

Unsung Heroes of an Uncommon Denomination:
Abner Kneeland, Heretic
UU Church of Meadville
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You never know whom you'll meet at the UU General Assembly (or GA) , our uncommon denomination's annual convention of meetings, performances, workshops, parties, and social action witness. GA moves around the country from year to year, and I wonder who might show up in Kansas City next week.

I've run into all sorts of types at GA over the year. Of course, I've met lots of modern day UUs of all stripes! And that's one of the most remarkable and fabulous things about GA – by attending, you learn skills to bring back to your church, and, as a “delegate,” you join your voice with thousands of other UUs in policy making; all the while experiencing how much bigger Unitarian Universalism is than our one congregation.

But there's more. At GA, you get the ride in a UU time machine where you meet some notables from our historic past. For instance, in Quebec, I met 19th century suffragettes; in Nashville, I bumped into Virginia Durr (Southern Belle turned Liberal Activist) and in Rochester, I was introduced to 19th century astronomer Maria Mitchell and Howard Tarbell, former chief of the Mohawks.

The GA in Cleveland was also the setting for my rendezvous with one of the most fascinating and most unsung heroes of this uncommon denomination.

His name is Abner Kneeland, and he serves as the title character in a book by the Rev Stephen Papa called “The Last Man Jailed for Blasphemy.” Kneeland was a Universalist minister and social reformer who spoke out against strident religion, and who advocated equal rights for women and blacks, supported interracial marriage and birth control – in the 1820s, mind you!

No wonder he was said to be 100 years ahead of his time! Given the rise in fundamentalist religion (Christian, Islamic and otherwise) , and with it, rigid labeling of believers and heathens, as well as calls for banning blasphemous books, artwork and ideology, one might argue that Kneeland was actually 200 years ahead of his time.

Beyond a history lesson regarding some famous white Universalist dead guy, you may question why it is pertinent for us to learn about and talk about Kneeland now. I'd respond that his particular story and the overriding question of what can be considered “blasphemous” are especially resonant in our current culture and world.

Our President espouses a chillingly black-and-white political theology of good Christians vs. evil-doers. His likely nominees for the nation's highest courts and his support for policies banning abortion, controversial art, and even, stem cell research, find their roots in his somewhat simplistic religious paradigms. Just this week, the Attorney General and then the Press Secretary publicly tied the

immensely cruel policy of separating children from their parents at the SW Border as “Biblical.”

These oft-labeled “liberal” hot potatoes might well be called “blasphemous” by Trump’s cohort. Even more unsettling, is the fact that the law that put Kneeland in jail for blasphemy back in the 1800’s actually remains on the books in some states to this day – Massachusetts and Michigan, to be exact. Might we see a resurgence in the enforcement of such a disturbing law? Scary possibility, isn’t it? And not that far-fetched.

For the purposes of exploration, we can home in on a fairly straightforward question (and it’s the one that was applied to Kneeland), namely “If you avow publicly a dis-belief in the traditional Biblical God, are you a blasphemer? An atheist? An infidel? A typical Unitarian Universalist?” Let’s delve into that question and a few others together.

First, blasphemy is in the eye of the beholder. One man’s blasphemy is often another man’s religion. This paradox certainly applied to Kneeland. What is blasphemy exactly? The word comes from the (Greek *blaptein*, “to injure”, and *pheme*, “reputation”) and signifies gross irreverence towards any person or thing worthy of exalted esteem. (If you’re like me , you’re now asking: “worthy of exalted esteem to whom?” In law and religion, only a believer can be a heretic, but anyone, even an unbeliever, can blaspheme.

According to Pulitzer Prize winning author Leonard Levy, “ Historically blasphemy has been a complex offense whose dragnet has ensnared people of no or little faith as well as the unorthodox faithful. At various times in the past, blasphemy was nearly indistinguishable from the crimes of idolatry, sacrilege, heresy, obscenity, profanity, sedition, treason, and breach of the peace.

The meaning of blasphemy has ranged from the ancient Hebrew crime of cursing the ineffable name of God to the modern crime of ridiculing or professing atheistic principles in a way that insults the religious feelings of others. Blasphemy is not just an irreligious crime; political considerations have often tinged prosecutions, as have considerations of public order and morality. Universalist preacher Abner Kneeland, for example, would never have been prosecuted if he had not been a radical social reformer.”

Does it surprise you to learn that almost 50% of the examples for blasphemy given in Levy’s book pertain to our UU history and ancestors? Yea team! Arius of Alexandria makes an appearance as well as Michael Servetus at the stake, the radical Anabaptists of Geneva, our Socinian ancestors in Poland and our Hungarian speaking forebears like Frances David, who faced prison, exile, and death for questioning the religious status quo.

Jesus himself was accused of blasphemy when he claimed to be the Son of God (Matt. 26:65; compare Matt. 9:3; Mark 2:7). What goes around comes around, apparently, in that two different gospels tell us that “They who deny his Messiahship blaspheme Jesus.” (Luke 22:65; John 10:36).

Conservative Christians’ once nicknamed James Redfield’s New-Age bestseller “The Celestine Prophecy,” the Celestine *Blasphemy*; and although

there have been worse films showing in the nation's theaters, "The Dangerous Lives of Altar Boys" was deemed symptomatic of our blasphemous times by a fundamentalist website called *anti-blasphemy.org*.

Islam gets into the game, too. Remember when Salman Rushdie was accused of the "crime" of blasphemy years ago? The claim centers on his book, *The Satanic Verses* in which he infuses fiction in to controversial Islamic traditions. This is, after all, just a normal means of expression for an artist.

One contributor to a web chat regarding blasphemy makes the provocative comment that he was in favor of Rushdie's book mainly because it is said to be blasphemous. "Blasphemy," he argues, "regardless of its form, is one of the foremost goals of enlightenment worldwide." Fascinating, especially if you define enlightenment as "waking up."

Perhaps the most absurd tidbit I uncovered in my sermon research came courtesy of webmaster Blair Scott from his site called " Bible Belt Blasphemy." He tells the sordid tale of the coffee mug he purchased from the Evolve Fish company. It has a picture of Darwin's amphibian holding a wrench and the word "Evolve" in the amphibian's body.

Scott writes, "I didn't think I would have a problem with the cup, as it was usually in my hand or on my desk next to my monitor. One would think that after living in the heart of the Bible Belt for three years that I would have learned by now that anything portraying a non-Christian attitude would become a problem sooner or later."

"As I strolled through the small office of fifty-five employees, I ran across a smorgasbord of Christian paraphernalia. Little plaques with prayers, icons in the shape of crosses and the Virgin Mary, ceramic angels and other religious figurines, various items containing the Lord's Prayer, and plenty of other items. These items do not offend me, but do provide me with the occasional chuckle. After using my new coffee mug for about three weeks, the manager of the office approached me and asked if she could talk to me in private.. Simply put, she told me there had been complaints about my coffee mug and that I should remove it from the office. I felt like a six-year-old child being scolded for using the big kid's toys. The situation was embarrassing and humiliating. But, to keep the peace,' writes Scott, " I took the mug home."

Those wacky evangelical coffee drinkers, hm? Well, at least Scott didn't go to jail like principled but persecuted Abner Kneeland. The reasons for the blasphemy charge against Kneeland must be examined within the context of his life and his time. Kneeland was born in Gardner, MA in 1774. A carpenter's son, Kneeland had a memory so extraordinary he could repeat back the Bible text upon which the Sunday sermon was based and then the sermon, word for word.

Abner served as a schoolteacher for a while in Dummerston, Vermont and became immersed as a Baptist. He was a lay preacher during this time, and as his theology became more liberal, he joined his sister in the Universalist faith emerging in early 19th century New England. At age 30, he was ordained by the Universalist Church of America. None other than Hosea Ballou, one of

Universalism's leading theologians preached the sermon. Kneeland was a man of many interests and talents. He served in the New Hampshire Legislature, owned a dry good store with the third of his four wives (no comment), and published three hymnals and a spelling book based on phonetics.

However, his main vocation and passion was ministry, and it was indeed, this passion that got Lil' Abner in the soup. Here's what happened. In 1833, at the age of 59, Kneeland composed what he called a philosophical creed," which was not unlike our current UU "Coming of Age" practice of crafting a *credo statement* of our individual beliefs. Foreshadowing the Transcendentalists who would emerge in the following three decades, Kneeland wrote:

" I believe in the existence of a universe of suns and planets, among which there is one sun belonging to our planetary system; and that other suns being more remote, are called stars; but that they are indeed suns to other planetary systems. I believe that the whole universe is NATURE, and that the word NATURE embraces the whole universe; that GOD and NATURE, so far as we can attach any rational idea to either, are synonymous terms.

Hence, I am not an Atheist, but a Pantheist; that is, instead of believing there is no God, I believe that in the abstract, all is God; and that all power that is, is in God, and that there is no power except that which proceeds from God...

Hence, I believe, that God is all in all; and that it is in God we live, move, and have our being; and that the whole duty of man consists in living as long as he can, and in promoting as much happiness as he can while he lives." Sounds mighty contemporary, doesn't it?

Now, contrast this philosophical statement with the 1782 Massachusetts legal statute (amended in 1812, and revalidated as recently as 1979!) which eventually trumped Abner Kneeland's ministry:

" Be it enacted by the State and House of Representatives in General Court assembled, and by the authority of the same, That if any person shall willfully blaspheme the holy name of God, by denying, cursing, or contumeliously reproaching God, his creation, government or final judging of the world,

or by cursing, or reproaching Jesus Christ, or the Holy Ghost, or by cursing or reproaching the Holy Word of God, that is the canonical scriptures, contained in the books of the Old and the New Testaments,

or by exposing them, or any part of them to contempt and ridicule; every person so offending shall be punished by *imprisonment* not exceeding twelve months, by sitting in the pillory, or by sitting on the gallows, with a rope about the neck."

Lord have mercy! As I mentioned previously, this law remains on the books to this day in Massachusetts and could potentially be revived to silence individual religious rights. We need to be vigilant about that possibility because it is a real possibility, depending on whom ends up on the bench.

In Kneeland's case, it was more political events than philosophical emanations that led to his legal ordeal. Politics, law, and religion often produce an explosive brew. For Abner, trouble began with his popularity. In New York

City, more than 2000 people would come to hear him preach on Sunday about such subversive, blasphemous subjects as the universal availability of salvation. (still a hot potato today, apparently). He allowed supporters of women's rights, public welfare, and birth control to speak in his church. In Boston, he shared his pulpit with William Lloyd Garrison, the great abolitionist, because no one else would allow him to speak. Therefore, Boston's first anti-slavery lecture came at Kneeland's encouragement.

In order to silence and control Kneeland, he was charged with three counts of blasphemy, based on a distorted interpretation of two Boston Inquirer articles reprinted from a Freethought journal and a letter written by Kneeland to the editor of the Trumpet magazine.

Here's the twist – The statute against blasphemy was not intended to restrain the formation of opinions or the profession of religious sentiments, but rather to punish acts which have a tendency to “ disturb the public peace.” Shades of Orwell's 1984 or Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*? Perhaps, shades of what could foment in 21st century America, where coffee mug theology is censored for disturbing the peace and a wedding cake is a deliberated by the Supreme Court?

Abner was tried five times. Four times, he appealed guilty verdicts and won. The fifth time, his luck ran out. The prominent Unitarian minister, William Ellery Channing, collected 168 signatures on a petition to the governor requesting a pardon. Among the signers were Emerson, Theodore Parker and Bronson Alcott. A counter petition among conservative clergy drew 230 signers. The governor denied a pardon and Abner served his sixty days in jail, during which time, his son died in infancy.

Hosea Ballou visited him in jail, and Parker quipped that “Abner was juggled for sixty days but he will come out as beer from a bottle, all foaming and will make others foam.” But instead of continuing to serve as the yeast in the political brew, Kneeland emerged from jail deflated. He left Boston to found a utopian community called Salubria in Iowa. The experiment failed, Kneeland sold everything to pay his debts, and ultimately went back to work as a teacher to support himself. In 1844, he died at age 70.

Kneeland was heretical and arrogant, flawed and even, a bit naïve. But he was no failure. He was a true unsung hero of our uncommon denomination, even though the Universalists of his own day were often embarrassed by his audacity.

This is understandable, given that he “outed” them as different drummers. He was loud and public about his free and responsible search for truth and meaning and his offbeat pantheistic creed. I wonder if we modern day UUs squander Abner's sacrifice every time we downplay our liberal and creedless leanings on the soccer sidelines or around the water cooler.

I've been told on occasions by members of various UU churches how very hard it is to fess up that our denomination is not “Christian;” that we operate without a unifying creed, and that we don't baptize our children in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.”

If Abner was here, preaching today, I believe he would admonish us to keep our power by proclaiming and celebrating our free faith, blasphemous though it may seem to the mainstream. Kneeland never accepted the notion that he was committing a crime and neither should we. Blasphemy is in the eye of the beholder and so is religion. We give away our power and authority to others when we hide who we are out of misguided fear or embarrassment, and allow others to brand us as irreligious because we are search outside of *their* finite boxes for truth and meaning and holiness and value.

To honor Kneeland and his legacy, we need to cherish our doubts, stand by this faith and by our own religious instincts. I'd argue that we need to broaden our knowledge and experience of and deepen our commitment to Unitarian Universalism, too. One great way to accomplish this is by attending General Assembly and perhaps, rendezvousing with new faces and new ideas.

Ask yourself: "What good is a free faith if we don't feel free and empowered to proclaim it? What good is the free and responsible search for truth and meaning if we keep to the same limited neighborhood streets or hide the results in the closet and bend them to conform to the least objectionable version for public consumption?"

Be a reverent blasphemer, if that's what it takes. As a UU, you're already a heretic, so why not go for broke?! Disturb the public peace if you will, and do it proudly and respectfully, within the parameters of our principles.

Do it for Abner.

We'll bail you out.

Amen to that.

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