

# THE FREE RELIGIOUS ASSOCIATION

Rev. Richard A. Kellaway

Two major issues led to the creation of the Free Religious Association; both of them have persisted until the present day.

IS UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM A DENOMINATION WITH A CLEAR AND WIDELY ACCEPTED STRUCTURE FOCUSED ON THE CREATION AND MAINTENANCE OF LOCAL CONGREGATIONS, OR IS IT A MOVEMENT WITH A VARIETY OF INTERESTS AND ORGANIZATIONS WHERE PARTICIPATION IS OPEN TO ALL WHO ARE INTERESTED?

SHOULD THE ORGANIZATION CREATE AND PROMULGATE A CLEAR SET OF BELIEFS WITH SOME OF THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A CREED. OR SHOULD IT BE LEFT TO INDIVIDUALS AND GROUPS TO FASHION AND EXPRESS THEIR OWN UNDERSTANDING OF THEIR RELIGIOUS IDENTITY?

The conversation which culminated in the founding of the Free Religious Association took place in the Boston home of Rev. Cyrus A. Bartol on October 29, 1867. The eight men present had all been disappointed by the outcome of the recent second National Conference meeting held in Syracuse, some to the point of secession. The most senior members of the group were Dr. Bartol, for many years the minister of the West Church and John Weiss, Potter's New Bedford predecessor, now returned to his former pulpit in Watertown. In addition to Potter, the other Massachusetts ministers were Samuel Johnson from Lynn, Edward Towne from Medford, and Henry W. Brown. Sidney Morse was the editor of a small, struggling journal, *The Radical*.

Credit for the initiating idea has been given to Potter. Stow Persons states in Free Religion that while still at Syracuse he conceived the possibility of creating "a spiritual anti-slavery society" and then shared it with Abbot and Towne on the return journey to Boston. (Stow Persons, *Free Religion*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1947, p. 43) However, since he went directly to Utica and then on to Binghamton where he preached two Sundays to assist an effort to organize a new congregation, the other trip could not have been the setting for the first sharing, unless the conversation took place between Syracuse and Utica.

Francis Ellingwood Abbot was the most brilliant, energetic - and difficult - of all the leaders of the free religious movement. Born into an old and distinguished New England family of great intellectual distinction, he graduated from Harvard in 1859 with highest honors. After having a powerful religious experience while in college, he determined to study for the Christian ministry. Choosing the Unitarian seminary in Meadville, Pennsylvania, he became engrossed in the struggle between transcendentalism and more traditional Unitarian views. Out of the tension he developed a personal position which he called "scientific theism." He believed that the existence of deity could be demonstrated

through the rational use of scientific principles and that ideal human nature embodied the fullness of divinity. However, he was also convinced of the enormous human capacity for evil. He was clear about the distinction between moral and immoral thought and behavior, had few doubts about his capacity for identifying error, and a passionate sense of duty to expose evil and champion good. His whole life was dedicated to developing and promoting his theology and to being an advocate for moral behavior in personal life and in society. What brought him to his radical opposition to what he perceived as “creedalism” within the National Conference was his conviction that in religion there must be absolute freedom of thought and expression.

This intense commitment to religious liberty and his ability to agitate and organize suggest that he was the principal leader of the opposition at the Syracuse convention. Of the three visible leaders, Towne had few political skills and. Potter had to be conscious of the delicate relationship with his church member, Congressman Thomas Dawes Eliot, who was chairing the sessions. Abbot surely led at Syracuse, and in the days following, with Potter’s absence in Binghamton, he must have been the primary organizer of the meeting at Dr. Bartol’s.

During the days between Syracuse and the meeting, there surely was extensive communication between some of those who gathered. Different views about hopes and expectations rapidly emerged. Some spoke for creating a strong new organization to develop and advocate the principles of free religion. Someone else suggested that it might become just as oppressive about matters of theology and organization as the National Conference. John Weiss spoke against making a complete break with Unitarian groups. However: “the younger men, Abbot, Towne, Potter and Henry W. Brown, were determined that some kind of organization be formed outside of Unitarianism which should both assure the individual liberty of each member and provide a working basis of fellowship for objects they held in common.” (FR 44) The meeting ended without any agreement except a commitment to continuing the conversation.

In his report to the New Bedford congregation about the Syracuse Conference, Potter had been generous and conciliatory. *At Syracuse many of us wondered...whether we could count ourselves in or out of the denomination. And while secession was spoken openly of by both sides, at the end of the debate the bonds of unity were stronger than before it began. ...I am willing to trust the National Conference, at least until it shall commit some overt act against individual or congregational liberty & adopt a practical policy of exclusion...*(Sermon 182; 10/28/66; 17-18)

More of his true feelings were expressed in a November 19 letter to Abbot: *The conservative managers and leaders wanted to say one thing and do another - to declare in their platform that Jesus is Lord and King and yet fellowship still, for the sake of their growing power, those who will not make that declaration. ...These men carry on a species of ecclesiastical gambling, and use their creed about the Lordship of Jesus as a double-faced card: they throw one card to the free thinkers, the other to the Orthodox world. They say to Jesus, ‘Lord, Lord’ is their constitution, yet omit his spirit and example out of their assembly. I abhor from the bottom of my soul all this miserable trickery, this worldly, hypocritical policy. And yet the middle and moderate men are*

*being committed to it, and the whole denomination are being of danger of being entangled in it".* (Abbot Papers, Harvard University Archives)

When they gathered again on November 26, it was decided to test opinion among Unitarians and other radicals to see if there was sympathy for creating a new association. Clearly they had been disappointed that many of the liberal ministers present at Syracuse had not joined in their protest, and now wondered about their commitment to liberty. The most important affirmation came from Rev. Octavius Brooks Frothingham. Born into a patrician Boston family, and a son of the prominent minister of the First Church in Boston, he had assumed from an early age that he would become a minister. During his years at Harvard and in his first ministry in Salem, Massachusetts, he had become increasingly radical. After a successful stint in Jersey City, New Jersey, Dr. Bellows suggested in 1859 that he organize a third society in New York City. It was an immediate success. Frothingham expressed his radical ideas in a popular and powerful manner, and the congregation grew so rapidly that it continually had to move to larger halls. By the time of the organizing meeting of the National Conference in 1865, Frothingham was increasingly disillusioned with Unitarian conservatism, and when the theological preamble was adopted, he led the congregation in changing its name from the Third Unitarian Society to the Independent Liberal Church. Because he had lectured and published widely, he had a major national reputation. Not only did he endorse the idea of a new association, he agreed to preside at an organizing meeting. With his leadership, the participation of many others would be assured.

The call to the meeting was issued on January 1, 1867. It presented the rationale for creating a new organization and invited the recipients to a meeting at the home of Dr. Bartol on February 5. It was signed by O. B. Frothingham, John Weiss, Edward C. Towne, Francis E. Abbot, and W. J. Potter.

On the Sunday preceding the meeting, February 3, Potter informed the New Bedford congregation of the plans. He confessed that he had promised himself that he not would speak on denominational issues for a year after his October report on Syracuse. However, published newspaper reports had made it imperative that he respond to rumors circulating within the congregation that he was involved with a group that planned to secede from the Unitarian denomination. *'Many of those not satisfied with the actions of the Syracuse conference, including me, have united in a call for a meeting of persons sympathizing with them for the purpose of forming a new religious association; & hence have naturally arisen apprehensions of schism & secession & dissensions in individual churches. Now the fact thus stated is substantially correct, but the inference from it is very incorrect.* (192:6) Many feel that the neither the National Conference nor any other existing organization represents the full spectrum of Unitarian views. The meeting will consider forming a new association, but this does not mean that it will be separate from Unitarianism or that its members will withdraw from existing bodies. *For me, I do not propose to withdraw from Unitarianism, provided Unitarianism continues to be what I have always supposed & assumed it to be both in my thought and in my administrations here.'* (192:8)

He then defined his own position about the denomination, declaring that it was becoming too ecclesiastical and stated that it should be defined *not as a theological position, but*

*as a theological movement. ...Its principle is the absolute right of free inquiry in religious truth, carrying with it the right of each person to form & hold his own religious convictions & the right of each church to manage its own affairs & interests. (192:9-10)* The problem with existing Unitarian organizations is that they do represent the movement as a theological position. The National Conference has put ideas into its constitution which are *in direct contravention of the religious belief of a considerable portion of Unitarians. (192:15)*

In the three months since he reported on the Syracuse conference he had grown to have even less confidence in the organization. Its Council had sent down a constitution which it hoped individual churches would adopt as they organized themselves into local conferences. The tendency is to create an ecclesiastical hierarchy in which local congregations would be pressured to bow to the will of the majority. He reported that many other ecclesiastical forms were under discussion – bishops, ecclesiastical courts which would rule over the ministry, uniform programs of Sunday services. However, he was not opposed to the creation of a voluntary and informal Bristol County and Rhode Island conference for mutual encouragement and edification.

The American Unitarian Association constitution is as broad as Unitarianism itself, but in practice it is as narrow as the National Conference. It will publish nothing which doesn't conform to a conservative spirit. In spite of the generosity of his congregation in contributing more than \$3000 to the association since his ministry began, the association had been unwilling to publish anything he had written, perhaps because they calculated that any expression of radical views would reduce contributions. But, because the association does good practical work, support should continue.

On Monday, February 4, Potter had met with Abbot and Towne at the Parker House hotel to draw up a constitution. Its contents would define the character of the organization, so what the three decided was crucial. Since the primary motivation for organizing was to defend the right of conscience and provide an opportunity for the expression of individual convictions, it had to be widely inclusive. However, the primary source of members was expected to be dissident Unitarians who might wish to retain that affiliation, so it was important to assure them that they need not choose between the two organizations.

Nearly thirty people gathered on Tuesday. At the core were Unitarian clergymen, but there were also laywomen and men. Several Universalists and Quakers participated. The protracted conversation revolved around the proposed constitution. Again, a variety of views were expressed related to the tension between freedom and effective organization. Eventually, a majority expressed support for the creation of a new organization, and appointed a committee of Frothingham, Rowland Conner and Potter to arrange for a public convention in Boston. Potter became its central member.

Twenty-six years later in his address to the World Parliament of Religions, he placed the founding of the Association in a larger context. The Civil War had been a transforming experience for the national consciousness. It had led to the growth of a larger and more inclusive understanding of the meaning of humanity. Emancipation had been a profound expression of a new commitment to personal liberty. In the process of supporting the

union and achieving freedom, people from all sectors had worked together and had gained mutual understanding and respect. Women and men, people of different religions or none, united to move away from a preoccupation with old theologies towards a shared commitment to humanitarian and social progress. People began to envision the creation of a “new civilization”.

### FORMAL ORGANIZATION

That the May 30, 1867, date of the organizing meeting was chosen to coincide with the Unitarian meetings of Anniversary Week is indicative of the committee’s realization that Unitarians would be central to the success of a new association. The location in Boston’s Horticultural Hall was the venue for many Unitarian meetings. The event was well publicized in advance in both religious and secular media based in Boston and New York. The announced topic was “to consider the conditions, wants and prospects of Free Religion in America.” Frothingham had written the call. In it he said: “The desire is to make a fellowship, not a party; to promote the scientific study of religious Truth, not to defend the legacy of Theological Tradition; to keep open the lines of spiritual freedom, not to close the lines of speculative beliefs.” (Ahlstrom, “F.E. Abbot and the F.R.A.,” 18)

More important than the topic was the list of invited speakers. Among them were Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Weiss, Robert Dale Owen, William H. Furness, Lucretia Mott, T.W. Higginson, Issac M. Wise and F. E. Abbot. Ms. Mott was a Quaker, and Rabbi Wise, a Reform Jew. It was intended that the organization be religiously inclusive, not restricted to those of Christian backgrounds. Most of the speakers were not known primarily as religious leaders but because of their extensive appearances on the Lyceum circuit.

The hall was packed to overflowing. Frothingham announced that a new religious organization was being created as haven for the multitudes of thoughtful people across the nation who were rebelling against the orthodoxies of their denominations. The speakers would present a variety of views all related to the need for liberty of conscience and expression. In fact, many of the speakers did disagree with others, and some doubted the need for organizing. Emerson had thought that he had been invited to a small committee meeting, so, instead of being the first speaker, he composed his thoughts and spoke at the conclusion of the morning session to endorse the creation of a new association:

*I think it does great honor to the sensibility of the committee that they have felt the universal demand in the community for just the movement they have begun. ...I think the necessity very great, and it has prompted an equal magnanimity, that thus invites all classes, all religious men, whatever their connections, whatever their specialties, in whatever relation they stand to the Christian church, to unite in a movement of benefit to me, under the sanction of religion. We are all very sensible ... of the feeling that churches are outgrown; that the creeds are outgrown; that a technical theology no longer suits us. ...The church is not large enough for the man... 5.*

Despite the disarray, the afternoon session did vote to create the Free Religious Association and adopted the proposed Articles of Association. Article I defined the

objects of the association to be, *to promote the interests of pure religion, to encourage the scientific study of theology, and to increase fellowship in the spirit.* They were purposely very broad, as was the welcoming of all persons into membership, and the assertion that the Executive Committee would have no power to take any action or determine policy for the association. Only those who wished to vote would be required to pay any dues at all.

The officers and committee, elected without dissent, were meant to be broadly representative of the potential membership. Women were warmly welcomed. Frothingham accepted the presidency. The vice presidents were Rev. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Robert Dale Owen, and Caroline M. Severance. Potter was to be the secretary, and Rev. Rowland M. Conner assistant secretary. Richard P. Hallowell was the treasurer. The directors were Edna W. Cheney, Frank B. Sanborn, Hannah E. Stevenson, Rev. Edward C. Towne Charles W. Whipple and Rabbi Issac M. Wise. Among the thirty-seven founding members, the first to enroll was Emerson.

In his sermon of June 2, Potter shared his responses to the events of Anniversary Week. He began by paying tribute to Rev. Orville Dewey and his enormous contribution to the New Bedford congregation. Then he reported on the highlights of the week. There was a growing interest in the importance of religious education. He also detected eagerness among many people for *an emancipated, unsectarian, unecclasiastical religious faith.* (201:6). He noted that the church formerly served by Theodore Parker and held in a theater was full of people eager to hear this kind of message, while the pews of many other Boston Unitarian congregations were nearly empty. Bringing the issue home, he asked, *Shall I tell you, friends, why do they not come here? One obstacle is, doubtless in your minister. ...but the main reason here, as in other cities, is because of these pew doors banning the entrance to their seats as property whether you occupy them or not.* (201:6)

Only when he was half way through the sermon did he speak of the new organization: *And last week a meeting, modestly called, with no flourish of trumpets, to consider the conditions, wants, and prospects of free religion in America at which various representative persons of various sects and out of the sects were asked to speak of the special progressive tendencies in religious thought with which they were most familiar, brought together one of the most crowded assemblies of the week. ...a march for new tendencies of truth ...within it much that is crude, unsettled, irrational, extravagant ...strange companionships & singular contradictions seem for the moment to be brought together ...singular that many different views & approaches were expressed on the same platform. Many different to God & Man.* (201:15-18)

CORRECT

*methods can come to the same fundamental religious principles. There are, indeed, for the first time In Christian history, indications of a movement for making Ch'y actually commensurate with the Universal & Absolute Religion. ...to the simple terms in which Jesus expressed the formula of religion – Love* Objections to the proposed organization were expressed. Some were against any fellowship with Jews. But, Potter countered, weren't the early Christians both Jews and Gentiles, and aren't we all children of our Father in Heaven? Others feared, *But we shall be mixed up with people not respectable, disreputable, vulgar, ignorant, fanatical cries our fastidious, kid-gloved, I am holier than thou, party & shrinks back into its luxurious, well-guarded private enclosure.* (201:19).

Suppose we do; perhaps we can help heal them. Another objection was that the faith of the people was being undermined by this new critical, investigative spirit. He responded that *it is more undermined by the attempt to keep up doctrines & observances in religion which the reason of the age condemns.* (201:22)

He concluded the sermon by again calling for transcending fear and renewing an absolute commitment to reason and the search for truth. He did not tell them that the new organization had actually been established. He never mentioned the name of the Free Religious Association. He did not tell them the name of any of the speakers or officers. He did not mention that he had been elected Secretary.

The Association began with great enthusiasm and high hopes. But its very openness quickly proved to be its greatest problem. It was easy to challenge the assertions of Christian dogma and to repudiate orthodox demands for doctrinal conformity; to define the meaning of free religion was far more difficult. In the first annual report of the executive committee, Potter stated that the Association intended to be open to all religions, or to “so much of any religion as can prove itself to be true.” 7. While he believed that it was possible to discover truth in religion and had repeatedly reminded his own congregation that this quest was the basis of his ministry, the question of what constituted proof was far more difficult to define. Potter, like most of the younger members of the Association, was a rationalist strongly influenced by the capacity of the physical sciences to demonstrate the validity of their theories. F. E. Abbot spent much of his life articulating and defending what he called “scientific theism”, and insisted that it could be demonstrated on purely rational grounds. Others doubted that something as personal as religion could even be defined in propositions which might be broadly acceptable. The tensions revealed at the organizing meeting were to remain central throughout the entire history of the Association. Was the purpose of the organization to define, demonstrate, and promulgate a shared vision of a religion of humanity, or was it to be a forum in which religious seekers could meet to raise questions, share their personal answers and convictions, and grow their personal religious philosophies in response to the process? While Potter may have believed that Truth in religion could be found, he was the most ardent of the Association’s leaders in insisting that it could and should not take any positions - theological, social, or political. To do so might compromise the liberty of belief promised in its constitution.

In his address to the second annual meeting Potter considerably shortened his remarks from those that he had planned to share. Apparently, the proceedings had been contentious with prolonged polemics, and there was no longer time for his full presentation. His major point was that natural religion has always existed within humanity, with religious people finding religion wherever they live around the globe. He objected to any supernatural claims or other creedal tests that served to divide one religious person from another. He urged that, “...we read or remember the religious sayings of other men, whether Jew or Indian, or Greek or Persian, only for friendship, only for joy in the social identity they open to us. ...I find something stingy in the unwilling and disparaging admission of these foreign opinions – opinions from all parts of the world – by our churchmen, as if only to enhance by their dimness the superior light of Christianity. ...I am glad to believe society contains a class of humble souls who enjoy the luxury of a religion that does not degrade; ...who have conceived an infinite hope for

*mankind; who believe that the history of Jesus is the history of every man, written large.* (Free Religious Association, p. 489 – 91) PUBLISHER?

Again in 1870, Potter felt compelled to offer an *Index* article offering an interpretation of the meaning of the name of the organization. The question was regularly being asked, “What do the ‘Free Religionists’ believe?” He reminded the reader of the diversity of opinions held among those related to the FRA, and asserted that what is important is not the common views of any religious group, but the personal convictions of individual men and women. (*The Index*, 1870)

Addressing the question of what the Association would actually do was the primary task of the new Executive Committee. Its members reflected the variety of backgrounds, affiliations, and views of those present for the organizing meeting in Horticultural Hall. The discussions were intense, and they were reflected in the variety of presentations at the first annual meeting during the 1868 Anniversary Week. In his presentation to the 1893 World Parliament of Religions, Potter explained that after two years of experience: *..the Association accepted the fact that its mission was not to be an organizer, but an educator; not to be a builder of local institutions of its own, but to be an agitator, and a molder of public opinion which should shape society and its institutions, in a freer order, to better ends.* 8.

The vehicles for achieving these goals came to be recognized as lectures, conventions, and publications. Potter was at the center of the process. While Frothingham was an eloquent and respected spokesperson for the Association, it was the secretary who assumed the major responsibility for getting the work done. Stow Persons states that, “Potter was to be its principal driving force during the years of its greatest activity”. (FR 9)

Publications began to appear soon after the beginning. The reports of the annual meetings, compiled by Potter, as Secretary, contained most of the addresses which had been delivered there. For example, that of the 1868 meeting:

*contains addresses by O. B. Frothingham, Jas. Freeman Clarke, Robert Collyer, Charles H. Malcolm, John P. Hubbard, Olympia Brown, John Weiss, T. W. Higginson, F. E. Abbot, A. B. Alcott and others, each presenting some distinct aspect of the religious tendencies of the times; also a long address by Wendell Phillips, specifically prepared for the Association on “The Relationship of Religion to Philanthropy;” Essay by F. B. Sanborn on the same subject; Essay by W. J. Potter, on “Present Tendencies of Society in regard to Religious Organization and Worship;” the specific Report of the Executive Committee of the Association, and letter from M. D. Conway in London and Keshab Chunder Sen, of India.* Later annual reports were equally meaty. Pamphlets published in 1868 included one by Potter, *Reason and Revelation*.

He also led in organizing a series of Sunday afternoon meetings in Horticultural Hall in Boston beginning in 1868-9. (J. W. Chadwick; *Unitarianism in America* p. 204). For the next twenty five years he devoted a major portion of his time to that work. His influence was profound, and the attitude expressed in his sermon of February 3 prevailed – it was a movement, not an ecclesiastical organization. Its success must be measured by

its influence, not by the number of members that it was able to attract. And, if **The Index** had not been created, it would have been virtually voiceless.

Abbot intended to be that voice. Within three weeks after the establishment of the Free Religious Association, he wrote on June 17 to the Secretary, Potter, proposing that the association makes its first priority the establishment of a high-quality weekly paper free from Christian and denominational influences. *Suppose it is called the **Reformer**, advocates every radical improvement in society, strikes out for Humanity (which is not depraved, but divine), and strives to work out the application of this American idea to Church as well as State. ... Our aim would be, not to produce special results, but to regenerate that public opinion out of which results flow.* He believed that there would be thousands eager to read such a progressive journal and that there were wealthy persons who could be persuaded to support it. (FEA - WJP 6/17/1867 quoted in *The Index* 6/24/1880)

He immediately began the process of creating the new journal, to be called **The Index**. It required developing an editorial policy and format, soliciting contributors, and making arrangements for printing and distribution. He recognized that the paper could not easily become self-supporting, but that a minimum of 2000 subscribers at \$2.00 a year would be necessary to make it so.

A prospectus was issued on November 1. Its first paragraph stated the positive objectives:

*“It will aim, above all things, to increase pure and genuine RELIGION in the world, - to develop a nobler spirit and higher purpose both in society and the individual. It will aim, at the same time, to increase FREEDOM in the world, - to destroy every species of spiritual slavery, to expose every form of superstition, to encourage independence of thought and action in all matters that concern belief, character or conduct. It will, in short, be devoted to the cause of FREE RELIGION which it proposes to advocate with the utmost ability and moral earnestness it can command.” (Index, 1/1/1870 p.5)*

He went on to say that it would work with the spirit of reform, while taking a radical stance solidly outside of the sphere of Christianity. Its only authority would be right reason and good conscience; this would mean that it would be the organ of no religious sect or political party. It would welcome contributions from many viewpoints, the criteria for acceptance being “ability, fairness, courtesy and pure moral tone”. It was to be understood that all contributors as well as the editor would be speaking for themselves alone.

As promised, the first issue appeared on January 1, 1870. On the front of the eight page tabloid were Abbot’s Fifty Affirmations. They were his propositions about religion, Christianity, Free Religion, and the relation of Christianity to Free Religion. He reprinted them in several subsequent issues, insisting, however, in response to Unitarian jibes that he had rejected their “creed” only to create a far longer one of his own, that they were indeed his own and not intended to bind anyone else.

Among the seven contributors listed on the masthead were O. B Frothingham, Thomas W. Higginson, William J. Potter and from overseas, Rev. Charles Voysey of London, England. The reality is that much of the contents of the early issues came from Abbot

himself. In addition to expressing his religious views, often edited versions of his Sunday addresses, he supplemented what he received from Potter with commentary on a variety of religious, social and political topics. During the first year more than 60 essays were published; all but seven were by Abbot; one of the additional seven was by Potter. All of the more than 100 editorials were written by the editor himself. They dealt with subjects as varied as *Romish and American Education*, *The New Creed of Atheism*, *Woman and the Fifteenth Amendment*, *Orthodoxy Scared by Its Own Image*, and *Sympathy for Prussia*. Under the Department of Free Religion there were more than 100 contributions, all edited in New Bedford.

### THE 1870'S

Potter continually felt pressure to defend the Association, its character and its work, often as much to its friends as its enemies, because of its emphasis on conventions and lectures rather than on direct action on important issues. In response, he reported on two incidents that occurred during his recent trip to the conventions in Detroit and Syracuse. He had dined with a distinguished jurist who knew nothing of the FRA, he responded that his own views were very much in sympathy. The conventions offer an opportunity to reach out to that large group of persons alienated from conventional religion but with no awareness that other share their views. At another of the conventions, he had noticed a very simply dressed elderly man raptly engaged in absorbing all of the addresses. On inquiry, he stated that he had come from a small town some distance away, because he had radical thoughts that he had not dared to share with anyone else in his community. Here he had been given affirmation for his own religious quest, and the strength to go home and persist. It was to reach the multitude of such persons from every class and educational level that the conventions and publications have been created. (*The Index*, DATE DATE, 1872 p. 21)

The ongoing tension with organized Unitarianism erupted again in 1872 when the *Christian Register* asserted "the Free Religionists stand before the world as an anti-Christian sect", including most of its officers, and "the Association withholds full hospitality from all who do not virtually renounce Christianity when uniting with them." Potter challenged them to prove it. The response was to dissemble and equivocate. The officers in question were Frothingham, Towne, Abbot, Weiss and Potter. The latter pointed out that three of them were listed in the Unitarian Directory, and that they had differing view about Christianity. But the most important fact, he asserted, was that the Association had never asked any of its members about their relationship to Christianity. That is entirely a matter for individual freedom and decision. Why does it matter so much to the *Register*? It is fierce in defending the Unitarians when attacked by other denominations, demanding strict adherence too the truth. "It does not show to good advantage when it tries to apply to its own case the prescriptions it is in the habit of making for others." (*The Index*, 1872, p. 109)

At a convention held in New York in October 1873, he spoke on *The Ecclesiastical Foes of Rational Faith*, an essay which was printed in *The Index* on November 6. In it he alluded to a situation in the West where a minister newly converted to Unitarianism was refused denominational financial support because he would not declare himself a Christian. In November he continued his ongoing tussle with the Unitarians. An *Index*

article noted that the Report of the Annual Meeting of the FRA had been reviewed in both *The Liberal Christian* and *The Christian Register*. The first, an editorial, contained very positive comments: *So much severe, earnest, honest thought about religion as contained in this pamphlet, so much vital interest and concern for its themes, so much evidence of profound sincerity, are not to be easily found in any equal space in any religious literature of any time.* It went on to comment, mostly favorably, on each of the essays.

In contrast, the *Register* reviewer disparaged almost all of the essays as *not especially able or interesting. Indeed we must honestly say that considering the occasion, they seem to us poor, and to add little or nothing to thought already commonplace upon their prevailing theme.* Potter rejoined that such a spirit, *well expresses what has been the general attitude of the Register towards the Free Religious Association. And this general spirit greatly detracts from the force of any of its special criticisms of the Association's proceedings, - renders them, indeed nearly valueless. Criticism, of course, we do not deprecate. We criticize and expect to be criticized. But we have a right to ask that criticism be respectful and fair.* (*The Index* 11/6/1873, p. 447)

The 1875 annual lecture series in Horticultural Hall in Boston elicited a report from Potter in March 25 *Index*. Several of the lectures related to social issues and some had complained that there wasn't sufficient attention paid to religious topics; Potter noted that in previous years there had been complaints to the contrary. One of the issues addressed was the possibility of legislation prohibiting alcoholic beverages; the speaker was against it. Some had complained that both sides of any issue should be presented. Potter responded by repeating the FRA philosophy that every speaker should have absolute freedom, but he also noted that a speaker favoring prohibition had been invited, but had been unable to attend. What he hoped was that funds could be raised to present several topical courses of lectures throughout the year. (*The Index*, 3/25/187)

In that same year, *Freedom and Fellowship in Religion*, a collection of essays by several of its leaders, was published under the auspices of the organization. Potter alluded to the two principles present in the title in an *Index* article. While absolute liberty of thought was at the very heart of the FRA, such a principle was not sufficient cause to justify an organization. Many realized that there was a purpose in connecting kindred spirits, uniting in their quest for truth and right. Answers may differ; the search unites. (WJP *The Index* 5/13/75 p. 222-3)

From the time that the Free Religious Association had been organized some had questioned whether it was acceptable to become a member and still remain associated with the Unitarians, or indeed to call oneself a Christian. It was an important issue because **The Christian Register**, an unofficial voice of the Unitarian Association, as an extension of a continuing series of attacks, had recently claimed that, "the Free Religionists stand before the world now as an anti-Christian sect", and virtually require members to renounce Christianity. Potter responded by demanding that the editors of the *Register* prove it. He asked the editor to provide names, time and place when the leaders of the Association had renounced Christianity. Reporting in an *Index* article, he said that

no explicit information was forthcoming, only that if the officers hadn't renounced Christianity, they should make a public statement saying so. In fact, the Free Religious Association had never asked any member to state a theological position. And he reminded the Unitarians that three of the five officers whom they had accused of being anti-Christian were still listed in the denomination's Yearbook as Unitarian ministers. (Index 1872, vol. 3, p.109) Abbot and Frothingham had made formal requests that their names be removed.

In order to counteract such charges Abbot and Potter worked together to amend the Association's constitution to make theological liberty even more explicit. Abbot's language was modified by Potter and passed by the 1872 annual meeting. The Purposes section was revised to read, "*and nothing in the name of constitution of the Association shall ever be construed as limiting membership by any special belief or system of beliefs pertaining to religion, or as interfering in the slightest degree with that absolute freedom of thought and expression which is the natural right of every rational being.*"

This action did not resolve the tension with the Unitarian denominational leaders. They were determined to assure outsiders that theirs was a Christian denomination. To have ministers among them who denied or even doubted the Christian name threatened their urgency for respectability. The case of Potter was especially troubling. He was the renowned and respected minister of one of the most important Unitarian congregations. Yet, his leadership in the Free Religious Association placed him in league with Abbot, Frothingham and others who had explicitly rejected the Unitarian label. Those who were eager to be rid of the free religionists felt the necessity of pushing Potter to clarify his relationship to the Unitarian Association. Since this Association was an organization of individuals, not congregations, the primary mechanism for identifying Unitarian congregations and minister was the annual Yearbook which it published. Potter's name had been listed since the beginning of his ministry.

In the Fall of 1873, George W. Fox, Secretary of the Unitarian Association wrote asking if he wished to have his name continue to be listed. The background of the request was an incident involving a new congregation in the West being subsidized by the denomination. When the minister announced that he could no longer call himself a Christian, the subsidy was withdrawn. Potter and other free religionists rallied to his defense and protested the denominational action. In response the leadership became even more committed to asserting a Christian identity.

Since the question of being listed was potentially controversial, Abbot and Frothingham having already requested to have their names removed, it is unlikely that he would have taken this action on his own initiative. Potter's response was to place the responsibility for making the decision on the Association. He replied that he had never asked that his name be placed on the list and he would not now ask that it be removed. He stated that he was not of the same mind as Frothingham. *I for one propose to 'stick' - until I receive notice to quit. If the AUA authorities want our names out of the 'Yearbook', let them not shun the responsibility, but themselves apply the scissors.* (WJP - FOX 11/??/1873)

This was not a welcome answer; they clearly wanted him to go, but they did not want to be accused of pushing him out. So the correspondence continued. In response to a

second request to declare himself, Potter again refused. Since the editors set the principles for inclusion, they must decide who fits them. Fox, in his letter had inferred that his willingness to continue to be listed indicated that he was still agreeable to calling himself a 'Unitarian Christian'. Rejecting that inference, Mr. Potter stated: *I do not call myself by that or any other denominational name. ...'Christian I do not now call myself, and have so said in public Fourteen years ago when I entered the ministry. ...Still, seeing what wide general meanings are given to the name, I do not feel bound, as some of my co-adjutors do, constantly to protest against it, of others choose to consider me entitled to it. For a prior question must then be, 'What do you mean by Christian?' (WJP - FOX 12/1/1873)*

He had told them that they must decide, and they did. Fox informed him that his name would be omitted. Potter responded with a long discussion of the purpose and character of the Unitarian movement, now in the process of hardening into another sect. He asserted that such decisions could be made on the basis of character rather than doctrine. The AUA could choose to say: *Though some of those on the list of ministers give to the name 'Christian' such a definition as not to include themselves under it, yet we, not professing to define the term so much by doctrinal tests as by tests of character, can rightly retain their names (unless they especially request that they be withdrawn), especially when they appear to be the accepted ministers of societies commonly recognized as Unitarian.*

He then dissociated himself from his withdrawing colleagues and asserted that Unitarianism was basically allied with free religion. He would continue to work with the Unitarian organizations and colleagues where they were dedicated to promoting the interests of *pure Christianity*, but now his primary commitment would be to serve the other association which, *represents that larger spirit and movement of our age which, unlimited by any lines of speculative belief or by the boundaries that separate the specific religions, is aiming at grounds of faith & fellowship as universal as humanity.* (WJP - FOX 12/10/1873)

This was a very important controversy. That it represented a conscious strategy on the part of the free religionists is indicated by a November 28 letter from Abbot to Potter, before the latter's two expository letters to Fox. After informing Potter that he was sending 125 copies of the Index to New Bedford for free distribution with the object of encouraging subscriptions, Abbot told him that he hoped to publish two of his articles in the weeks ahead. *I am trying to keep the Year Book point fresh till New Year: for the foxes keep in their holes pretty clearly, and I want to smoke them out. If you prefer if I should drop that subject, say so, and I will; but unless it is doing mischief in New Bedford in any way, the matter ought not to rest.* (FEA - WJP 11/28/1874)

The 'foxes' were smoked out. Before receiving permission from Potter, Fox chose to have their correspondence printed in the **Christian Register**. This was prior to his receiving the second expository letter. The complete correspondence was published in **The Index** on January 23. The consequence was uproar. Neither Abbot nor Frothingham was serving a congregation. Mr. Potter was the highly respected minister of a very important Unitarian church. To reject Potter was to reject that church. Having succeeded in pushing the AUA leaders into making the decision about omitting his name,

his response had been generous and conciliatory, underscoring his conviction that affiliation should be determined by character and general sympathy, not doctrinal conformity.

Protests immediately appeared. One of the first came from the Essex County Conference of Unitarian Churches. (Essex County is in Northeastern Massachusetts.) Its condemnatory resolution referred to Potter as a *regularly ordained Unitarian clergyman of distinguished scholarship, ability, & purity of character, & pastor of a prominent Unitarian Church*. The resolution deplored his exclusion as *an unprecedented indignity” which disparaged and undermined one of the essential principles of the Unitarian faith, namely the perfect liberty of religious enquiry...* It rejected any doctrinal test of fellowship and insisted that no tribunal had the authority to decide who was qualified for inclusion, and that a personal decision about whether or not to label oneself Christian was not an important test. It then explicitly rejected the authority of the American Unitarian Association to erect any theological test for fellowship. *And we offer to our brother, Rev. Wm. J. Potter, the unconditional assurance that we regard his relations to the Unitarian body as wholly undisturbed, and beg him to continue in his accustomed fellowship with our denomination so long as his religious & personal sympathies impel him to do so.* (Resolution of Essex Conference, February 21 or 22, 1874.) A final version of the resolution may have been somewhat milder and more conciliatory.

When the National Conference met in Saratoga in November 1874, the issue was still very much alive. Legally, the Conference, as a separate entity, had no right to make any comment on an action of the AUA. Factually, the leaders of the two were closely allied. Dr. Bellows, the major power with the Conference, had always been eager to make it as inclusive as possible. When the meeting convened, he offered a resolution, *...that this Conference heartily endorses the action of its officers in inviting to be present with us the church at New Bedford, by its pastor and lay delegates, and wished its general spirit to be interpreted by this particular action.”*

Bellows had previously expressed his conciliatory spirit in article in the **Liberal Christian**. Mr. Potter commented on it in an **Index** article contrasting its response to the Annual Report of the FRA with that of the **Christian Register**. Bellows had said: *To find so many so many men of high intelligence, broad culture, poetic genius, and rare character, laying the most elaborate studies in religion upon the altar of freedom and truth is a phenomenon of the rarest interest and the gravest significance. ...so much evidence of profound sincerity, is not to be easily found in any equal space in any religious literature of any time.* The **Register** had dismissed all but two of the addresses: *“they seem to us poor, and to add little or nothing to thought, already commonplace on their prevailing theme.* Potter commented that the Register writer seemed to have done exactly what Bellows had cautioned against, by, *responding with a sneer on his face or a shrug of easy indifference on his shoulders.* (*Index*, vol. 4., p. 447, 11/6/1873)

In the spring of 1874 Potter responded to an article in *The Liberal Christian* which quoted the Assistant Secretary of the AUA as saying that since Frothingham had requested that his name be omitted that consistency required that the only other name of an FRA member in the Yearbook also be omitted. In fact, Potter rebutted, there were more than thirty FRA ministerial members still listed, and that many others listed were in

active cooperation with it. The basic point was that the FRA was explicitly NOT an attempt to organize a new sect. In its commitment to freedom, its members included persons who were members of a variety of religious organizations beyond the Unitarian, and many affiliated with none at all. (*The Index*, 6/18/1874, p. 294)

When Potter commented on the controversy and the convention in two New Bedford sermons at the end of November, he was explicit about the continuing rejection, *But the resolution having been proposed solely as a test of fellowship, the decisive vote to table it became virtually & unmistakably an act of disfellowship & exclusion on the part of the Conference toward this society*. In fact, the controversy had centered on Potter, not on the church, but this statement of his allied the church's position with his own. By the beginning of the 1840's all that the church required was *the expression of a solemn purpose to follow the precepts of Jesus, & to lead a Christian life*. The society had never had any theological test. During the ministry of John Weiss in the 1850's the church ceased to exist as a separate entity, so there was no longer semblance of either creed or covenant. The implications were profound; the doors were now open to anyone who might choose to share in fellowship - infidels, progressive Jews, - even adherents of Asiatic faiths - Hindu, Buddhist, Mohammedan. There was nothing in the rules or spirit of the congregation which would exclude them. The two sermons were published within weeks of their delivery. Surely they were intended for distribution beyond New Bedford. Abbot, always eager for controversy with the Unitarians, kept the issue alive in the pages of **The Index**.

Within the denomination the center of radical thought was in the Western Unitarian Conference (essentially, the Midwest). Distant from Boston, the majority of ministers and congregations were independent in thought and action and resisted any denominational pressures towards conformity. In May 1875, that conference entered the controversy. Their annual meeting unanimously adopted a resolution introduced by the highly respected minister of Chicago's Unity Church, Rev. Robert J. Collyer, deploring the action of the AUA *in its efforts to limit the fellowship of the Unitarian body by practically defining the word Christian, so as to make it a dogmatic shibboleth, instead a symbol of righteousness*. It went on to protest the exclusion of Potter's name from the Yearbook and urged that it be restored. Among those in support was the conservative, Rev. William Greenleaf Eliot. Through his New Bedford brother, Congressman Eliot, he was very much aware of Potter's character and integrity, and he felt that the action had been arbitrary and un-Unitarian. At the same meeting resolutions were adopted which thanked the AUA for its efforts to promote liberal Christianity and offered sympathy and good will to the Free Religious Association. (Charles Wendte: *The Larger Fellowship* ....)

Unlike Abbot and Frothingham, Potter was not eager to abandon the Unitarians; his goal was to reaffirm its character as a movement, to transform its organizations, and to move the body forward towards more radical ideas. By refusing to make a decision about the inclusion of his name, he cleverly led the officers of the AUA into the position of appearing to be dogmatic and illiberal. Fox's decision to print their correspondence in the *Christian Register* meant that Potter's position was shared with an influential denominational audience which would not have been aware of them through **The Index**. He surely anticipated that he would receive significant support, and that no matter what

the immediate actions of denominational bodies, his principles and values would be advanced within the movement.

He also saw the FRA as a movement as much as a membership organization. The initial meetings were held in the home of Cyrus Bartol, and although never a member, he has appeared frequently on its programs. So Potter felt it important to respond to criticisms of the movement made in Bartol's book, *The Rising Faith*. The major issue was the negative attitude of many its adherents. Calling for religious freedom was not sufficient; it had to result in some positive affirmations. Not a creed, but creative and positive ideas. Potter's response that it was not the responsibility of the officers to attempt to determine the emphasis of the speakers selected to present their views on one of its platforms. While many of them spoke more of liberty than of religion on those occasions, the religious sentiment was fully evident in their preaching. However, the Association is and should be open to liberal minded people who have little use for organized religion. Freedom requires that they also have an opportunity to express their views in the shared quest for truth. (*The Index*, 2/5/1874, p. 67)

Two weeks later he responded to another criticism – that the FRA was not sufficiently concerned with social problems and their solution. He agreed that the Association did not have this as one of its purposes. However, many of the speakers on its platforms were very concerned with the relation of religion to social reform and have made specific proposals to effect it. Most of the core members are actively engaged in a variety of reform movements. “*They are in the Woman's Rights movement, or the Temperance movement, or the Social Science Association, or the Prison Reform agitation, or the Freedmen's Education Commissions.*” Indeed, one of the problems of securing speakers on such concerns was that many of the most qualified were too busy actually addressing them. But that is not the primary purpose of the organization. *The main work of the Free Religious Association is to sow ideas, - in the hope and belief that from the ideas will spring gradually all noble philanthropies and happier conditions of society.* (*The Index* 2,26, 1774, p. 104)

Abbot had presented a lecture in the 1877 FRA Horticultural Hall course. In it he discussed the proper interpretation of the Constitution of the Association and asserted that its central point was *the substitution of the scientific method for the method of authority in religion*. In it he raised the possibility that the scientific method had moved religion beyond Transcendentalism. Higginson responded by questioning his tolerance, not his ideas, and stated that Abbot was guilty of exclusion and narrowness and intended to push all the Transcendentalists out of the FRA. Frothingham, the President of the Association, had remained silent, thereby implying that he agreed with Higginson. Potter was also present at the meeting, but later explained that his secretarial duties prevented him from speaking in Abbot's defense. No one else did either.

Potter felt compelled to respond in an *Index* article. He pointed out that the scientific method could be applied to spiritual phenomena as well as material. When the Association was organized the name Religious Science Association was considered and rejected because it *might appear to exclude the practical and humanitarian interests of religion*. Some would feel that Abbot was rejecting intuition as being valid in religion as appropriate for scientific investigation. Potter believed that such phenomena were

appropriate subjects. *Darwin and Spencer believe in intuition, but scientifically account for it.* He was eager to point out that the Transcendentalists had been central to the founding of the association and to assure them that they continued to be a welcome and valued part of the movement. (*The Index*, 4/12/1877, p. 175)

At the 1878 annual meeting of the FRA Rev. Octavius Brooks Frothingham, the founding president, retired. He was elderly and traveled frequently, but his responsibilities were not heavy. The work of the association had settled into a routine of the annual meeting, occasional conventions in various cities, a Boston lecture series, and the publication of pamphlets. Without **The Index**, the Association would barely have been heard. When he heard of Frothingham's decision he wrote urging him to stay in office, *It is you and Potter who have made the life of the FRA.; it will never be the same when either goes!* (FEA – OBF: 5/15/1878) Frothingham did retire; the new president was Felix Adler of New York City, the Jewish founder of Ethical Culture. Adler's father was the rabbi at the reform Temple Emanu-el. As a young man he thought his way into agnosticism and became alienated from the Reform community. In 1875, at the age of twenty-five, he founded the Society for Ethical Culture. Eager to rid all religion of superstition, he was equally committed to the cause of fundamental social reform. It was Frothingham who had recruited Adler and urged his election.

In his 1879 presidential address, delivered without notes for an hour and twenty minutes, Adler spoke of the practical needs of free religion. Potter reported, *His hearers at once felt the power of a trained thinker and speaker of exceptional strength, and as they were carried along with him, could not help but catch something of his enthusiastic conviction that Free Religion does not mean merely the holding of conventions for free discussion of religious problems, but has a large practical mission for human welfare which it is only just beginning to unfold.* Even cautious Potter conceded that, *...there is room enough within the strict limits of the constitution for much enlargement of operations.* (*The Index*, 6/12/1879, p. 284)

Although the annual meeting had not acted as Abbot had hoped it would to speak out in support of the Comstock laws, he was nevertheless more enthusiastic than he had been for several years. The spark was the new leadership of Adler who told the members that the organization must grow or die. Abbot had once again been persuaded to speak, and his plea echoed that of Adler. There was a triple need of, *a first-class philosophy, a first-class journal, and a first-class organization.*

One ongoing source of tension between Abbot and the other leaders had been his passionate conviction that the Association had a moral duty to speak out on issues related to public morality. He was hopeful that Adler shared this view. He was encouraged by the youthful, energetic and visionary new president's plans. Persons states that he envisioned:

*A School for the Science of Religion would be needed to train free religious leaders, and until one could be established Adler suggested that funds be raised to endow chairs of the Science of Religion, rational ethics, and social sciences in existing universities. A journal which would be the official organ of the Association would also be needed. Some method of establishing local societies organically related to the parent group must be worked out. Finally, the Association must make up its mind to take an immediate interest*

*in the advancement of human welfare and concern itself with the problems of poverty industrialism, and property.* (FR: 94)

Abbot agreed to serve with him on a planning committee along with Potter and Rev. Minot Savage.

Adler had inherited a tired organization. Its revenues had peaked at \$2600 in 1875; by 1879 they had fallen to \$600. Publications and programs had to be suspended. Yet, Adler had brought a new spirit of optimism. At the annual meeting a committee was appointed to develop means of making the organization more united and effective. In his annual report Potter alluded to the correspondence that had urged greater activity. *...there is a conviction among persons of free religious sentiment of some more efficient organization of their ideas than has hitherto been attempted on any large scale, - an organization not simply for the luxury of speculative discussion, but for taking hold of the practical, social, philanthropic, and educational problems of the day, where these problems concern man's highest interests.* If this is to be achieved it may be necessary to assist in the organization of local societies. To those who might say that it couldn't be done, he pointed to three strong existing groups: the Free Congregational Society at Florence, Massachusetts, the Free Religious Society at Providence, Rhode Island, and the Society for Ethical Culture in New York City.

At the beginning of 1880, Potter reported on a circular that had been issued by the Executive Committee. It urged the development of local societies, paid traveling lecturers to speak at more frequent conventions, the publication of a journal and materials for the instruction of young people. A general agent had been engaged to oversee the implementation of these goals. He was Mr. David H. Clark who previously had been the resident speaker at the society in Florence. On the advice of Adler, he had taken up residence in New York. Part of his mission was to personally encourage membership from the liberal thinkers of the city who might not otherwise be aware of the Association. If successful there, he would move on to Philadelphia and other cities. His mandate also included record keeping, providing information, especially for those who might be interested in organizing local societies, and arranging for lectures by persons selected by unanimous vote of the Executive Committee. Sunday school lessons were being prepared. But, already some were concerned that too little was being done; others, too much. (*The Index*, 1/29/1880, p. 55)

The Executive Committee managed to raise only \$1000 to begin the process, and by the time of the annual meeting in 1881 opposition was already arising. In addition to addresses by Adler, Minot J. Savage, George Chainey, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a whole afternoon was to be devoted to discussing the question, "Will Free Religion organize? The lead address was to be given by F. A. Hinckley, the resident Speaker of the Free Religious Society in Providence. The discussants would be Mrs. Anna Garlin Spencer, Mr. Giles H. Stebbins, and Mrs. Anna L. Diggs. The old fear of ecclesiasticism emerged again. Subsequently, a committee was created to consider expansion plans.

However, in the Spring of 1882 *The Index* announced a meeting at the Parker Fraternity Hall in Boston for a full and frank discussion about more organized activity. The fact that Potter spent a large portion of the notice in alluding to the tension about expansion seems to confirm that he was among the doubters. (*The Index*, 3/23/1882) About fifty

persons were in attendance and Adler presided. The Executive Committee had appointed nineteen state correspondents; sixteen had sent reports on the state of religious liberty and the degree of receptivity to liberal religion in their states. Beyond the New England states reports were received from New Jersey, Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin, Kansas, Nebraska, California, and Arkansas. In general they were hopeful about the prospects for free religion.

The committee appointed at the 1881 annual meeting reported. Chaired By Mrs. Spencer, it had also included Mrs. Diggs of Lawrence, Kansas, Mr. Arthur G. Hill of Florence, Mass, Mr. B. A. Ballou of Providence, and Mr. W. H. Hamlen of Boston. Mrs. Spencer delivered the report which advocated the appointment of an agent or agents who would visit those states showing the greatest promise for welcoming free religion. The task would be to help produce lectures and conventions, assist in creating state organizations and local societies. It advocated offering start up financial assistance for societies that showed promise of becoming self sustaining. The response was basically supportive except on the question of providing financial aid. Because the meeting was an informal one, any action had to be deferred to the next annual meeting. What is unclear is whether Clark was still acting as General Agent and the committee was proposing additional agents or whether he had left.

Potter offered an extended commentary in May. He interpreted the position of the committee as being one which would make the organizing of local societies the primary mission of the Association. If adopted it would be a fundamental repudiation of the constitution and would effectively result in creating a new sect. He spoke as one who had been instrumental in the founding of the Association and as an author of its constitution. It explicitly stated, *Membership in this Association shall in no degree affect his (a member's) relation to other associations.* He reminded his readers that members of a variety of religious groups had been present at the beginning. Organizing local societies would effectively force those members (and even some members of the Executive Committee) to choose between the FRA societies and their own. In fact, the Association is much more than a simple debating society – *it has declared ...for unrestricted mental liberty on all religious problems. It asserts both the right and the duty to look at all problems from the stand-point of the free reason. ...it declares its practical objects to promote righteousness, fellowship, and the rational study of religion.* He acknowledged that times change and the old purposes might no longer be relevant, but he remained defensive. *The fact that more recent comers into the Association do not appear to comprehend or to be satisfied with the old aims and methods would seem to indicate that the time for such a change may be approaching.* He proposed the possibility of giving the committee's proposal a try, but only after appointing a larger committee to give careful consideration to the implications and possible consequences, and then perhaps changing the Constitution to permit it. (*The Index*, 5/11/1882, p. 530)

The debate about both goals and methods went on for three years, and little new was accomplished. By the time of the 1882 annual meeting, Adler had become tired of waiting, and he resigned as president and from the Association. He addressed the meeting with stinging criticism:

*It is with a heavy heart that I speak of it, but what has Boston done for the honor of our principles? What great charitable movement has found its source here among those who*

*maintain the principle of freedom in religion? What living thing for the good of mankind, for the perfecting of morality among yourselves and others, has emanated from the Free Religious circles of this city...It is not enough that, once every year, in Anniversary Week, a company should assemble and fill this hall, and listen to a careful discussion of weighty, and then retire until another annual meeting calls us together. ...The general idea of freedom in religion has been worked out; its special applications have not been worked out, and until they are worked out, so they can be utilized, so that societies – really vital societies – can be built on these methods, our principles will fail to be generally accepted... (FRA Proceedings, 1882)*

When Felix Adler resigned from the presidency of the Association in 1882, he was replaced by Potter. As the presiding officer at that annual meeting, he felt that he could not reply at that time to Adler's address. A few weeks later, as the editor of **The Index**, his response was vigorous. His first salvo was addressed to all the Association's editorial critics who already predicting its imminent demise. In fact the idea and principles of free religion stated fifteen years earlier had continued to spread. But the leaders had always recognized that these were larger than the active membership in the organization itself.

Adler and many others have been and continue to work for their extension. When there are enough more the organization may indeed go. *Its concern is for the triumph of its principles, not for its own perpetuity. But for the present it means to stay. (The Index, 6/15/82, p. 591)*

A week later he responded directly to Adler's criticism: *...the chief point of his criticism is directed against the methods and practical policy of the Association. His arraignment is that it has not put its professions into practice; that it provides for discussion, but does nothing else; that it talks but does not act. The problem is three strange misconceptions. First of all, the Association is not only a Boston organization, it is a national association with officers and members from many states. While it does not itself undertake practical work, many of its members are much engaged in moral and philanthropic activity relevant to conditions in the communities where they reside.*

Secondly, when he claims that Free Religious circles around Boston do nothing but talk, *he goes beyond the limits of rhetorical license, and commits an injustice against men and women who were growing gray in the service of humanity before he was old enough to even think of his work in New York. He went on to give several examples of their action: And on some point of educational and social reform, as is natural from his years and partial isolation from other reformers, he appears to be just awakening to facts and principles that have long been familiar to those older in the field. If he should reply that these beneficent activities do not come distinctly in the name of "Free Religion", it must be said that it is one of the principles of "Free Religion" to work for humanity with others, wherever work can be done without compromise of any religious convictions.*

His third misconception is a theoretical one. He expressed a concern that the openness to a great variety of opinions might muddle and temper the distinctness of individual religious conviction, and that the open platform of the Association is no substitute for a definite religion. *This remark, we think, explains a certain sensitiveness which Mr. Adler has always shown on the Free Religious platform, lest his own convictions were somehow*

*to be compromised by the differing convictions of other speakers. The remark, also, in our view, discloses his failure to comprehend one of the most fundamental principles of the Free Religious Association; namely, its assertion, in the interest of truth, of the right of differing religious opinions to a full and fair hearing, each speaker speaking on his own individual responsibility, but each also, for the same reason, being left perfectly free to urge his own opinion, there and elsewhere, with all the mental power at his command. (The Index, 6/22/1882; 602)*

Potter was now both the president of the Association and the principal editor of **The Index**, the two most important positions in the free religious movement. That he accepted both positions while continuing to serve his New Bedford congregation is an expression of his commitment and loyalty to the cause. It also was prescient of its fading.

Potter was not an ambitious person. And he was not by temperament or skill an organizational leader. While he had a powerful mind, a profound commitment to social justice and excellent writing and editorial skills, he was also a very private person, socially at ease with only a few intimates. Both as editor and president he was essentially a caretaker with neither the will nor energy to undertake new initiatives. As President he continued to resist attempts to engage the Association in intentional organizing. As Editor he was a keen observer of both religious and public issues and frequently commented from a free religious perspective. Special targets were the attempts by the orthodox denominations to enforce conformity on some of their more progressive members and their attempt to intrude their religious opinions into public life. And he never withdrew from his eagerness to identify hypocrisy among the Unitarians.

The National Conference had continued to have Fall biennial gatherings. In 1882 it was scheduled for Saratoga, New York. In an advance article, Potter rehearsed the controversy about the Preamble to its constitution which had emerged at the organizing meeting in New York City in 1865. Despite the efforts by radicals to make it generous and inclusive, the majority insisted on making it exclusively Christian. Subsequent attempts to modify it had never long succeeded. Yet many younger radical ministers continued to attend. Clearly they did not believe it, but in recent years they had made no effort to change it. *Even some of those who for a time made their silent protest against the theological status of the Conference by staying away from it have in latter years, we notice, yielded to the social or denominational attraction or to some other force (perhaps only to the drawing power of a famous summer resort) and go as announced delegates to the Saratoga meetings.* They seem to believe that they can simply ignore the Preamble as irrelevant. There are many important Unitarian preachers who clearly do not accept it, yet they are among those who protest when orthodox denominations attempt to enforce their creeds. He then challenged the Radicals, many of them his personal friends, to explain how in conscience they could rationalize participating, or else to make an active attempt to change the Preamble. (*The Index*, 9/14/1862, p. 122)

Two weeks later, in response to colleagues who had attended and been inspired, he explained why he would not go. They had said, *...Most of the prepared addresses were, broad, progressive, radical. Even the most conservative in doctrine were catholic in sympathies, and had a forward look. The talk and action were all in the direction of liberty and a large fellowship. The stimulus, socially, morally, spiritually, was of the*

*best. We all came away feeling that we belonged to a live and moving body. You ought to have been there to have felt the progress the Unitarian denomination is making.* (ibid. 9/28/1862, p. ) He responded by admitting that he had lost something by not being able to attend and to share the fellowship. But he was prevented by duty. When the Conference was established, it drew a boundary defining who was theologically acceptable. He was clearly outside the line.

He was well aware of how much he had lost by not being in fellowship with many esteemed colleagues, but conscience would not permit his participation. The fact that in 1880 the Constitution was modified to permit the participation of those who could not fully accept the Preamble, made some believe that they could now join. *But for ourselves, even if we still retained general fellowship with the Unitarian denomination, we should feel impelled to stay out of the Conference, in order to protest the keeping of the theological fence that necessitates the opening of the gateways.* Basically, he was attacking the theological dishonesty of insisting upon retaining the Preamble while at the same time suggesting that it wasn't important to honor it. What was clear was that the Conference leaders continued to insist that it was still a Christian body. Some Radicals who still nominally believe themselves to be Christian might be comfortable in joining, but clearly non-Christians remained unwelcome. As for himself, he had stopped calling himself a Christian several years previously. *...in the practical interest of what seems to us a more comprehensive truth and a wider fellowship, the triumphs of which are to come in the future, our position and work are outside the lines which the Conference has made its bounds.* (*The Index*, 10/5/1882, p. 158)

After the annual meeting in 1883, he protested against the suggestion by some of the speakers that the Association was a religious denomination. To the contrary, from the beginning it was intended to be a movement which would not require its members to abandon any other association. Indeed, there are currently members of several different religious denominations, while others are associated with none, and some might choose to create new associations. *Hence, though new and advanced sects may come, and the Free Religious Association may hospitably welcome their word and work, it is not its mission to form them nor merely to count one among them...* (*The Index*, 6/14/1883, p. 590)

Another attendee questioned the failure to have arrived at any definitive answers to the great religious questions. Since the Association was supposedly committed to scientific inquiry, was there no scientist who could provide solid conclusions? In response, Potter asserted that science does not quickly achieve answers, and that among scientists there was often great disagreement and debate about important questions. Some religious questions are so broad and complex that they do not easily suggest definitive answers. Scholars are working towards creating a science of religion, but scientists as well as religionists may have strong opinions long before they are able to fully prove their validity. So Darwin posited his theory of evolution before he had all the facts needed to support it. Potter then alluded to his own strongly held convictions about the nature of religion, but confessed that they might need to be modified in response to new tests of truth. Most important, the purpose of the Association was not to find and proclaim THE truth, but to encourage its thoughtful members to leave theological differences aside

while they worked together for the practical improvement of humanity. (*The Free Religious Index*, 6/28/1883 p. 614)

A letter was received from Judge George Hoadly, recently nominated as the Democratic candidate for governor of Ohio. He reported that the Republican press was beginning to call him an atheist or an agnostic determined to destroy the Christian religion and its principles, this because of association with the FRA. He has agreed to serve as a vice-president because of the eminence and character of all the others who held that office.

But now his critics were claiming that the Association refuses to accept Christians as members. He asked if there was anything in the constitution which would exclude Christians. Potter printed his letter and responded as the President. Not only is there nothing exclusionary in the constitution, he personally knew of a substantial portion of members who called themselves Christians.

A convention was held in Florence, Massachusetts, in November, 1884. One of the speakers, Mrs. Diaz raised a question as to the meaning of "religious" in the name of the Association. Potter responded in *The Index*. Once again he pointed out that no one had the right to speak for the Association, but that many of the members had clear and articulate views on the meaning of religion. Even the orthodox do not agree on the meaning. However, the constitution of the Association does contain an explicit statement, *to encourage the scientific study of man's religious nature and history*. This suggests that man has a religious nature, but it does not attempt to define religion. That word is use only once in the constitution: *To promote the practical interests of pure religion*. Here the suggestion is that the organization *exists to emphasize the practical, ethical, or conduct side of religion, in distinction from its speculative or theological side*. When the Association speaks of religion it applies it to matters of character and conduct. It welcomes individual statements of religious convictions as contributions to the discussion of great questions, but itself it can take no position. (*The Free Religious Index*, 12/11/1884, p. 278)

On November 18, 1886, Sara A. Underwood, a Board member and regular *Index* contributor, had presented to the Festival of the Free Religious Association an ambitious plan to revitalize the association and extend its work. Printed in the *The Index* on December 10, a few weeks later on December 23, Potter responded: *Our purpose ... was to sketch a possible new working plan for the Free Religious Association. But now, at the end, we have to ask if this plan, however good it may seem on paper, is practically 'possible'. It is certainly not possible with the present membership of the association. A largely increased membership and an increased interest will be needed. ... Is the time right for the attempt? Perhaps the plan, at least, will set other and wiser minds to thinking, and we invite personal correspondence on it.* (*The Index*: 12/23/1886 p. 303) His response was hardly an affirmation of her ideas, let alone a call for vigorous action. *The Index* ceased publication shortly thereafter. Its remaining subscribers and resources were transferred to *Unity*, a Chicago based Unitarian organ, or to the *Open Court*, another liberal publication based in Illinois.

While it survived in some form until 1923, and probably never officially dissolved, the Association's greatest moment of triumph came with the World Parliament of Religions

in 1893. In 1872 at the time of the first Vatican Council, Potter had preached a sermon in response (later presented to the Association and published in *The Index*). In it he made a remarkable prediction:

*Some of us here may live to see the day when there shall be when there shall be a World's Convention or perhaps in Boston, San Francisco, of representatives from all the great religions of the globe – coming together in a spirit of mutual respect, confidence, and amity, for common conference on what may be the best good for all; not to make a common creed by patching articles together from their respective faiths in which they might find themselves in agreement, but emancipated from all bondage to creed and sect, to join hands in a common effort to higher truth and nobler living. It may be that the work of this Association will culminate in such a World's Convention. (The Index,*

The Parliament was indeed the culmination of Potter's vision. Among all the other meetings, The Free Religious Association held its twenty-sixth annual meeting. The president, Potter delivered the principal address which he called a sketch of the organization's history and meaning. After discussing the context and controversy surrounding its founding, and outlining its original goal and plans, he defended the association against the charge that it was merely "a voice without a hand." *Though the organism has not developed much of a hand, its voice has had a pervasive and penetrating quality. It has been heard in Christian churches, in Jewish synagogues, in the shadow of Mohammedan mosque. In less than one year it had found its way to India, and brought back a response from the distinguished leader of the Brahmo Samaj, the now lamented Keshub Chunder Sun, whose equally distinguished successor, Mr. Mozoomdar, we welcome to this platform this morning. Without much of a hand to go with it, the voice has a way of commanding and using the hands of other bodies, and that is answering the purpose nearly as well.*

He went on to express his understanding of the essential character of the association: *First and foremost, it has emphatically and unequivocally affirmed the utmost liberty for thought in matters of religion, and the human mind itself as the seat of ultimate authority in the discovery and holding of truth...*

*Secondly, - the ethical and spiritual interests – or, what we may call, the character interests - of religion are paramount to all creedal and ecclesiastical interests.*

*Thirdly, - All artificial barriers and restrictions to freedom of thought in religion, whether imposed by church or state...should be opposed and abolished.*

*Fourthly, - There is a broader and finer religious fellowship than any which the sects and special religions have yet been wont to act upon...*

*Fifthly, - Religion being one of the phenomena of human history, the modern scientific method of study is to be applied to it as to all other phenomena of the world of man and nature.*

*Sixthly, - The modern spirit of humanity and philanthropy is one of the most obviously practical interests of religion. It is one of the conditions for the emancipation of the human mind, - working not only for the alleviation of misery, but for the prevention and cure of moral evil, the removal of oppressive burdens, and the opening to each and all of free opportunity for the best use of their faculties and life.*

He then proclaimed that there had been one implicit vision grander than all the rest: *Following the logical line of a growing unity in thought and purpose among the most*

*enlightened and spiritual minds of all faith, The Free Religious Association has been prognosticating the actual ultimate union of all the great faiths of the world in one religion; and that not by the conversion and education of them all to the perception of a higher realm of truth...*

He concluded by raising the question of the future of the Association: *...it might be disposed to say with the ancient and devout Simeon, - 'Now let thy servant depart in peace! For mine eyes have seen the coming salvation of the Eternal.'* *The work now to be done it might, perhaps, leave with good grace to other forms of organization and to the swift-footed progress of reason and the forces of evolution. By why should not the Association rather be inspired with new life from the vital enthusiasm of this hour? ...Why should not those who are possessed by these convictions and aspirations which point onward to this ideal goal of the Religious Federation of the World, and who feel discontent with even a semblance of the old forms and creeds, fling sectarian bonds to the winds, and, with open heart and hand, join forces, even though in a small and local way, in the great name of the free, universal, Catholic Church of Humanity? So may it be!*

Rev. Richard A. Kellaway  
10 Rosedale Street  
Dorchester, MA 02124

617 419 5197  
[ishmael@comcast.net](mailto:ishmael@comcast.net)