

“The Last Man Jailed for Blasphemy”

**a reflection
by Rev. Bill Gupton**

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Heritage Universalist Unitarian Church
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A moment ago, I spoke of religious freedom – and the idea that a Unitarian Universalist church exists as a tangible institution designed to perpetuate the existence of religious freedom in our society. We are accustomed to thinking of Heritage Church, and other UU congregations like it, as places where persons of differing beliefs can come together to worship in a welcoming, inclusive, non-judgmental community of theological and spiritual tolerance. We pride ourselves on our openness, and on the diversity of opinion that exists and is often expressed here in our sanctuary.

But we seldom stop to think that hymns like those we have sung and heard sung this morning, words like those we have read, from Starhawk or Richard Gilbert, would have caused an uproar even in the most progressive Universalist and Unitarian churches just two centuries ago. History, I believe, can often serve as a yardstick, helping us measure just how much, or how little, progress we have made, over time; today, I want to lift up for our consideration one very important but almost completely unknown aspect of our history – our history as a liberal faith, and as a nation.

This past summer, as I was walking through the Unitarian Universalist bookstore in Boston, a small book caught my eye. Actually, it was the title that caught my eye: “The Last Man Jailed for Blasphemy.” I had learned a little bit about Abner Kneeland back in seminary – I recalled that he had been jailed for his religious beliefs; I remembered that he was an iconoclast and a rebel, a philosophical forerunner of the anti-institutional Free Religious Association, a group of free-thinkers who had walked out of the American Unitarian Association in the mid-19th century. As an institutionalist myself, I regarded Kneeland as an interesting, but somewhat misguided, character who had railed against the establishment of the kind of church I was then training to serve as a minister.

What I did not know about Abner Kneeland was just how much he had influenced that same church, and just how much he had influenced my beliefs, and *my* theology. What I did not know was how much this relatively obscure man had done for the cause of religious freedom in America.

“Blasphemy,” like its cousin “heresy,” is a loaded term. We often say that Unitarian Universalism is a heretical faith (and, in fact, it has been declared so by the Catholic Church since the year 325). By this we mean that the views of God accepted here – note the plural, views – do not always coincide with the one, singular, orthodox view promoted by some other faiths. Heresy, then, is a church matter – a doctrinal difference of opinion.

Blasphemy, on the other hand, is a matter of public concern. Blasphemy occurs when religious differences of opinion go beyond church walls, and enter the public sphere, the civic arena. To espouse ideas about God that are unconventional or unacceptable, is “blasphemy” – a civil crime. In Mosaic law, the penalty for blasphemy was death by stoning; under Puritan rule in early New England, though still potentially a capital crime, more often than not, the punishment for blasphemy was having one’s tongue pierced and seared by a red-hot poker – a fate that befell the early Universalist Joseph Gatchell, who dared to publicly declare his belief that “*all* are saved.”

By the 19th century, however, things in New England had liberalized to the point that one could receive a maximum penalty of only 90 days in jail for the “crime” of blasphemy. Which brings us to Abner Kneeland. As we shall see, he has the unique distinction of having been punished both by the Universalists, for heresy, and Unitarians, for blasphemy. Perhaps the greater injustice is that he did not live long enough to see his beliefs become commonplace in both denominations.

Abner Kneeland was born in Gardner, Massachusetts, in 1774. At the age of 30, he was ordained to the Universalist ministry, with his mentor – and the chief spokesman of Universalism in America, Hosea Ballou – presiding. For the next 14 years, Kneeland was one of the pillars of New England Universalism, working with Ballou on the new denomination’s first hymnal, serving as the clerk of their convention, and as the respected minister of the church in Charlestown, Massachusetts.

But eventually, Kneeland’s views about God began to change. He began to have doubts about the absolute authenticity and authority of the Bible. He read voraciously, and was an avid student of philosophy and science, chemistry and biology. He went for walks, and contemplated the mysteries he saw all around him in nature and the natural world. In time, he came to realize that the church he was in might not be open enough to accept

him – *and* his new ways of thinking. In this respect, Abner Kneeland’s religious journey, his life experience, mirrors many of our own.

You may well wonder, “But wasn’t he already in an open, inclusive church?” In a word, no. The fact is, the Universalist Church of America, in the 19th century, was distinguished from other sects of its day not by its non-creedal nature – which is how we think of ourselves today – but rather, by its creed. The doctrine of universal salvation – the idea of a loving God who would not exclude anyone from salvation – that’s what the Universalists of the time professed. And there wasn’t much room for disagreement about the nature of that God, either – as Abner Kneeland came to find out.

In accepting a call to a large Universalist congregation in Philadelphia in 1817, Kneeland anticipated his later ecclesiastical difficulties by insisting on the right to interpret the Universalist Articles of Faith – the document that comprised the church’s creed – “as [*his*] conscience saw fit.” Such freedom of the pulpit that was, at that time, unusual in our movement. Kneeland’s steadfast assertion of his right to speak and preach his mind on matters of religious belief led to the loss of two pastoral positions and, eventually, to his removal from the Universalist ministry in 1829.

Not one to take injustice lying down, Kneeland – having returned to Boston – responded to his ouster with a scathing pamphlet called “An Appeal to Universalists, on the Subject of Excommunication, or the Withdrawing of Fellowship, on Account of Diversity of Opinion.” One lesson for us – now comfortably two centuries removed from this controversy – is the reminder that the diversity of religious opinion which today is the very hallmark of our faith, was won at a steep price – even within our own denomination.

It is also helpful to keep in mind, as religious scholar Martin Marty points out, that the heresies of one generation become the orthodoxies of another. Listen for a moment to Abner Kneeland’s credo statement, written in 1833 to refute the charge that he was an atheist – an accusation that, more than any other, contributed to the intrigue that resulted in his ouster from the Universalist ministry:

“I believe,” he wrote, “in the existence of a universe of suns and planets, among which there is one sun belonging to our planetary system; and that other suns being more remote, are called stars – but that they indeed are suns to other planetary systems. I believe that the whole universe is [appropriately called] *nature*, and that . . . God and nature, so far as we can attach any rational idea to either, are synonymous terms.

Hence, I am not an atheist, but a pantheist; that is, instead of believing there is *no* God, I believe that in the abstract, all is God – and that all power

that is, is in God ... I believe in all that logically results from these premises, whether good, bad or indifferent. Hence, I believe ... it is in God [that] we live, move, and have our being – and that the whole duty of man consists in living ... and in promoting as much happiness as he can while he lives.”

Elsewhere he wrote, “If I still retain and make use of the term God, it must be in a very different sense from [how] I have used the term before... Now I admit ... the existence of an incomprehensible principle or power, which quickens into life all animated nature, and other living matter [such] as plants and trees – which power may be called God, for the sake of a name, though I see no necessity of any name for it.”

When I read these passages and others like them – in the book I picked up at the UUA Bookstore (and not, I’m sorry to say, during my earlier seminary training) – it dawned on me that this man, who had been run right out of the Universalist Church almost two hundred years ago, had professed a sincere faith with which most modern Universalists would be quite comfortable. Moreover, I realized that his religious beliefs were virtually indistinguishable from my own. Abner Kneeland’s crime, at least within the history of Universalism, was nothing more than being well ahead of his time!

It should also be pointed out that Kneeland’s *social* views were so far ahead of those of his contemporaries – and, in some cases, even our contemporaries – as to be downright revolutionary. In 1831, for example, he wrote, “Women’s wages should be exactly, per week, per day, or per hour, the same as those of men” (a condition, I will point out, that we *still* have not achieved in this country). He also preached with great vigor, throughout his life, against the evils of slavery and of child labor; he was a proponent of birth control. He believed women should have equal property rights and the right to vote – and, get this – in one article he even espoused what he called the “theory of rational marriage,” in which he said, “The basic principle of society should be the principle of perfect equality as to rights and privileges, totally regardless of sex, and ... totally regardless of color ... to marry each other. Yes, to marry, if they love or fancy each other.”

That Kneeland held such radical views was well-known in Boston society, and this knowledge undoubtedly played no small part in his eventual trial. At the very least, he was already the object of considerable public ridicule when, shortly after leaving the Universalist fold, he was arrested by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, in 1834, on charges of blasphemy. The basis for the charge was a letter he had written to his arch-enemy, one Thomas Whittemore, which Kneeland later reprinted in his own magazine, the *Boston Investigator*. That letter, in part, read:

“I still hold to universal philanthropy, universal benevolence, and universal charity. In these respects, I am still a Universalist. Neither do I believe in punishment after death, so in this also, I agree with the Universalists. But as it respects all other of their religious notions ... I do not. For instance: Universalists believe in a god which I do not ... Universalists believe in Christ, which I do not ... Universalists believe in miracles, which I do not.”

A copy of Kneeland’s letter found its way into the hands of the Grand Jury of Massachusetts, thus initiating a four-and-a-half year court battle that eventually resulted – after two appeals and one hung jury – in the imprisonment of Abner Kneeland, in the summer of 1838, in the Boston common jail. Let the record show that the presiding judge, as were many of those involved in the case, was a Unitarian. It seems that Kneeland’s views were too radical for both of the liberal religions of his day.

But our story does not end there. While serving his sentence, Kneeland proved to be as outspoken as ever, writing inflammatory letters to the editor, one of which noted that while he looked out his jail-cell window, the citizens of Boston were holding a commemoration ceremony on the anniversary of the Battle of Bunker Hill.

“What was it [the American Revolution] all for? Liberty,” he wrote. “And what am I here for? For the honest exercise of that very liberty!” He went on to challenge the legitimacy of the blasphemy law under which he had been imprisoned, writing, “I did no more than what I have, and every man has, a constitutional right to do. I shall never give up this right but with my life. If the law requires that I should, then the law requires me to be a dishonest man.”

The sight of the elderly Kneeland being dragged off to jail, for no greater misdeed than for telling the truth about his beliefs, aroused public sympathy, even among his detractors. Petitions were circulated for his release, and preachers of all stripes – perhaps realizing that a similar fate could, some day, happen to *them*, too – called for an end to what they rightly termed the “persecution” of religious dissenters. When at last he was released from jail – after serving just 60 days – Kneeland was greeted by a cheering crowd of some 300 supporters. What he said when he addressed that crowd, could just as easily have been addressed to us, here, in 2004: “All I ask of you is to *remember this*, when you go to the polls.”

Like others, then, it was in defeat that Abner Kneeland found his ultimate victory. Though he could not have imagined that Unitarianism and, eventually, Universalism, would come around to his way of thinking, and

though he dared not dream that he would be “the last man jailed for blasphemy” – such is the legacy of Abner Kneeland.

As Kneeland scholar Stephen Papa says, “He left us freedom... He made it so difficult, [so] embarrassing for the powers that be, that they dared not [ever] enforce that illicit law again. His sacrifice confirmed, [at a time when it was in serious question,] the necessity of the separation of church and state... He left us the stone of religious freedom.”

Let us continue to cherish that freedom, and let us commit ourselves to building a church where it will thrive – for generations to come.

Amen.