

## **Fresh Thoughts on Public Theology: The Discourse of Nineteenth-Century Unitarian Women**

Only two women authors were published in the first series of 300 tracts published by the American Unitarian Association (AUA) from 1827-1858. The well known author Mrs. Anna Letitia Aikin Barbauld (1743-1825) of London was published posthumously in 1827 and credited as “Mrs. Barbauld.” The first tract written by Mrs. Dorcas Hiller Cleveland (1773-1850) of Massachusetts was also published in 1827 and included no author credit. In subsequent works she was identified only as “the author of a *Dialogue on Providence, Faith, and Prayer*,” her first tract. When an index of the first series was published in the early twentieth century, Cleveland was listed as the author of five tracts and credited as “Mrs. Cleveland.” Both women were involved in the formal education of young men and women and were influential among well-known romantic authors, acting especially as mentor to young women writers. The use of dialogue in theological discourse as is exemplified in their work and educational theories changed the way women of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries engaged in liberal theological discourse.

In addition to her theological essay, *Discourse on Being Born Again*, published in the AUA’s collection, Barbauld's writings included radical political and abolitionist essays as well as hymns, poems, essays and sermons that focused on a Christian faith that was inclusive and experientially based. Cleveland's series of five interwoven dialogues emphasized a mother’s influence on her husband’s and son’s religious discernment. In an accessible and engaging style, Cleveland makes a case for liberal Christianity as a “third way” between Calvinism and deism.<sup>1</sup> Both women were pioneers in educational reform and treated the theme of children's experience of God and the world as paramount.

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1 Gary Dorrien asserts that the quest for the “third way” between “the authority-based orthodoxies of traditional Christianities and the spiritual materialism of modern atheism or deism” is the foundational subject of theological liberalism. Gary J. Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion, 1805-1900* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), xiii.

Barbauld's and Cleveland's theologies interacted with, influenced, and differed from the male-dominated Unitarian theology of both of their generations. They formed friendships with and corresponded regularly with prominent Unitarian ministers and abolitionists, such as Joseph Priestly and William Ellery Channing. Cleveland, the wife of a ship captain, spent significant time in Cuba and was responsible for introducing many New England women and men to Cuban culture and the evils of slavery.

Anna Letitia Barbauld, born in 1743 and called "one of the great minds which belonged to all time" by Harriet Martineau, was much acclaimed among religious reformers and free thinkers in her native England as well as in the United States. A strong proponent of early-childhood education, she held writing for children to be "humble but not mean." The edification of children, especially the creation of books "neither above nor below their capacity," was for her, "laying the first stone of a noble building" or "planting the first ideal in a human mind."<sup>2</sup> In the work for which she was later most often remembered, *Lessons for Children (1778-1779)*, she used an "informal dialogue between parent and child," to capture children's attention. Each lesson was a "dialogue, a narrative, or a description centered in [her adopted son] Charles's actual or potential experience."<sup>3</sup>

Based on her own experience, by the 1790s, Barbauld's work had moved from children's literature to political missives focused on revolution, abolition, and scathing critiques of war. Her massive body of literary work fell out of publication and circulation after her death in 1825. Her popularity and confidence waned earlier, after she published what was viewed as a scandalous poem criticizing the British involvement in the Napoleonic Wars. The publication and negative

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2 Anna Letitia Le Breton, *Memoir of Mrs. Barbauld* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1874), 50.

3 William McCarthy, "Mother of All Dialogues," in *Culturing the child, 1690-1914: Essays in Memory of Mitzi Myers*, ed. Donelle Ruwe (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2005), 89-91.

reception of “1811” effectively ended her literary career, as she never published again. In her later years, William Ellery Channing came from America to visit Barbauld and in an account written by Barbauld’s niece, “Admired her felicity of style, freshness and animation, and frequently the originality of her thoughts.” Channing, as a leader in American Unitarianism, “formed a link with the succeeding age” of liberal religion, as Barbauld’s niece put it.<sup>4</sup> It is quite possible that Channing’s admiration was the impetus for the 1827 publication of Barbauld’s essay *Discourse on Being Born Again* by the newly-formed American Unitarian Association.

Barbauld’s upbringing included both eighteenth-century enlightenment ideas and nineteenth-century expectations of women. Her mother educated her in many things including strict social norms for women, but young Anna is said to have convinced her father to teacher her Latin and Greek. She was raised and then made her home in educational environments.

Barbauld, her father, and her husband were all instructors at boy’s schools. Her pedagogy was based in her involvement in dissenting movements such as Unitarianism and her own theological and spiritual orientation toward the world.<sup>5</sup> A proto-transcendentalist, Barbauld believed that the experience of God could be had in the world. In *An Address to the Deity*, she wrote: “I hear the voice of God among the trees; with thee in shady solitudes I walk With thee in busy crowded cities talk; In every creature own thy forming power; In each event thy providence alone.”<sup>6</sup>

Judith Walker-Riggs argues that Barbauld’s “naturalistic religion of both thought and feeling” offered a “whole new vision of education” and “led to her educational innovations.” She took her students to see things for themselves: to the country, to the Houses of Parliament, to the homes of

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4 Le Breton, *Memoir*, 182.

5 Anna Barbauld’s husband, Rev. Rochemont Barbauld, was a Dissenting minister. He later succumbed to mental illness, first threatening his wife’s life and then taking his own.

6 Anna Letitia Barbauld, “An Address to the Deity,” *The Works of Anna Letitia Barbauld Volume 1* (London: Longman), 117.

famous people. And she taught them how to express themselves...”<sup>7</sup> This is experiential learning is echoed in Dorcas Cleveland’s writing and foreshadowed the work of Bronson Alcott and Elizabeth Peabody as well as Maria Montessori’s learning by doing, and in the twentieth century the work of the progressive educators of John Dewey’s generation.

In language that American Transcendentalists would use two generations later, Barbauld believed in the import of heart as well as head in religious thought, discourse, and practice. Walker-Riggs relates that Barbauld was not shy about expressing her distain for the approach of religious reformers who sought to “reject all warm imagery and in short, everything that strikes upon the heart and the senses.” This view frustrated Joseph Priestly, her close friend, and other enlightenment dissenters who distrusted any sort of “emotional” religion.<sup>8</sup>

Priestly was, however, taken with the methods of instruction Barbauld encouraged at Warrington Academy, where she and her husband were instructors and Priestly was a tutor. He spoke especially highly of the use of tutorial teas and conversations which formed “a central part of his teaching.” This informal or ‘familiar’ dialogic method of instruction was popular among dissenters in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England. Michèle Cohen argues “what the ‘familiar’ offers is an artful pedagogic approach bringing together the informal – social, domestic – with the more formal dialogic form.”<sup>9</sup> Cohen rightly emphasizes that this educational style was “distinct from other kinds of didactic dialogues, such as formal conversations and catechisms.” More informal dialogues or conversations, especially among families or pupil and

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7 Judith Walker-Briggs, “Anna Letitia Barbauld: Biographical Sketch,” in *Standing Before Us: Unitarian Universalist Women and Social Reform, 1776-1936*, ed. Dorothy May Emerson et al. (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, 2000), 484.

8 Ibid.

9 Michèle Cohen, “‘Familiar Conversations:’ The Role of the ‘Familiar Format’ in Education in Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century England,” in *Educating the Child in Enlightenment Britain: Beliefs, Cultures, Practices*, ed. Mary Hilton et al. (Surry: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2009), 108.

tutor, served to “textually encode the existing practices and rules of polite sociality in ways that allow active participation in the construction of shared understanding while at the same time being structured and methodical so as to facilitate the integration of knowledge in the mind of the learner.”<sup>10</sup> According to Cohen, this method allowed engagement in intellectual discourse by those previously excluded from more classical forms of education because they were either women or religious dissenters.<sup>11</sup> In the case of theology, I argue that this ‘familiar’ dialogue both in in-person gatherings and written publications allowed for the expression of those excluded for both reasons – women theologians like Barbauld and Cleveland.

Cohen’s work informs our understanding of the women-centered conversations pioneered by Barbauld and Cleveland and continued into the mid-nineteenth century by the likes of Elizabeth Palmer Peabody and Margaret Fuller. Additionally, we will also apply Cohen’s examination of dialogue in women romantic writer’s work to the uniquely structured theology presented by Cleveland in the AUA tracts of 1825-1829. Barbauld is quoted as saying that “the best way for a woman to acquire knowledge is from a conversation with a father, a brother or a friend, in the way of family intercourse and easy conversation.”<sup>12</sup> Barbauld and Cleveland broadened this concept in their own passing of knowledge through conversation with the writing and thinking women who they mentored.

Barbauld’s great niece and biographer reports that she “was acquainted with almost all the female writers of her time, and there was not one whom she failed to mention in terms of admiration, esteem or affection. To the humbler aspirant, who often applied to her for advice or

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10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., 109

12 Lucy Aiken, “Memoir of Anna Letitia Barbauld” in *The Works of Anna Letitia Barbauld Volume 1* (London: Longman), xviii.

assistance, she was invariable courteous, and often serviceable.”<sup>13</sup> Cleveland would utilize dialogue and conversation as the medium for her public theology. The best way to both experience and impart knowledge as well as liberal theology, it seemed to these women, was by having a conversation.

### **Barbauld and the Transforming of Heart and Mind**

In the poem *An Address to the Deity*, Barbauld speaks directly to God. In *Discourse on Being Born Again*, tract number 13 of the American Unitarian Association, she has a direct conversation with the reader. This is style that would have been familiar to readers of religious tracts in which the author sought to directly impress his or her theological position upon the reader with great urgency.<sup>14</sup> Showing keen exegetical skills and a wide scriptural knowledge base, Barbauld unpacks the “strange paradox” of John 3:3 asking “what is it to be born again so as to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.” Through a mix of rhetorical questions set to the reader and statements of spiritual “fact,” she explores the analogy of spiritual birth to natural birth. Like the child emerges from the darkness of the womb and opens her eyes on a world of possibility, to the newly professed Christian “the invisible world is laid open to him” and “the eyes of his mind are opened.”<sup>15</sup> The Christian has a parent in God, a welcoming family in the “wide extended family of God’s virtuous and approved children.”<sup>16</sup> She acknowledges the difficulty and spiritual pain, likened to that of childbirth, of coming to a Christian life. One is to view affliction and

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13 Le Breton, *Memoir*, 190.

14 S. Barrett’s “Excuses For The Neglect of The Communion Considered” no. 22 in the first series is an example.

15 Anna Letitia Barbauld, “Discourse on Being Born Again,” *Tracts of the American Unitarian Association*, no. 13 (1827), 3.

16 *Ibid.*, 5.

disappointment as “school masters to bring one to Christ.” After trial and tribulation, resistance and re-birth, the Christian is then born to an existence where “all things are his, for God is his.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

Turning to the reader, the second half of Barbauld's tract is a guide to examination of oneself. She instructs the reader to "ask whether you have undergone this important change [of being born again], and whether you are improving it to the perfection of the divine life."<sup>18</sup> Like her liberal religious contemporaries and those in the generation after her, character of the Christian was of the utmost import and the method of determining the "soul's health." The Kingdom of Heaven that one wished to enter with the transformation of one's soul in a new birth was not "separated from the kingdoms of this world." It is "in the midst of us." The directions given by God to save one's soul are not, Barbauld, a true dissenter, argues, "for the purpose of inflicting misery upon the delinquent; but salutatory warnings and kind instructions respecting the natural and necessary consequences of our actions and dispositions."<sup>19</sup> Where dispositions are heavenly, she states, there is the kingdom of heaven. The life of the spirit lives not in an ethereal afterlife, but in one's heart.

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18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., 12.

Anna Letitia Barbauld was, to be sure, an eighteenth-century woman on the cutting edge of enlightenment thought. With a worldly kingdom of heaven, her lens was focused on the political as well as the spiritual. Her polemics against war are still inspiring today. Her resistance was not limited to writing; she was actively involved in labor protests and received criticism from literary critics and social neighbors alike. Her theology is fundamental to her social awareness and vice versa. Her model Christian in *Discourse* once he receives the “bread of life” and the “gracious influences of the Spirit,” “sees the beauty of right action” and “feels the force of moral obligation.”<sup>20</sup> The purpose of religion then, for Barbauld, is to transform the heart and spirit of the Christian toward right action and participation in the “invisible” Kingdom of God on earth.

### **Dorcas Cleveland’s Dialogues of Religious Discourse**

Cleveland, in her *Dialogues*, written a generation after Barbauld, utilized the structure of ‘familiar’ instruction in the Henderson Family with mother as theological instructor, and husband and son as rapt learners. Nearly unknown today, Cleveland was born September 11, 1773, in Salem, Massachusetts. A “finely educated” woman, she was the facilitator of intellectual symposia in Lancaster in the 1810s and 1820s. As convener of parlor conversations on education reform and theology, she acted as mentor to educators and ministers, including Jared Sparks, George B. Emerson, and Elizabeth Peabody. Cleveland’s life is recorded as tangential to that of her husband, shipping magnate Richard Cleveland, and those of her social and intellectual circle. She is mentioned off-handedly in diaries, letters, memoirs, and biographies both as an accomplished “literary lady” and as little more than a “meddling” gossip.

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<sup>20</sup> Barbauld, “Discourse on Being Born Again,” 3.

Son Horace Cleveland's biographer, Daniel Nadenicek, writes that the Cleveland family considered themselves "leaders of society" and believed that they "had a responsibility to guide the rest of society to better lives and greater fortune."<sup>21</sup> Dorcas Cleveland raised and educated three sons at home. Richard Jr. later studied civil engineering<sup>22</sup> and became "an adventurous youth."<sup>23</sup> Henry Cleveland became "a highly regarded scholar and educator" who met with a literary organization known as the "Five of Clubs," whose membership included Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and abolitionist Charles Sumner.<sup>24</sup> Horace became a celebrated landscape architect known for a natural aesthetic founded upon the theories of Transcendentalism. As they grew older, the boys' mother employed tutors from Harvard University and then Harvard Divinity School after its founding in 1816. She eventually expanded her home-school efforts to organize a boy's academy.

Megan Marshall's biography of the Peabody sisters positions the three young Peabody women in the midst of the "internal revolution" that permeated early nineteenth-century New England.<sup>25</sup> Central to this cultural exuberance were intellectual circles where "women's ideas were welcome in conversation, if not always in print."<sup>26</sup> It is from Marshall that we learn of

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21 Daniel Joseph Nadenicek, "Nature in the City: Horace Cleveland's Aesthetic." *Landscape and Urban Planning* 26 (1993): 5- 15.

22 *New Year in Cuba: Mary Gardner Lowell's Travel Diary, 1831-1832*, ed. Karen Robert. (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society: Northeastern University Press, 2003).

23 Richard Jr. traveled to Poland in 1830 to participate the Polish-Russian Revolt of November 1830 ending in defeat of Polish rebels in September 1831. *New Year in Cuba*, 112n.

24 Joachim Wolschke-Bulmahn, *Nature and Ideology: Natural Garden Design in the Twentieth Century* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1997), 62n.

25 Megan Marshall, *The Peabody Sisters: Three Women Who Ignited American Romanticism*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), xvi.

26 *Ibid.*, xv.

Cleveland's intellectual salons. Additionally, Lancaster's two celebrated private schools—one for girls and one for boys—were both overseen by Cleveland, and drew the finest Boston talent in teachers.<sup>27</sup> Elizabeth Palmer Peabody held her first teaching position at the girls school as a teenager.<sup>28</sup>

Inspirational evenings at the Cleveland estate focused on implementation of the ideas of European educational theorists like Rousseau and others. “It was not merely the new methods of intellectual education that were discussed at these symposia of Mrs. Cleveland's,” Peabody wrote after Cleveland's death, participants regularly engaged the “necessity and method of building up *character* [emphasis original] of the Christian and the heroic ideal of inspiring children with the power to educate themselves.”<sup>29</sup>

In her five tract, 125 page series, Cleveland tackled both concepts through a mother's involvement in her son's intellectual and religious thought. In addition to *Dialogue on Providence, Faith, and Prayer*,” Cleveland wrote four more tracts featuring the Hendersons: *Discourse on the Causes of Infidelity*, *Dialogue Between and a Christian and a Deist*, *Divine Revelation Advocated and Illustrated*, and *Divine Authority of the Christian Revelation Acknowledged*. Throughout her work, she gently but firmly asserts the rationality and pragmatism of liberal Christianity. Her writing is conversational, strikingly distinct in tone and

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27 Richard Kopley. *The Threads of the Scarlet Letter: A Study of Hawthorne's Transformative Art* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2003), 144n.

28 Peabody and other young women struggled to negotiate the possession of advanced intellect within a society infatuated with the “cult of true womanhood”—an ideal that did not favor smart or outspoken women. A wealthy, married woman of intellectual acclaim and significant independence—the later due, in large part, to her husband's prolonged absence—Mrs. Cleveland “seemed to fulfill the feminine ideal” for Elizabeth Peabody. The younger woman wrote of her elder that she was a “highly cultivated and interesting” woman who “never says anything unmarked with deep thought, and yet her manners are so unaffected [and] so elegant that you do not think of her as being a *professed literary lady*.” [emphasis original]

29 Abijah P. Marvin, *History of the Town of Lancaster, Massachusetts: From the First Settlement to the Present Time: 1643 - 1879* (Lancaster, 1879).

structure from the sermons and essays that comprise the remainder of the AUA's first series of religious tracts, including Barbauld's. In her discourse, we are drawn into a family saga that makes the doctrinal debates of the 1700s and 1800s vividly personal.<sup>30</sup> In 'familiar' format, the Hendersons discuss the development of "life-giving" Christian faith.<sup>31</sup> Dominated by the theological treatises of Mrs. Henderson, these tracts provided Cleveland's generation and the following a method for teaching liberal Christianity that would avoid what the author considered the overly excited and damaging false doctrines of orthodox Calvinists and the materialistic logic of revelation-denying deists. She, like her liberal Christian colleagues, puts these two theological systems in relation, understanding orthodoxy as the primary cause of disbelief in the truth of the Christian system. In the preface to her fourth pamphlet, published in 1829, Cleveland outlines the purpose of the series as marking out a "line of conduct" for use by Christians to correct the "false notions" of "deistical friends or acquaintances" with "more justice and with greater prospect of success" than a harsher approach.<sup>32</sup> Cleveland states that "to bring forward the Evidences of Christianity [sic] was not a part of the main design" of her project. Her work is undertaken in response to skeptical individuals who seem to be gratified by Christians who

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30 It is likely that the character of Mrs. Henderson was loosely based upon Dorcas Cleveland's grandmother, Susanna Porter Cleveland (1716-1789). Susanna's son, George, set out to be a seaman and died of yellow fever in Havana at the young age of sixteen. Cleveland wrote that her maternal uncle, whom she never met, was "remarkable for the sweetness of his temper." Susanna's daughter, also named Dorcas, was "the flower of the family" but died at the age of twenty, a loss from which Susanna never recovered. Dorcas Hiller Cleveland wrote that her grandmother was "unable to overcome her grief" and considered herself the "single object of malice of the powers of evil." Cleveland's aunt and uncle were also immortalized in the characters of the *Dialogues*. (Dorcas C. Hiller Cleveland, quoted in Edward Janes Cleveland, *The Genealogy of the Cleveland and Cleaveland Families* (Hartford CT: Case, Lockwood & Brainard Company, 1899), 130.

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32 Dorcas Hiller Cleveland, "The Divine Revelation Advocated and Illustrated," *Tracts of the American Unitarian Association* no. 24 (1829), 1.

“candidly examine into the state of their feelings, or urge them on the importance of doing it themselves.”<sup>33</sup>

Put forward a generation after the majority of Barbauld’s work and seventy years before Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s *The Woman’s Bible* was shunned by liberal Christians as well as feminists in 1895,<sup>34</sup> Cleveland’s *Dialogues* asserted the authority of female experience as theological source and portrayed a mother, Mrs. Henderson, as spiritual a guide. This proto-feminist work was published by the American Unitarian Association in pamphlet form just as Boston Unitarianism began to define and defend its foundational beliefs. Cleveland applied the religious assertions of the newly formed American Unitarian Association in a practical manner designed to be replicated by all liberal Christians—especially lay women—in the continued battle against orthodoxy on one side and deism on the other.

Like Barbauld, the AUA’s publication of Cleveland’s work speaks to the quality of her writing and the esteem for her theological voice, as well as her influence within Unitarian circles. She was associated with many of the founding members of the association, including Rev. Jared Sparks (1789-1866) and Rev. Dr. Nathaniel Thayer (1769-1840). Despite these relationships, her relative anonymity contributed to the fact that her work was taken seriously by reviewers, who, on the whole, assumed her voice to be male.

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33 Ibid.

34 See Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion, 1805-1900*, 253-260.

Cleveland's tracts use a gentle but firm theological and educational method that establishes liberal (Unitarian) Christianity as a middle way for persons seeking a religious system to satisfy both mind and spirit.<sup>35</sup> In a proto-transcendentalist move, Cleveland suggests that George received his understanding of God best in nature, where "his heart expanded with gratitude and love to the God who spoke to his soul."<sup>36</sup> Also anticipating the transcendentalist thought that was just beginning to emerge in Unitarian circles, Cleveland believed that divine revelation occurred when a person reflected upon his or her own thoughts and feelings. "In this way," Mrs. Henderson states, "we can all come at some truths which it is important we should all possess."<sup>37</sup>

As the starting point for her theology, Cleveland, like Barbault, adopts the Unitarian belief that God's character was infinitely merciful. The Deity is "a kind and watchful guardian."<sup>38</sup> This is confirmed, she says, by experience and reason. She claims that the only logical explanation for any apparent contradiction between God's mercy and the course of history was the limited nature of the human mind.<sup>39</sup> The limited nature of human understanding is, for Cleveland, not due to human depravity, but is instead born out of the need to maintain a theological system based upon the infallible goodness of the creator and to make sense of the harsh realities of human existence. Cleveland reconciled Christian faith with Enlightenment thought, stating that God does not act in the modern world by affecting the course of events, but continues to intervene in the world by influencing the nature of the human mind. She wrote:

35 Cleveland did not expressly identify any of her characters as Unitarian.

36 Ibid., 14-15.

37 Cleveland, "A Dialogue Between a Christian and a Deist," *Tracts of the American Unitarian Association* no. 23, (1829). 17.

38 Ibid., 9.

39 Ibid., 6.

What is called natural means, what is called miracle, are all divine interpositions, and uniformly pursued by God to reform and elevate the human character, and united the spirit of man with his Maker.<sup>40</sup>

In the same stroke, Cleveland “solves” the problem of evil in the world by relinquishing the need for supernatural expressions of divine power through the prevention of suffering. Instead, Cleveland calls for acquiescence to God’s power and will in difficult times. She believed that prayer provided the space for transformation of the human character so as to enter into more perfect union with God. At the conclusion of the first dialogue, Mr. Henderson professes that “never did [his] relation to [God as] gracious Being seem so near and intimate.”<sup>41</sup> Mrs. Henderson’s explanations of “rational” religion were an apparent success.

According to women’s historian Linda Kerber, the model American Protestant woman of the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries was “a teacher as well as a mother.”<sup>42</sup> Working within the accepted cultural expectations of, what Kerber terms the “Republican Mother,” Cleveland established the theological authority of wife and mother over husband and son. Attributed to her experience as a woman, Mrs. Henderson has a special sense “for the spiritual affections.” In response to his inquiry as to why their perceptions differ in regard to religious subjects, she tells her husband:

You have lived in the world of business, my dear, while I, secluded, and moving only in the little circle of my domestic duties, have lived in an internal world of thought, observing and reflecting on the operations of my own mind . . . Hence the difference in the character of our minds, which originally, I believe, were constituted very much alike.<sup>43</sup>

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40 Ibid., 20.

41 Ibid., 22.

42 Kerber, 235.

43 Cleveland, “A Dialogue on the Causes of Infidelity,” *Tracts of the American Unitarian Association* no. 21, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (1831), 20.

Yet, in a move characteristic of many early female theologians who purport to deny their authority, even as they establish it, Mrs. Henderson tells her son that her knowledge is “extremely limited,” saying: “let us leave the whole field of polemic divinity to those who are properly qualified.” But she simultaneously asserts the validity of her experience and faithful witness by asserting that “everybody can look into his own heart.”<sup>44</sup> Barbauld, to the contrary, claimed her theological, literary, and political authority in her public discourse much earlier than Cleveland’s time.

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44 Cleveland, “A Dialogue Between a Christian and Deist,” 17.

For Cleveland, the purpose of Christian faith is a positive transformation of the individual character through aspiration to the example of the suffering Christ. With an explicitly Socinian Christology, she writes, “Jesus is Savior, not by any change his death wrought in God, rendering him in any degree more able or more willing to forgive sinners ... but by the change produced in the hearts and lives of mankind ... by showing the way of righteousness...”<sup>45</sup> Thus Jesus does not effect, but illuminates, the mercy of God for all people. Cleveland presents her Christology as a more logical interpretation of Jesus as Christ than orthodox doctrine because it retains the goodness of God.

Advocating early religious education for children, Cleveland states that “religion should be presented to them in the simplest and plainest manner” so as to inculcate young minds with the “correct” understanding of God as infinitely wise and benevolent and of Jesus as model of Christian character. Reflecting educational theory grounded in theories of childhood development, she believed that young children should be not only educated in how to reason about their own religious beliefs, but should be taught theological positions that would insulate them from harmful doctrines. Thus adequately prepared, she believed young people would later “be able to grapple with the dogmas they might learn, and resist the falsehood offered as divine truth.”<sup>46</sup> She writes, “Children’s minds should be early and deeply impressed with the great and fundamental truths of religion ... if our infant notions are correct, our rational convictions in mature life will confirm them, and our faith will be solid and satisfactory.”<sup>47</sup>

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45 Cleveland, “The Divine Authority of the Christian Revelation Acknowledged,” *Tracts of the American Unitarian Association* no. 25, (1829), 12.

46 *Ibid.*, 8.

47 Cleveland, “A Dialogue on Providence, Faith, and Prayer,” *Tracts of the American Unitarian Association* no. 12 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (1830), 8-9.

Dorcas Cleveland was raised and educated in the eighteenth century and was twenty-seven years old as the nineteenth century dawned. Her theological thought and writings were situated within the culture and philosophy of the New England Unitarian elite. She was not a radical and was focused primarily on educational reform as a means to improve the character of boys and girls of her social class and race. Despite her own family's connections Salem ports, her husband's exposure to the realities of maritime life and trade, and her own experiences of slavery in Cuba, she mentored young women and men in a completely different milieu—a world consumed with the beauty of the natural world and the life of the mind and the soul. The purpose of religion was to create happiness in the heart of the believer, not to transform the world.

As we analyze their theology in content and form, we find that Barbauld and Cleveland share a determination to establish their voices as theologically sound and to contribute to the furthering of liberal religion in ways distinct from, but not less than their male counterparts. In her article "The Gush of the Feminine," Isobel Armstrong argues that romantic women writers "... neither consented to the idea of a special feminine discourse nor accepted an account of themselves as belonging to the realm of the non-rational." Barbauld and Cleveland, as theologians, utilized the strategies Armstrong identifies to further their discourse. They used what she calls the "customary 'feminine' forms and languages, but they turned them to analytical account and used them to think with." "Second, she continues. "they challenged the male philosophical traditions that led to a demeaning discourse of feminine experience and remade those traditions."<sup>48</sup> In Barbauld's and especially in Cleveland's public theology women's private theological experience is paramount. Sensory experience, heart-based spiritual response, and analytical thought are imparted through dialogue and conversation with God, self, and others.

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48 Armstrong, Isobel. "The Gush of the Feminine: How Can we Read Women's Poetry of the Romantic Period?" *Romantic Women Writers: Voices and Countervoices*. Eds. Paula R. Feldman and Theresa M. Kelley. Hanover: University Press of New England (1995) 15.

Ushering in and then bridging Enlightenment and proto-modernist theologies, Barbauld and Cleveland reached out to young people who would shape the future of American consciousness through their contributions to literature, education, and Unitarian theology, as well as social reform. In her *Dialogues*, Cleveland outlines what she understood as the crucial paths to follow for a future that would lead to human flourishing for all people. She asks each seeker to search her heart, examine her ego and be ready to be transformed when engaging the quest for religious truth. Barbauld asks us to “examine ourselves” as we seek the Kingdom of God on this earth. Through their lives and written works, Barbauld and Cleveland offer twentieth-century liberal theologians and clergy possibilities for refreshing our own spiritual exploration and religious discourse.

Re-proclaiming Barbauld’s and recognizing Cleveland’s contribution to American Unitarianism and liberal Christianity is a crucial part of recovering the systematic loss of women’s voices, theologies, and Christianities within the study of theology as a whole, and specifically within Unitarian Universalist history. Both were women on the cusp of new ways of thinking: theological shifts within the Unitarian movement, the emergence of Transcendentalist thought, and the radical reform movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, both in Europe and the United States.

Applications of lessons learned from them include methods of religious education for children and youth as well as reinvigorating liberal theological conversations in the public sphere. We might take from their example as well to find ways we might encourage conversation as a form of instruction and religious and spiritual exploration. The burgeoning small group ministry movement within religious communities has shown the import of and potential for such an approach.

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