to be called "Reverend" and they enter the pool of qualified ministers to be called by UU congregations and to community ministry.

a result of the presence of female clergy some of the “bad” behavior of male ministers was ameliorated as noted in the following comments:

Women coming into the ministry changed things, for example, dirty jokes (at ministers gatherings) ceased after women were present. Another changing norm was the heavy drinking. When I first arrived in the 70s ministers would sit up all night drinking. In a couple of years this heavy drinking ceased (because of women).²³

Thus, women’s presence changed the norms governing interactions and established more appropriate boundaries and guidelines, including how ministerial colleagues engaged one another. Sylvia Howe, UU minister, noted the highly “sexually charged” ministerial gatherings that many of her female colleagues encountered in their early years in her study of power, sexuality and ministry.²⁴ Some of the respondents observed that being “hit on” was the generally accepted norm at that time. Kay Montgomery, Executive Vice President of the UUA, noted the difference in the increased presence of women on the UUA staff and on the Ministerial Fellowship Committee. She posited, “so that the habit, that is, ‘old boy behavior’ was no longer acceptable. . . I used to regularly meet with clergy chapters and large church ministers and the change in those groups was quite dramatically different” (as a result of women coming into the ministry).²⁵

Another example of institutional change cited in the UUA was the use of their organizational machinery and political clout, which women used to galvanize their collective voices to take effective action. One example is the 1991 General Assembly (GA). As early as

²³ Due to the sensitive nature of this content no attribution is made by the writer.

²⁴ Sylvia Howe and Paul L’Herrou, *The Law and the Spirit. Power, Sexuality, and Ministry in Unitarian Universalism—Selected Essays 2001* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Ministers' Association, 2001), 75.

²⁵ Kay Montgomery, interview by author, Boston, MA. August, 2005.

1977 a small group of UU feminists crafted a resolution to the 1977 GA in Ithaca, NY calling for a “search within the UUA for the religious roots of sexism.” The resolution was unanimously adopted as the “Women and Religion Resolution.” Years later, the UU Women’s Federation and the Continental Women and Religion Committee used their formidable influence to call together Task Force I on Clergy Sexual Misconduct.

They essentially challenged the institutional norms that had permitted clergy sexual misconduct to go almost unchecked except for the most egregious instances. Furthermore, the incident in question involved a Senior Minister. Research findings by this author indicate that high-ranking ministers that engaged in clergy sexual misconduct in the past tended not to face the same consequences as other ministers who were engaged in clergy sexual misconduct, if they faced any consequences at all. Meanwhile, the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association (UUMA), the professional organization for UU ministers, began a much needed revision of its guidelines. In an effort to affirm the UUMA’s good work the UU Women’s Federation (UUWF) Board passed a resolution in February 1992 that recognized the UUMA for the newly revised “Ministerial Codes of Conduct.” While the UUWF was congratulatory of the UUMA’s progress in establishing appropriate guidelines they were not pleased that the update was only sent to Presidents of District Boards, ministers and seminarians.²⁶ Then UUWF President, Phyllis Rickter, wrote a letter pointing out the UUMA’s exclusionary practices and reminded them that their silence about misconduct could lead to continued damage among the constituency.²⁷

²⁶ Betty B. Hoskins, *Comforting the Bystanders and Cleansing the Religious Community in Unitarian Universalism – Selected Essays 2001* (Chicago: Collegium, 1993), 34.

²⁷ Betty B. Hoskins, *Comforting the Bystanders and Cleansing the Religious Community in Unitarian Universalism – Selected Essays 2001* (Chicago: Collegium, 1993), 34.

White clergy women's inclusion into the Unitarian Universalist male bastion of ministry inevitably changed the cultural norms of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) and the gender make-up of ministry. The influx of white female clergy in the late 1970s ultimately produced a critical mass that individually and collectively challenged the primarily male culture that had promoted male supremacy. Women had dared to manifest the vision that females could preach and teach and provide ministerial leadership just as their brothers had been doing. This leap of faith and courage would forever change not only the vocation of ministry, but the laity and all the institutions that support ministerial formation and vocation.