

**Between Black and White: Frances Ellen Watkins Harper
and
Philadelphia Unitarianism¹
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In 1870, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper – African-American poet, abolitionist, feminist – joined First Congregational Unitarian Church in Philadelphia, having been raised a member of the African Methodist Episcopal church and continuing to work for and publish through that denomination. Why did she join this prominent white church and what role did its well-known minister – Rev. William Henry Furness – play in her decision to become a Unitarian? Was her Unitarianism merely a political act intended to smooth her way into white circles, as some have contended? Or was her membership based on other reasons?

When I began this research, I had no idea what answers to these questions I would find. I assumed her joining First Unitarian had to do with the well known record of its abolitionist minister. Certainly, Rev. Furness played a significant role and his abolitionism was clearly important, but it was not the only reason for her interest in the church. Based on my reading of her essays and poems, I now feel certain that Harper's membership at First Unitarian was the result of her growing interest in Transcendentalist Unitarianism.

Frances Harper grew up and attended the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church and she remained active in the church throughout her life. The AME church, founded by Richard Allen in 1816 following a split from St. George's in

¹ Adapted from a paper presented at the Society for the Study of American Women Writers Convention, Philadelphia, November 9, 2006

Philadelphia, emerged as part of the protest against slavery and the Philadelphia church in which Harper taught – Mother Bethel – was the first AME church Allen established.

At the center of AME religious ideals was the notion of a “liberating gospel” through word and deed, and much of its work has always been grounded in what later became known as the “social gospel” – work in the areas of poverty, hunger, unemployment, and the needs of those in prisons, mental institutions, and hospitals. In this sense, the AME church shared much in common with American Unitarianism, which also centered its core religious tenets on social reform and both denominations shared an opposition to slavery and support for women’s equality, two issues for which Harper worked much of her life. In fact, the two denominations share similar mottoes. The motto of the AME church has long been “God our Father, Christ our Redeemer, Man our Brother.” Between 1870 and 1920 a common formulation of Unitarian faith was summarized in the covenant, “We believe in the Fatherhood of God; the Brotherhood of Man; the Leadership of Jesus; Salvation by Character; The progress of Mankind onward and upward forever.” In addition, following the war, in 1867, the American Unitarian Association worked with the AME Church by providing funds to the AME institution Wilberforce University, offering financial help to its students, and providing libraries of 45 mutually agreed upon books to AME churches, especially in the South, to help further African-American education.

Because Harper remained active within the AME church but also belonged to a Unitarian church, there have been efforts to understand her religious motivations. Some writers, for example, have claimed that Harper espoused a Unitarian Christology. One writer claims, for example, that “Christ was not a distant God to her, but a role

model for the kind of exalted existence that all human beings could attain”² But this approach to Jesus was common, not only in the AME church, but within many churches who saw social reform as part of their mission, especially within African-American churches and among radical abolitionists.

Following passage of the Fugitive Slave law in 1850, Harper moved to Ohio and taught domestic sciences at Union Seminary, where the abolitionist John Brown served as principal. She later married and gave birth to a daughter, leaving the state after the war, for a speaking tour throughout the South to lecture audiences about the need to educate recently freed black slaves. It is in Ohio that Harper met Peter H. Clark, an African-American abolitionist and educator. This friendship is particularly important because Clark, also actively involved in the AME church, joined First Congregational Church (Unitarian) of Cincinnati in 1868, two years before Harper joined First Unitarian Church in Philadelphia.

Clark served as one of Frederick Douglass’ assistants, along with Harper’s cousin, William James Watkins. In the early 1850’s Clark had become a member of an association called The Liberals, where dissident religious views, including those of Thomas Paine, were discussed.³ Clark also became acquainted with Alphonso Taft and George Hoadly, prominent Cincinnati lawyers, members of the Cincinnati Unitarian church and enthusiastic supporters of the church’s new abolitionist minister, Moncure D. Conway. In 1860, Conway delivered a sermon on the ideas of Thomas Paine and Clark began attending the church as an avowed Deist. He eventually joined the church in 1868, drawn by its openness to religious tolerance and the Deism of its new minister,

² Grohsmeyer, Janeen. “Frances Harper.” *Dictionary of Unitarian Universalist Biography*. <http://www.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/francesharper.html>.

³ Frederickson, Mary E. and Walter P. Hertz. “A Matter of Respect: The Religious Journey of Peter H. Clark.” *The AME Church Review*. April-June 2002, 28.

Thomas Vickers.⁴ Clark contributed financially to the church, rented a pew, and served as a delegate to the National Council of Unitarian and other Christian Churches in 1871.⁵

The story of Peter H. Clark is instructive because he, like Harper, remained active in the AME church after he had joined the Unitarian Church. Clark appears to have been much more active in his Unitarian church than Harper had been in hers, but both of them wrote extensively for the *Christian Recorder* (the AME weekly newspaper) and both of them participated in various AME celebrations. Clark was a featured participant in the Allen Temple AME Church Semi-Centennial Celebration in 1874, speaking on “The Developing Power of African Methodism,”⁶ while Harper contributed a poem to the commemoration of the centennial of the A.M.E. Church in 1887 and wrote another poem to celebrate the 40th anniversary of Daniel A. Payne as bishop of the AME Church.

Harper finally moved to Philadelphia in 1870 with her daughter and joined First Unitarian the same year. Her relationship to the church remains shrouded in mystery and her reasons for joining have been the subject of speculation. She left no autobiography or personal reflections, no indications of her intentions, few letters, and “wrote very little about herself.”⁷ As a result, arguments such as the following have sufficed as an explanation:

Both Unitarians and the AME church have claimed Harper as a member.

She was reluctant to choose between the two. AME was the church she

⁴ Hertz, Walter. “Peter H. Clark.” Dictionary of Unitarian Universalist Biography. <http://www.uua.org/uuha/duub/articles/peterclark.html>.

⁵ Frederickson, 29.

⁶ Hertz.

⁷ Logan, Shirley Wilson. “Black Speakers, White Representations: Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and the Construction of a Public Persona.” *African-American Rhetoric(s): Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Ed. Elaine B. Richardson and Ronald I. Jackson II. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 2004, 24.

had been raised in. It was family and home to her, and she always remembered where she came from and what her people had been through. Her reasons for joining the Unitarian church, on the other hand, may have been partly political. Although she had had personal and professional contacts in both black and white communities ever since her first book of poems was published, many doors remained closed to her. In a society where color lines were clearly drawn, a Unitarian church provided a rare opportunity for the races to meet. The Unitarians she knew could help to advance the causes she supported in places she could never go.⁸

I find this explanation unsatisfactory for a number of reasons and as I explored them individually, I became fascinated by Harper's membership at First Unitarian as well as the contemporary reaction to her joining. There is no indication from church records or other sources that Harper was involved in the life of First Unitarian Church. She continued to teach at Mother Bethel AME Church and to publish in the AME weekly, the *Christian Recorder* as well as other AME publications such as the *AME Church Review*. Why did she join a Unitarian church?

Suggesting that Harper joined First Unitarian for political reasons, while it may make sense on some level, has the *effect* of diminishing her choice as a mere political act done for the purpose of making important social connections. Ultimately, and most importantly, this point of view suggests that Harper's decision to join a Unitarian church was *inauthentic* and based merely on political motivations.

⁸ Grohsmeyer.

On a more pragmatic level, there is no indication that Harper ever benefited politically from her membership at First Unitarian. There is no evidence that Harper was restrained as an African-American from participating in the abolitionist movement, the women's movement, or the temperance movement, and she lectured widely in all three. In fact, according to William Still, in his important work, *The Underground Railroad*, "Everywhere in this latitude doors opened before [Harper], and her gifts were universally recognized as a valuable acquisition to the cause [of slavery]." ⁹ There is no evidence that she was denied publication due to her race as her poetry and fiction was targeted for a black audience and published in the black press. Harper had numerous opportunities for the "races to meet" and she maintained a remarkable fluidity within numerous circles, moving freely within abolitionist, temperance, and feminist communities, black and white. According to her introduction to Harper in *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader*, Frances Smith Foster points out that "[w]hile working with predominantly white organizations, [Harper] always campaigned for mutual recognition of their shared interests." ¹⁰ Still, Harper was not intimidated by white reformers, telling white women at the Eleventh Woman's Rights Convention in 1866, "You white women speak here of rights. I speak of wrongs," as she proceeded to distinguish between the treatment of women based on race. ¹¹

Finally, the Unitarians she encountered at First Church were themselves actively involved in numerous movements for social reform, so her joining would not have engaged them in new efforts. Harper's decision to join First Unitarian, I believe, is

⁹ Still, William. *The Underground Railroad*. Philadelphia: Porter and Coates, 1872, 759.

¹⁰ Foster, Frances Smith. "Introduction." *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader*. NY: Feminist Press, 1990: 23.

¹¹ Harper, Frances Ellen Watkins. *We Are All Bound Up Together. A Brighter Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader*. NY: Feminist Press, 1990: 218.

based on her respect for its minister, Rev. William Henry Furness, and on her affinity with his anti-slavery work and his theological orientation.

Harper knew of and had contact with several Unitarians involved in the movement to abolish slavery, particularly Unitarian Lydia Maria Child, who had published an early abolitionist book, *An Appeal on Behalf of the Class of Americans called Africans*, in 1833. Child and her husband served as editors of the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, a well-known abolitionist newspaper, and in 1861, Child edited and wrote the introduction for Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, now considered the most important fugitive slave narrative written by a black woman. In 1865, Child published five poems by Harper in *The Freedmen's Book*, an anthology of black and white writers intended as a textbook for newly freed blacks.

But living in Philadelphia, Harper would have been well aware of the abolitionist Unitarian minister, Rev. William Henry Furness. Furness preached his first anti-slavery sermon the Sunday before July 4, 1839 and again in early 1841,¹² sermons that were controversial at the time. First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia was home to numerous merchants and wealthy businessmen who worried about the effects of the abolition movement on trade, while others believed that politics had no place in a church. In 1842, riots broke out in Philadelphia and William Lloyd Garrison noted that Furness remained the only clergyman to speak out against the violence.¹³ As a result of Furness' anti-slavery sermonizing, a movement within the church gathered thirty-nine signatures in an effort to have Furness removed as minister. A counter effort, containing seventy-eight names, was produced and the effort to remove Furness failed.

¹² Geffen, Elizabeth M. *Philadelphia Unitarianism, 1796-1861*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1961, 190.

¹³ Geffen, 192.

¹⁴ Although some members were lost as a result of Furness' antislavery preaching, others were gained who "were drawn to hear the eloquent preaching of Furness." ¹⁵

Furness remained actively engaged in the antislavery movement until its end and believed that the abolition movement was a "profoundly religious movement." ¹⁶ John Brown's raid provoked renewed effort by Furness in 1859. On the day of Brown's execution, a public meeting was held at National Hall and was opened with a prayer by Furness. After Brown's execution, Furness and his son were two of only four people permitted to the platform to receive Brown's body as it passed through Philadelphia on its way to New York. Furness' name was featured prominently in newspaper stories surrounding the execution of Brown,¹⁷ and Furness became a well-known Unitarian opponent of slavery.

Some members of the congregation who had been lost due to Furness' strong position against slavery returned and members of the church became involved in foiling a plot to assassinate President-elect Lincoln in 1861 when he stopped in Philadelphia on his way to his inauguration. Once war did erupt, the largest congregation ever assembled in the church crowded in to hear Furness proclaim, "The long agony is over!"¹⁸

Frances Harper joined First Congregational Unitarian Church in 1870, two years after her friend Peter H. Clark had done the same in Cincinnati. No doubt she was attracted to the church as a result of the eloquence and passion of the anti-slavery preaching of its minister Rev. William Henry Furness. Several years later, Furness

¹⁴ Geffen, 194.

¹⁵ Geffen, 196.

¹⁶ Quoted in Geffen, Elizabeth M. Philadelphia Unitarianism, 1796-1861. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1961, 207.

¹⁷ Geffen, 231.

¹⁸ Geffen, 234.

gave Harper a copy of his printed sermon *Recollections Upon the Forty-Eighth Anniversary*, inscribed with the words, “Mrs. Harper, with kind regards, W. H. Furness.”¹⁹ The sermon gives an account of Unitarian theology as an affirmation of the “Unity of the Supreme Being.”²⁰ Furness argues that Unitarianism is “not a form of doctrine,” but is “A SPIRIT.” For Furness, Unitarianism “is what the religion of Jesus itself was at the first.”²¹

It makes perfect sense that Harper would have been attracted to First Unitarian based on this understanding of Unitarian theology. But there is more to this story. In his 1958 book *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story*, Martin Luther King suggested, “the most segregated hour of Christian America is eleven o'clock on Sunday morning.” It has become a truism that the segregation of American churches has always been with us, especially as a result of the independent black church movement of the 19th and early 20th century through which many historically-black denominations were founded. But as Laurie Maffly-Kipp has pointed out, during the 19th century “a sizeable number of free black Protestants chose not to join independent black churches.”²² In addition, Maffly-Kipp argues, “Just as was true of whites in the antebellum era, free blacks took advantage of the many opportunities for ‘religious seeking’ that came their way.”²³

I believe Harper engaged in just such a spiritual journey. She would have been aware of Unitarian religious philosophy through the *Christian Recorder*. Frances Smith Foster notes that “the Christian Recorder regularly reprinted summarized articles from

¹⁹ Furness, William Henry. *Recollections Upon the Forty-Eighth Anniversary*. January 19, 1873.

²⁰ Furness, 19.

²¹ Furness, 20.

²² Maffly-Kipp, Laurie. “African-American Religion, Part 1: To the Civil War.” National Humanities Center. <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/nineteen/nkeyinfo/aareligionb.htm>. 22 Aug 2007.

²³ Maffly-Kipp.

other papers,” including “discussions of Unitarian philosophy.”²⁴ What’s more, according to William Still in *The Underground Railroad*, “Mrs. Harper reads the best magazines and ablest weeklies, as well as more elaborate works....In espousing the cause of the oppressed as a poet and lecturer, had she neglected to fortify her mind in the manner she did, she would have been weighed and found wanting long since.”²⁵

It is therefore likely that Harper would have been aware, not only of Furness’ theology and anti-slavery work, but of other Unitarian writers, particularly Transcendentalist writers. Furness, in fact, “was associated with a liberal approach to Christianity that synthesized a transcendentalist emphasis on nature with readings of the Gospels. He argued for understanding biblical scripture as a manifestation of nature; indeed, nature represented revelation.”²⁶ Furness, a lifelong friend of Ralph Waldo Emerson, attended several meetings of The Transcendental Club in Concord and in his controversial 1836 book *Remarks on the Four Gospels*, Furness considers Christianity a natural rather than a supernatural phenomena that could stand its own ground without the evidence of miracles, a belief that had been part of the more traditional Unitarian evidence for the status of Jesus’ teachings.

Furness’ sermon *The Blessings of Abolition* indicates a Transcendentalist approach to slavery. Furness does not share the apprehensions of other whites worried that the abolition of slavery would mean calamity, because, he writes, “I rely upon the prophetic promise, not only because it is written and has stood written in this wondrous book for

²⁴ Foster, Frances Smith. “Gender, Genre and Vulgar Secularism: The Case of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and the AME Press.”

²⁵ Still, 797-98.

²⁶ The Antislavery Literature Project. Introduction to *The Blessings of Abolition*. <http://antislavery.eserver.org/religious/furnessblessingsofabolition/> 10 Oct 2006.

thousands of years, but because I read it written just as legibly by the finger of God in the nature of things.”²⁷

The Transcendentalist approach to both social reform and theology would have appealed to Harper, who wrote, “What I ask of Christianity is not to show us more creeds, but more of Christ; not more rites and ceremonies, but more religion glowing with love and replete with life – religion which will be to all weaker races an uplifting power, and not a degrading influence.”²⁸ The “theology of self-culture” that permeated all Transcendentalist writing would have served this purpose. Self-culture is a term the Transcendentalists used to convey an overarching philosophy of the spirit. Self-culture, referred to the cultivation of the soul in individuals and is a form of the philosophy of “racial uplift” predominant in Harper’s work and that of other African-Americans of the time. Self-culture focused on developing the individual’s innate tendencies through nature, writing, reading, and conversation. This development of the self would have appealed to Harper’s interest in African American self-education.

Harper’s work is replete with religious references and biblical characters, particularly the story of Moses, and his delivery of his people out of bondage. The Moses narrative was prevalent among African-American abolitionists (Harriet Tubman was referred to as “Black Moses”) and Harper produced three versions of her book-length poem, *Moses: A Story of the Nile*, between 1869 and 1893. But, according to scholar Patrick Rael, African-American abolitionists “began to favor a more direct intervention in their salvation which marked an emerging awareness of their own political agency and the steady growth of a desire to fashion their own responses to

²⁷ Furness, William Henry. *The Blessings of Abolition*. The Antislavery Literature Project. <http://antislavery.eserver.org/religious/furnessblessingsofabolition/> 10 Oct 2006.

oppression.”²⁹ For Harper, this shift shows evidence of Unitarian and Transcendentalist influences and offers some insight into her membership at First Unitarian. Unitarians emphasized Jesus’ humanity rather than his divinity and thought of him as a role model for moral behavior; through his persecution and crucifixion, he served as a powerful advocate for the oppressed. In *Iola Leroy*, Harper compares enslaved African Americans with Jesus, : “And is there,” continued Iola, “a path which we have trodden in this country, unless it be the path of sin, into which Jesus Christ has not put His feet and left it luminous with the light of His steps?”³⁰

In her essay, “Christianity,” Harper argues that “Christianity has changed the moral aspect of nations” and genius, philosophy, science, poetry, music, and learning all gain value by their proximity to. Their ultimate virtue, argues Foster, “is to instill, to guide, and to encourage Christian living,”³¹ the aim, as well, of self-culture. “Christianity,” she continues, “forms the brightest link of that glorious chain which unites the humblest work of creation with the throne of the infinite and eternal Jehovah. As light, with its infinite particles and curiously-blended colors, is suited to an eye prepared for the alternations of day.” She goes on to correlate “man’s physical nature’ with “his moral nature,” sounding a Unitarian note.³²

In her important work, *Discarded Legacy: Politics and Poetics in the Life of Frances E. W. Harper, 1825-1911*, Melba Joyce Boyd argues that Harper’s poem “Youth in

²⁹ Rael, Patrick. “Black Theodicy: African Americans and Nationalism in the Antebellum North.” *The North Star: A Journal of African American Religious History*. 3:2 (Spring 2000): 9.

³⁰ Harper, Frances Ellen Watkins. *Iola Leroy; or, a Shadow Uplifted*. (1893) Boston: Beacon Press, 1987: 256.

³¹ Foster, Frances Smith. “Essays and Speeches.” *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader*. NY: Feminist Press, 1990: 95.

³² Harper, Frances Ellen Watkins. “Christianity.” *A Brighter Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader*. NY: Feminist Press, 1990: 98.

Heaven” relates to “Harper’s conversion to Unitarianism.”³³ The Unitarianism to which Boyd refers is the Swedenborgianism prevalent among Transcendentalist Unitarians such as Furness. Swedenborgianism and Unitarianism developed simultaneously in the American Northeast, opposing the orthodox doctrines of the Vicarious Atonement and arguing that many of the Old Testament texts were mythical rather than historical. Twenty-second and Chestnut Street in Philadelphia, where the Swedenborg Church and the Unitarian Church stood side by side (and stand together still), was labeled “Heretics’ Corner.”

It is easy to see why Unitarians were attracted to the ideas of Swedenborg. In his *The New Jerusalem, and Its Heavenly Doctrines*, he maintained that all evils are from the self and that “the light of heaven is the same as the truth of God, the warmth of heaven is the same as love towards God” and elsewhere believed that “Influx is the dynamic force issuing from the spiritual center and it creates in the natural world the forms whose patterns of prototypes first exist in the spiritual world.”³⁴ Emerson, in “Swedenborg; or, The Mystic,” quotes Swedenborg’s most famous sentence: “In heaven the angels are advancing continually to the springtime of their youth, so that the oldest angel appears the youngest.”³⁵ Harper quotes this passage in her 1860 poem, “Youth in Heaven,” in which she considers this reversal of the aging process and images of “light and darkness.”³⁶

³³ Boyd, Melba Joyce. *Discarded legacy: Politics and Poetics in the Life of Frances E. W. Harper, 1825-1911*. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1994: 74.

³⁴ American Transcendental Web. “Transcendental Roots.” <http://www.vcu.edu/engweb/transcendentalism/roots/em-swed.html>.

³⁵ Emerson, Ralph Waldo. “Swedenborg; or, The Mystic.” *Representative Men* (1850). http://www.rwe.org/comm/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=145&Itemid=42

³⁶ Harper, Frances Ellen Watkins. “Youth in Heaven.” *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader*. NY: Feminist Press, 1990: 172.

Transcendental Unitarians were also influenced by the writer Goethe. Emerson's "Goethe; or, The Writer" appeared in the same volume (*Representative Men*, 1850) as his essay on Swedenborg, and Furness translated German works into English. The title of Harper's poem "Let the Light Enter!" is based on Goethe's final words and the poem focuses on the ebb and flow of light and shadows: "All the dying poet whispers/Is a prayer for light, more light."³⁷ This interest in images of light and darkness, so central to Transcendentalist philosophy, appear in other poems. In "A Dialogue," Harper writes: "Oh, I am from the land of light,/My home is the world on high;/But I dwell mid the weary sons of night,/And bid their darkness fly."³⁸ This interest in images of light and dark, so central to the Swedenborgian manifestation of good and evil would have appealed to Harper's view of the darkness of slavery in contrast to the freedom illuminated by Jesus.

Harper died at the age of 85 in 1911. Her funeral took place at First Unitarian Church in Philadelphia and she was buried in Eden Cemetery. In 1992, the Continental Congregation of African American Unitarian Universalists organized a Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Commemoration. Harper's tether to Philadelphia Unitarianism is based on her membership in and funeral at First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia. I believe her attraction to Unitarianism was not politically-motivated any more than any of us seek fellow travelers in our spiritual and social journeys. I do believe that the anti-slavery activism of the church's minister, Rev. William Henry Furness, and eventually by the congregation itself, combined with the Transcendentalist theology that emerged at the time, offers a plausible explanation for her surprising membership in a church that seemed so unlike

³⁷ Harper, Frances Ellen Watkins. "Let There Be Light!" *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader*. NY: Feminist Press, 1990: 171.

³⁸ Harper, Frances Ellen Watkins. "A Dialogue." *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader*. NY: Feminist Press, 1990: 214.

herself and yet served as a place where she could grow theologically. It seems clear that, while Mother Bethel served as her community, First Unitarian served as the place where she could develop spiritually.