

TOWARD A WIDER ECUMENISM:

Hedge and Rau, Mixed Legacy of Liberal Religious Ecumenism

ERIK RESLY

HARVARD DIVINITY SCHOOL

In 1949, George Huntston Williams set about rethinking the Unitarian relationship with Protestantism in hopes of mitigating the denomination's perceived descent into an increasingly isolated irrelevancy. His muse was the nineteenth century transcendentalist minister Frederic Henry Hedge, who modeled an "enlightened conservative" approach to recovering for Unitarians a deeper connection with, as well as a distinctive role within, the historic community of Christian faith (Williams, 1981: 35). As a member and outspoken advocate of the Broad Church movement, Hedge exhibited a generous and reconciliatory spirit that valued solidarity with the universal Church over and against sectarian division.

Across the Atlantic Ocean on the European continent, nineteenth century author Heribert Rau founded the first German-catholic [Deutschkatholische] congregation in Frankfurt/M., Germany, on June 1, 1845, which would later be renamed the Unitarian Free Religious Community in 1948. Following the lead of Johannes Ronge, whom the Roman Catholic Church excommunicated for his scathing public letter to Bishop Wilhelm Arnoldi condemning the display of the Holy Tunic in Trier, Rau mobilized a congregation around the Spirit of Progress, the Light of Reason and brotherly forbearance. In this way, both Rau and Hedge sought to extend what they understood as Luther's symbolic march towards an emancipatory and unifying religiosity, even if they resisted forging close relations with its institutional manifestation (i.e. the Lutheran Church).

Today, these two men stand at the fringes of the Unitarian Universalist imaginary, if they are rendered visible at all. Despite their lofty rhetoric and ambitious zeal, history has largely confined their legacies to the occasional ink spilled by scholars and historians acclaiming their liberalism.¹ In this paper, I will revisit the writings of Hedge and Rau to examine the logic and arrogance of their respective religious projects. In so doing, it will be shown that both individuals, though well-intentioned, fall victim to a naïve hubris about the prodigiousness of their ecumenism that continues to plague contemporary Unitarian Universalism.

¹ For Hedge, see: Wells (1943), Williams (1981) and LeBeau (1985). For Rau, see: Todt (1970) and Taesler (1982).

WITH ROOTS IN LUTHER

To understand their respective ecumenical projects, we must begin with Martin Luther, since Hedge and Rau quite explicitly place themselves within his lineage. Although they understand this inheritance differently, both men celebrate Luther's ability to, as Hedge terms it, "shake Christendom to its centre" (1888: 5).

Hedge simultaneously admires Luther's "indomitable courage" (1902: 69) and denounces his archaic theology. These allegiances, in turn, color his selective reading of Luther's world-historic significance. On Hedge's account, Luther tapped into "the power which presides over human destiny and shapes the processes of history" (1888:1). In severing the religious subject from staid ecclesiastical dependence on Rome, Luther defied his own conscience, previously shackled to tradition and bound to prescription, in obedience to a higher duty. He overthrew Roman hegemony and rescued the Christian world from the seductive power of "temporal despotism" (Hedge, 1888: 36). Disapproving of Luther's views on religious doctrine, however, Hedge is careful to distill Luther's reformationist impulse into the acceptable terms of "secular emancipation" (1888:34). For example, he contrasts the "theory" of the Roman Catholicism, marked by a fatal adversity to the "best interests of humanity, light, liberty, progress," with Luther's audacious revolt against the despotic spell of papal autocracy (1888: 36). New England Unitarianism, according to Hedge, owes its humanistic impulses to this law that Luther set in motion during the sixteenth century. He traces a litany of values back to the Saxon reformer, including "civil independence, spiritual emancipation, individual scope, the large room, the unbound thought [and] the free pen" (1888: 2).

Hedge overwhelmingly focuses on the spirit and nature of Luther's actions, as opposed to his thought. He admits in an essay on the subject that his interest lies in Luther's "character of reformer" (1888: 33). Yet, in his apology for not entertaining alternative aspects of biographical interest, such as Luther's poetic sensibilities or love of nature, Hedge fails to even acknowledge the theological lens, which he implicitly groups with Luther's "faults and infirmities" (1888: 34). In the concluding paragraphs of that same discourse, Hedge musters the courage to attack

Luther's theology head-on. After honoring the man remembered for wresting the "heritage of God from sacerdotal hands," Hedge explains: "He taught us little in the way of theological lore; what we prize in him is not the teacher, but the doer, the man. His theology is outgrown, – a thing of the past; but the spirit in which he wrought is immortal" (1888: 37).

In spite of Luther's "limited, even bigoted" creedalism (Hedge, 1886: 69), Hedge agreed to serve as the appointed orator at the 1883 Bostonian celebration of the four hundredth anniversary of Luther's birth. In a letter to Rev. J. H. Allen written shortly after the event, Hedge recalls "a large audience filling the house & embracing some of the most intelligent people in Boston & the neighboring towns" (1883). Despite unfavorable climate conditions at the Arlington Street Church, which served as the venue for the occasion, Hedge remembers "no other response to my discoursing than respectful attention. Which, to be sure, is the best response & the one I most cared for" (1883). According to one source, the ninety-minute oration afforded Hedge the "enjoyment of a real popular triumph" (Eliot, 1910: 165). In fact, the *Christian Register* decided to reprint Hedge's speech in its November issue. Similarly, across the Atlantic and forty years prior to the Luther Jubilee in Boston, Rau joined with other members of the *Gesellschaft Iris*, comprised of free-spirited literary figures in and around Frankfurt/M., to jointly celebrate the birthdays of Luther and Schiller. Historian Karl Glossy describes the event as "especially notable" in light of the strong Jewish and Catholic representation among the *Iris* ranks (1912: 193). Taking on a role analogous to that of Hedge, Rau held a eulogy for Luther, which he reportedly ended with a toast to Ronge.

The historical parallelism between these two figures should not eclipse the nuanced asymmetries in their respective readings of Luther's legacy. Even though Rau, like Hedge, discounts Luther's theology, he worries considerably less about addressing its inadequacy, since on his view Luther himself anticipated the need for theological revision. Specifically, he interprets Luther's exhortation not to erect new papal decretals as evidence that Luther never intended for his catechism to stay in use 300 years after its composition (1850: 317). Further, Rau accentuates Hedge's passing reference to Luther's characteristically German "features" (1902: 73) and "native qualifications" (1888: 7). It is critical to Rau's project that the 'first' Reformation took hold in the heart of Germany. He writes: "Luther is the representative of a truly German honest

man [Biedermann]. In Germany, his teaching unfolded and developed, and German blood had to saturate German soil to secure this German movement its achievement” (1848: 277). Much as Hedge connects his American Unitarian context to Luther’s legacy by recourse to the “master force” of the Spirit (1888: 8), so too Rau draws a continuous line between Luther’s Spirit of Freedom and the “Giant-spirit” [Riesengeist] that animates the German-catholic impetus to a “full freedom of belief” (1848: 163). On Rau’s view, Luther set the precedent for this assignment by triumphantly breaking the shackles of slavish belief.

Historical context helps illuminate the interpretive incongruity between Hedge and Rau. Whereas Hedge, alongside other Harvard Unitarians, spent the earlier half of the nineteenth century carving out a theological identity in relief against the posterior Calvinist iteration of the Protestant Reformation, Rau’s relationship with Calvinism looked entirely different from the vantage point of a Roman Catholic living in Germany, where Calvinist teachings never fully took root. In fact, despite his disapproval of Calvin’s treatment of Michael Servetus, Rau greatly esteems Calvin’s role in the “propagation of the Reformation” (1871: 250), which, as demonstrated, he codes with nationalist sentiment.

Even if Rau states his case more explicitly, however, both he and Hedge aspire to extend Luther’s “saving work” (Hedge, 1888: 36). Hedge heralds the secular artifacts of national independence and mental freedom that have evolved out of Luther’s “mere theological or ecclesiastical movement” (1888: 34). He observes: “Our age still obeys the law of that movement whose van he led, and the latest age will bear its impress” (1888: 37). Rau, too, strives for national sovereignty and freedom of conscience, but, given his historical positioning, understandably appears less confident about its actual realization. The political turmoil and shattered hopes of the March 1848 revolution, which the German-catholic congregations not only welcomed but actively supported (Graf, 1978: 121), may likely have inflected Rau’s regret that after three hundred years “the Spirit is not yet free,/ Even though he should finally be” (1856: 124). In a speech commemorating the life of fourteenth century Czech Catholic priest Jan Hus, Rau makes reference to the hardship that the German-catholic church endured. Even though nonbelievers are no longer burnt at the stake for their heretical views, Rau suggests, there exist “in our days still other means by which to alienate us German-catholics from our better

convictions” (1848: 164). Anticipating an inevitable confrontation with the “weapon of ridicule and disdain” (1848: 165), reminiscent of Paul’s account of suffering in his Second letter to the Corinthians, Rau summons the spirits of John the Baptist, Christ and Hus as models of fully embodied religious commitment. He continues: “We though will resume what Luther began, and even if much discomfort should befall us, we want to proclaim with the courage and honest conviction of belief-heroes [Glaubenshelden]: Who will separate us from the love of God?” (1848: 167).

Luther, thus, animated and informed the work of Hedge and Rau alike. It should be noted, however, that Luther’s import primarily functioned symbolically. That is to say, neither Hedge nor Rau associated himself with, or expressed any notable admiration for, the Lutheran Church. Rather, both thinkers strategically accessed the perceived animus governing Luther’s reformatory project as leverage against Calvinist and Roman Catholic opposition, respectively.

ECUMENICAL ORATIONS

Although Hedge and Rau later reached out beyond their own traditions in an ecumenical gesture aimed at building bridges between sectarian communities, they initially focused their attention on resolving tensions within their own respective denominations. It is tempting, and to some degree justified, to conflate these inward and outward orientations as parallel expressions of catholicity. Nevertheless, as will be shown, the confidence that both Hedge and Rau place in the uniqueness of their intra-denominational projects creates a relational imbalance that haunts their inter-denominational ecumenism.

Standing before the graduating class at Harvard Divinity School in 1849, Hedge delivered an address premised on “an eclectic method, an open communion, the realization of Christian truth in human society!” (1849). Eleven years prior, Ralph Waldo Emerson had stood in the same pulpit, declaring the historic relics of scripture and the accounts of ancient miracles irrelevant to a Christ-like faith in humanity’s infinitude. One might argue that Emerson’s counsel to “dare to love God without mediator or veil” exemplified the anti-authoritarian spirit that Hedge and Rau admired in Luther, even if they would have disapproved of Emerson’s theological conclusions

(1848: 87). Yet, Emerson's address unleashed a flood of outrage and controversy among traditional Unitarians condemning his 'pantheism' as "the latest form of infidelity" (Norton, 1839). The Transcendentalist controversy that ensued grew almost as acidic as the Unitarian-Calvinist controversy preceding it. Disgusted by the spectacle, a significant number of clergymen sought to mediate the bitter disagreement, including figures like James Walker and Convers Francis.

Hedge featured prominently within this reconciliatory camp. On the one hand, he was deeply involved with the Transcendentalist faction, known for a time as the Hedge Club, for its unwavering commitment to questions of "spirit and form, substance and life, free will and fate, God and eternity" (1833: 109). Nevertheless, even at the height of his German Idealist inquiry, Hedge left room for "those who feel no interest in these questions" (1883: 109). What is more, while Hedge admired Transcendentalism's intuitive method and ontological claims about humanity's divine status, his own theology charted a middle path. For example, he navigated between William Ellery Channing's doctrine of the 'essential sameness' of God and humanity and Emerson's conviction that "every man is a divinity in disguise" (1848: 385). Further, he tempered the Parkerite reliance on Reason with the conservative Unitarian confidence in Lockean sensationalism, arriving at a compromise that appropriately labeled him a Christian Transcendentalist (Wells, 1943).

In 1865, Hedge, Henry Whitney Bellows and other Broad Church members helped to facilitate cooperation between the Evangelicals, older Rationalists and Radicals at the American Unitarian Association's New York convention. History has taken careful note of this monumental episode. Yet, even sixteen years before this public act of reconciliation, Hedge drew on his own theological centrism to impart an ecumenical message to the graduating throng of Harvard-trained ministers.

Hedge's 1849 oration is marked by a curious tension between explicit broadchurchly inclusivity and a more implicit tinge of exclusivity. He begins his speech with a reference to the oneness of the Holy Spirit's communion, which inheres in all Christian churches irrespective of their denominational bend. This expansive scope is quickly whittled down, however, into a less than

subtle picture of then-contemporary Unitarianism. From an almost pagan idolatry to a transcendentalist abstraction bordering on nihilism, the contours of the vast (Unitarian) Christian kingdom must not unravel “this many-faced Christendom, so dissimilar in use and doctrine, yet one in origin and name” (Hedge, 1849). The true schism, Hedge suggests, derives not from segregation and dissent, but from “the schismatic mind” that premises communion in Christ on a unity of theological conviction (1849). Reading against the grain, Hedge’s salutatory testifies to the then prevalent resentment and animosity fueling statements like “We declare you excluded...[W]e pronounce you antichrist and damned” (1849). In contrast, Hedge advocates a “true Catholicism” that avoids sectarian isolationism in favor of unification with those “nearest to us in faith and method” (1849).

Having looked inward, he then turns outward. Much as Hedge regarded Luther’s defiant reform as a product of the Spirit, so too he places the historical development of Christianity post-Luther under God’s tutelage. Again, this observation corners Hedge into a difficult position, forcing him to tiptoe around distasteful theological orientations. Despite his firm insistence on Luther’s outgrown theology, he must recognize its sustained popularity. More urgently, how should he account for his preference for the institutional Unitarian posture² in a religious landscape dotted with Trinitarian Christian churches? He resolves this tension by adopting an evolutionary framework, within which Trinitarianism represents a “legitimate form of Christianity, establishing itself by Divine counsel, fulfilling a Divine mission in the world, an appointed part of the Christian dispensation” (1849). He describes the doctrine as a “necessary phase of Christianity... [satisfying] a real want of the human mind” (1849). It remains somewhat ambiguous as to whether Unitarianism embodies a further, perhaps penultimate, step beyond Trinitarianism. Hedge steers clear of an absolute relativism that would privilege both orientations as equally viable, maintaining somewhere a standard of truth against which to measure religious validity. In this vein, Hedge seems to endow Unitarianism with a heightened sense of purpose for its essential and ordained role of religiously edifying humanity.

² Apart from his obvious denominational affiliation, Hedge’s own theism remains more ambivalent, resting between traditional Unitarian and Trinitarian theologies. He describes his religiosity as multi-, as opposed to tri-personal: “Father, Son, and Spirit, – unquestionably these three are in God, and they are one God; but they do not comprise, or do not express, the whole of Deity. I can hardly imagine a trinitarian formula that would” (1887: 24).

At the same time, Hedge admits that he, too, may mistake the theological truth of Unitarianism for “a sectarian bias” (1849). He seems to believe that the “one federal Head who is invisible” serves as the sole and final authority over the “jar of opinions and diversity of interpretations” (1849). While Luther’s revolt against despotic earthly authority satisfactorily removed a human being from this judicatory role, Hedge regrets the resultant centrifugal force of disunity that continues to divide members within the body of Christ. In this way, Hedge advocates for the joining of sectarian hands in both intra- and inter-denominational ecumenism. It is precisely in this project that Unitarianism has an advantage, however. Hedge’s arrogance is delicate but present. He asserts that the “real purpose of the Spirit in regard to us” is the task of ushering in the “catholicism” that once stirred the first generation of Unitarians (1849). Since catholicism in the Roman sense no longer seems possible, it befalls the American Unitarian Association to embrace its calling to “consistently maintain the catholic ground, and act out, in all senses and bearings, the catholic spirit” (1849). In fact, Hedge redefines the term ‘Unitarian’ accordingly, wishing that it might come to signify “not the unity of the Divine nature, which, in different senses, as abstract or concrete, all sects believe; but the unity of the Spirit in the churches, and the unity of the churches in the Spirit” (1849). Not only does Hedge here reductively enfold Christian theological diversity within an ‘anonymous Unitarian’ paradigm, he insinuates, following Channing, that the very nomenclature of the Unitarian tradition holds a unique significance for the rejuvenation of the Christian religion.

One might argue that the commencement exercises occasioning Hedge’s oration help to explain his lofty rhetoric. There is undoubtedly some credence to this position. Nevertheless, it is clear from the discourse itself that Hedge’s visionary program finds footing in more than mere opportunistic conjecture. In fact, the thrust of his entire oration centers on his faith in Unitarianism as the great synthesizer, which he later takes up in an 1860 *Christian Examiner* article entitled “The Broad Church.” Throughout his 1849 speech, Hedge insists that the Unitarian “emancipation from doctrinal confessions” equips practitioners with the necessary tools for fulfilling the “liberality” to which the tradition has always committed itself (1849). He unabashedly states: “[W]hen the Unitarian Association was formed, a quarter of a century ago, there was organized, perhaps for the first time since the synod which convened in that upper

chamber in Jerusalem, a religious, Christian alliance, without creed or covenant” (1849). In this spirit, he commends to his audience a theological charity that seeks not the expansion of its name but of its principles. Even if Hedge repeatedly warns against Unitarian self-centeredness, elsewhere noting that all sects are “partial, and therefore perishable,” he nevertheless holds firm to the “fixed fact” of Christianity and to the originality of a Unitarian toleration “so kind and continent, that all discrepancies of faith and worship, and all intolerances even, shall find shelter in its ample grace” (1849). Unitarianism, on Hedge’s account, embodies the American character of the Christian Church, reproducing the “mind of Christ in recent, native types” (1849).

Four years before Hedge’s Divinity School oration, Rau stood before the newly formed German-catholic congregation in Frankfurt/M. to enumerate what the movement ‘should’ and ‘wanted’ to do.³ An affluent wine distributor and prolific literary figure renowned for his poems, novellas and short stories, Rau never intended to enter the ministry, which eventually cost him the pulpit in Frankfurt/M. as the congregation could not wait for him to finish his theological studies in Heidelberg.⁴ Rau, like most members of the German-catholic church, was inspired by the audacity of Ronge’s widely published October 1844 letter to the Bishop of Trier, in which Ronge rehearsed Lutheran grievances with a modern journalistic style and patriotic pathos. Ronge described the Holy Tunic exhibit as an unworthy theatrical performance of Roman hierarchy, calling on both Catholics and Protestants to mobilize liberal [freiheitlich], national and social movements to confront the Roman tyranny. Although individuals began assembling in Breslau in January of the following year, the first German-catholic congregation was officially constituted on February 12, 1845 in Leipzig under the leadership of democratic opposition-politician and publicist Robert Blum. Numerous additional congregations sprang up in late February and the first German-catholic convention took place on March 23, 1845. On June 1 of that year, at 10:15 in the morning, Rau convened a gathering at which ninety-nine individuals signed the constitution of the first Frankfurt/M. congregation. He closed the meeting with an exhortation to

³ The most available copy of Rau’s sermon appears in the 1848 collection of addresses and prayers entitled “Worte zum Herzen des deutschen Volkes.” Unfortunately, the publication does not give a date or location for its deliverance. We can be sure that Rau preached the sermon in Frankfurt/M. sometime in 1845, however, since it is printed in another anthology of Frankfurt/M. speeches published in that year (Rau, 1845).

⁴ The University in Heidelberg was closely affiliated with the German Reformed Church.

action: “In the name of almighty God – in the name of eternal truth – in the name of reason and a therein grounded and blessed faith – we joyously and bravely go to work” (Todt, 1970: 28). In 1948, over a hundred years after its founding, then pastor Clemens Taesler renamed the Frankfurt/M. church the Unitarian Free Religious Community [Unitarische Freie Religionsgemeinde] after having come into contact with the unitarian designation through his work with Free Protestant minister Rudolf Walbaum.

The German-catholic movement exhibited in its early years a pluralism reminiscent of the American denomination in which Hedge was active. Despite the loose compromises it reached in annual intervals at national assemblies, on the ground churches displayed highly differentiated interpretations and “varied accents” of the faith (Bahn, 1991: 38). For example, at the 1845 convention, delegates agreed to the German-catholic name with the caveat that congregations would retain the freedom to self-identify as “Christ-catholic” [christkatholisch] at the local level if desired. The federalist structure of the national organization tenuously held both the conservative Christian pole personified by Johannes Czerskis in Schneidemühl and the utopian-socialist humanist pole associated with Ferdinand Kampe, Heinrich Thiel and Georg Weigelt under its auspices. It is likely that the audience of Rau’s 1845 sermon included traces of a similar spectrum of belief, as well as the socio-economic amalgam of upper- [bürgerlich-akademisch] and middle-class [Handwerker und Fabrikarbeiter] members for which the German-catholic tradition was known (Bahn, 1991: 43-44).

Rau opens his service with a prayer that grounds his discourse in a sense of urgency and purpose. Portraying the state of the Christian religion as still distant from the ambitious goals set forth by Jesus Christ, Rau insists that his parishioners remain servants not yet delivered over to freedom. Will they not turn away from their masters and place their trust in the bright light? Can they not hear the words of Gregor,⁵ Calvin and Luther in their souls? He continues: “Your Lord spoke the Word of freedom/ But you choose another duty./ Your partition is the greatest perjury,/ Which contradicts your belief” (1848: 266). In contrast, the German-catholic tradition intentionally did not leave the catholic (interpreted as universal [allgemein]) church, but rather removed from it the unjust and unworthy bias that sanctified only those select individuals who believed in the

⁵ Presumably a reference to Gregory of Nazianzus, the Cappadocian Father.

Pope. In this way, Rau opines, the German-catholic stance aligns itself with that of the “old church community” (1848: 269). After all, the word ‘katholikos’ signifies nothing other than universal in its Greek context. On Rau’s view, the early Christian church taught the universal religion of Jesus out of recognition that its “splendid simplicity” and “exquisite morality” qualified it as a primary contender for the status of world-religion (1848: 270). Only at a later point in time, as intolerance and an obsession with letters bred internal discord, did the term catholic transmogrify into orthodoxy [rechtgläubig]. Rau insists that a church cannot simultaneously profess universality while clinging to exclusivist and alone-beatifying [alleinseligmachende] principles. If a church expels, damns and persecutes dissenters and non-conformists, it should be labeled specific [besondere], not universal. The first obligation of the German-catholic church, thus, is to fulfill its uniquely religious duty, which he ambiguously defines as one enlivened by the “spirit” of Christ (1848: 279).

In order to fulfill this religious injunction, Rau advises German-catholics to practice tolerance. Opening their arms in brotherly love and human liberalism [Freisinnigkeit] to all “confessors of the one God,” they will bring peace to the world (1848: 276). Like Hedge, Rau colors this message with a heightened sense of self-importance. He instructs his parishioners to vigilantly check their teachings and principles against their unique ecumenical identity as the “catholic” or “universal” church. That way, they will make it possible for “all people...[to] join us” (1848: 275). Notably, Rau invites “our much-loved protestant brothers,” as well as Roman Catholics, to partake in the German-catholic cause, broadening his ecumenism beyond even that of Hedge (1848: 276). For Rau, German-catholicism knows no religious hatred and requests only that members of other traditions hear and test the German-catholic attitude. In a final act of arrogance, Rau utters: “[A church] like this even Jesus wanted to found” (1848: 276).

The third pillar of Rau’s address concerns the national character of the church. Much as Hedge inflates Unitarianism to the status of America’s Church, so too Rau understands his congregation as the continuation and fulfillment of a uniquely German lineage. The ‘first’ Reformation that Luther instigated on German soil echoes in the “German hearts” of those figures like Ronge who push forward with the “weapons of reason” a ‘second’ Reformation (1848: 278). But how does the militaristic rhetoric of this admittedly exclusivist crusade adhere with Rau’s universalist

overtures? Where Hedge resorted to evolutionary stages of theology, Rau relies on phases of national consolidation and growth. On the one hand, he confesses that in principle “universal” knows no limits, which trivializes the distinction between a German and Roman catholic church. On the other hand, just as the human body can only effectively function when all of its parts have matured, so too the entire human race will only then harmonize when each individual *Volk* arrives at its own organic fulfillment. Unfortunately, “we Germans are not yet there” (1848: 277).

Hence, Rau holds the “cosmopolitan tendency of a universal church” in sight, while first founding one of German import. Although it might be tempting to read this nationalist orientation against the backdrop of twentieth century German history, Rau’s approach mirrors that of Giuseppe Mazzini⁶ significantly more than that of Adolf Hitler. Not only were Mazzini and Rau contemporaries, but Rau’s 1864 manuscript on Giuseppe Garibaldi repeatedly testifies to Rau’s admiration for Mazzini’s “freedom-disposed [freiheitsgesinnter] spirit” (74). All the same, Rau’s text unquestionably smacks of an eschatological promise unique to the German-catholic church: “[W]hile other nations gradually lift themselves from a lethargic spirit-slumber [trägen Geistesschlummer], our work will already be complete” (1848: 278). In the future, when movements in France, England, Holland and the United States eventually decide to merge with German-catholicism, Rau concedes that the name may have to change to “universal Christian” or “universal free” church.⁷ For the time being, however, the German nomenclature serves to draw a clear distinction with the Roman Church and emphasize its distinctively Germanic origin. Elsewhere Rau notes: “The entire civilized world is watching us, and the millions that will come after us and build a better existence on account of the foundation that we have set, will bless us.” (1845b: 14)

⁶ Mazzini advocated for the consolidation of the Italian peoples as the first step to “a new development of civilisation” (1907: 224). Much like Rau privileges his German heritage, Mazzini considers the Italian legacy of empire and papacy fertile soil for the emergence of the “Rome of the People,” which will inaugurate “a Unity of civilisation accepted by the free consent of the nations for Humanity” (1907: 222).

⁷ Rau’s decision to evoke both “Christian” and “free” options evidences the probable theological diversity of his own congregation. In this way, he functions as a mediator in a similar fashion to Hedge.

MIXED LEGACIES

Regrettably, it is doubtful that Rau or Hedge will be remembered, let alone blessed, for the foundations that they set. On the North American continent, Hedge championed philosophical Idealism at Harvard and “placed [his] stamp on Unitarian training in divinity” for decades to come (Williams, 1954: 117). Under Harvard President Eliot’s administration, for example, Hedge co-taught a University Lecture course on philosophy with notable thinkers like Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Fiske, C.S. Pierce, J. Elliot Cabot and George Pick Fisher (Morison, 1930: 453). His intellectual influence did not allay his feeling of pedagogical impotence, however. By 1864, Hedge’s inability to counteract the curriculum’s turn away from Christ and the Gospels towards naturalistic theism and antisupernaturalism left him wondering whether “the graduate of the Scientific School is better qualified to be a preacher of righteousness to his fellow-men than the graduate of the Divinity School” (Williams, 1954: 119).

Institutionally, Bellows, as opposed to Hedge, became the face of the Broad Church movement and thereby the “leading spirit of organized or denominational Unitarianism” (Wright, 1975: 66). Even so, the major breakthrough that the Broad Church members sought in the 1850s amounted to little more than the creation of ninety new congregations, increasing the Association’s membership from 259 to 349 churches. The group did enjoy greater success between 1865 and 1894, negotiating a fragile ecclesiasticism at the New York conference, defining new theological perimeters at Syracuse and revising the constitution at Saratoga, thereby ending thirty years of controversy. As historian Conrad Wright observes, “the final outcome [of the Saratoga Conference] was substantially what Bellows had sought at the New York convention in 1865” (1975: 91). In this way, the Broad Church spirit did leave its mark on the institutional history of American Unitarianism. Through the consolidation of the American Unitarian Association with the Universalist Church of America in 1961, the Unitarian Universalist Association adopted a theological ecumenism reminiscent of Hedge’s yearning for a “church of scope so ample as to embrace all faiths and all souls” (1849). Representing 0.3 percent of the American population, Unitarian Universalism can hardly be considered America’s Church, however (Pew, 2009).

On the European continent, the German-catholic movement reached its institutional zenith in 1847 with 70,000 members (Bahn, 1991: 38). As such, it must be recognized as “one of the most important mass-movements of the Vormärz”⁸ (Graf, 1978: 64). With the arrival of the 1848 revolutions, German-catholicism had largely morphed into a secular, radical forum for the organization of opposition politics. Unfortunately, the failed legacy of the Frankfurt Parliament similarly marked the “collapse” of the German-catholic movement (Bahn, 1991: 47). The increasing politicization of the tradition could no longer sustain the inherent theological tension between those conservative members aspiring to create a new religion and the more secular members focused on political agitation and social change. Rau, as noted above, could not complete his studies in time to accept a ministerial position at the church he founded. In the summer of 1868, he did enter the pastorate of the Free Congregation in Offenbach, a sister-congregation of the church in Frankfurt/M, which he retained until his death in 1875. Whereas Hedge contributed German Idealist and Transcendentalist thought to the Unitarian tradition, Rau helped shape the Frankfurt/M. church’s theological trajectory. Reflecting on the founder of his congregation over a century later, Rev. Walter Meyer remarks how Rau was “already a Unitarian in the best sense of the word, distancing himself equally from monism and monotheism” (1976). Today, the Frankfurt/M. congregation remains an important, though marginal, voice in German religious conversation, far from the universal church Rau imagined.

TOWARDS A WIDER ECUMENISM

Hedge and Rau thus testify to the mixed legacies of liberal religious ecumenism. Despite their aerial rhetoric and magnified self-confidence, neither figure managed to achieve any considerable institutional momentum. Why were they not able to put foundations under the castles they built in the air? American Unitarian Association president Samuel Atkins Eliot once hazarded the following historical explanation for Hedge’s limited reception: “His name and fame in the world would have been, undoubtedly, much greater but for the fact that the circumstances

⁸ Vormärz refers to the time period between the 1815 Congress of Vienna and the March 1848 revolution, which tenuously balanced the repressive politics of monarchic restoration with growing popular radicalism.

of our day have given a somewhat different type of mind the larger prominence” (1910: 158). In short, Hedge’s vision proved bold, but public opinion was inconsiderate, even immature.

Eliot’s rationalization reinforces the tendency to exceptionalism to which well-intentioned liberal religionists often succumb. It is not that Unitarians, German-catholics, or for that matter Unitarian Universalists, insist on insular sectarianism at the expense of the ecumenical whole. It is not that we seek to promote our “more rational theology” over and against a “broader charity” (Hedge, 1849). On the contrary, we hold a very high regard for catholicity – for the worth and dignity of every person and their rightful place in the interdependent web of all existence. And we live out this ecumenism on a daily basis in our churches and neighborhoods and communities. Rather, the legacies of Hedge and Rau point to the inconvenient truth that liberal religion exhibits a dangerous inclination to rhetorical heroics. Dismissing other denominations as anemic in broadchurchmanship, we join Rau in believing that the “entire civilized world is watching us” (1845b: 14). How often are we reminded that the “world needs our prophetic and compassionate voice” (Morales, 2009).

It is tempting to fuel the fire of self-congratulation. But how prophetic and compassionate can our voices ever be when doused in such hubris? Should contemporary Unitarian Universalists choose to embrace the lessons of this lost historic opportunity for catholicity, then we must learn to pause and take notice of our own proclivities to exceptionalism. Rather than indulge the cheap grace of self-praise, let us habituate a spiritual disposition of humble leadership. Our calling is to an ever-wider ecumenism of hearts, hands and, most notably, tongues. Let us finally reconcile our palaver with our practice.

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