"The Wild Unitarian" by Susan Ruttan February 20, 2011

Charles Potter started life as a Baptist. In the small Massachusetts town where he was born in 1885, the Unitarians were considered such blasphemers that as a boy his mother made young Charles look away when they walked past the Unitarian church.

He was a great Bible reader as a child, and as a teenager discovered a gift for preaching. Naturally, he headed to college to become a Baptist minister.

That's where life started getting interesting for Charles Potter. In college he learned about all the scholarly research that had been done on the Bible to show that it was a flawed man-made collection of stories, not the revealed word of God. That new, critical view of Bible teachings such as the virgin birth didn't discourage Potter from the Baptist ministry. He was all his life a man of supreme confidence: he headed out preaching in 1908 confident that his congregations would welcome the enlightenment he would share with them.

That's not quite what happened. To give you a flavour of Baptist Christianity at the time, here's what Charles Potter had to officially accept as fundamental church truths before the Baptists approved him as a minister. They're called the Five Points of Calvinism.

I give you the whole list as a reminder of just how grim and damaging fundamentalist Christianity was at this time: 1. Predestination of those chosen by God to get to heaven; 2. The total Depravity of every baby when they're born; 3. Limited atonement – which means Christ's death on the cross atones for the sins of only select people;
4. Irresistible Grace – that God's chosen ones will be saved whether they like it or not; and 5. The Perseverance of the Saints – that God's chosen ones will never revert back to sin.

Potter fudged his way through the Five Points of Calvinism and went a-preaching, with his new wife in tow.

He had some success, attracting all sorts of new members to the two Baptist churches he served. However he inevitably ran into trouble with the church elders, who opposed dancing, the movies and card-playing and accused Potter of being a Unitarian.

Early in 1914 Potter decided they might be right, and he signed on with the Unitarian Church at its Boston headquarters. The fledgling Edmonton church, formed two years earlier, happened to be looking for a minister. So, with wife and three young children in tow, Charles Potter headed off to Edmonton to begin his career as a Unitarian minister.

Potter devotes an entire chapter of his 1951 memoirs to his adventures in Edmonton.

Edmonton, he writes, "was not the frontier outpost we had expected to find, but a cosmopolitan city, still showing its pioneer origins, to be sure, but very announcedly modern." That clash of pioneer and modern society intrigued him, and became the basis of an after-dinner speech called Brussels Sprouts and Buffalos that he gave for years around the U.S.

In Edmonton grocery stores in 1914, he writes, you could buy the usual beef, pork and lamb, but also venison, moose meat and yearling bear chops. "Bear chops were the same price as pork chops, 2 pounds for 25 cents, and tasted much the same, but sweeter and slightly gamy." A four-pound mallard duck cost a quarter.

Potter writes: "While our little church was taboo and anathema to the righteous

orthodox, we did have among our small membership the mayor, an alderman, a judge, the professor of classics at the University of Alberta, and the editors of both daily newspapers."

During Potter's two years in Edmonton, the congregation built its own building in Garneau – actually, only the first part of the building was built, a roofed-over basement containing an auditorium, school and social rooms and a kitchen.

But the big thing that happened was the First World War which started in August 1914.

As a result of the war, Potter says, "my congregation, which had been steadily growing, was reduced virtually to a few women". That may be part of the reason why he left Edmonton in 1916, but conflict over the war was another big reason.

The leading Unitarian layman, W.H. Alexander, was a prominent supporter of the war effort, while Potter, as he says, "disapproved of wars in general and this one in particular, for I viewed it as brought on not only by Germany's reaching for power but also by Britain's colonial policy which required her to "rule the waves". And he blamed arms manufacturers for fomenting the crisis.

He spent the next few years in small churches in Massachusetts. Then in 1919 Potter was chosen, over far more experienced ministers, to be minister at the West Side Unitarian Church in New York City. What won him the job was his impressive preaching ability, and his energetic plan to boost the church's membership and revenues.

That energy was soon very evident. The 1920s were Potter's heyday, and not coincidentally, the decade was also the heyday of newspapers. New York City in the 20s had all sorts of daily newspapers, because there was no television or Internet, and even radio was just getting going. In those days newspaper reporters covered ministers' Sunday sermons, and Potter proved excellent copy. He became a real publicity hound, sending out press releases, dreaming up media events and providing lively quotes to any reporter seeking one.

His biggest media event became a historic one. In 1924 Potter challenged the leading fundamentalist minister in New York City, one John Straton of Calvary Baptist Church, to a debate on five issues. In the end the two debated only four times; Straton backed out of the fifth debate.

The debate topics were:

1. Resolved that the Bible is the infallible word of God;
2. Resolved that the world and man came by creation of a living God and not by evolution;
3. Resolved that the miraculous virgin birth of Jesus Christ is an essential Christian doctrine.
4. Resolved that Jesus Christ is the Divine Son of God.

Potter, of course, was taking the negative side in these issues.

We have today become much less combative with even the most evangelical Christian churches, but Potter back in 1924 went at Christian fundamentalism hammer and tongs. At the time the fundamentalists were on the march, demanding Christian teachings in the schools and so on. Potter pushed back hard, preaching a whole series of sermons on the dangers of fundamentalist Christianity.

The first debate, on the Bible, took place in Straton's huge church, which was

packed with 2,500 spectators including many reporters. The Baptists in the crowd sang hymns before the debate started. The fearless Potter pointed to the many flaws in the Bible and called the Jehovah of the Old Testament “ignorant, malicious and grotesque”.

The three other debates were held in Carnegie Hall, and were broadcast on the radio. The evolution debate was particularly noteworthy – a full transcript of the debate was published in a 1995 book. His defence of evolution was Potter’s finest hour.

He said: “If God was able to interfere at certain crises in the past...why didn’t he interfere between 1914 and 1918: No, my friends, the World War absolutely dissipated forever that idea of God. God is with us, but we have got to change our idea of God, as every great epoch has demanded a similar change. We must recognize that this God that we are talking of is the God who sleeps in the mineral, stirs in the vegetable, feels in the animal, and thinks in man, and if another World War is to be prevented, it must be done not by a transcendent God in the skies, but by the God in you and me.”

Of course another world war was not prevented, and by 1929 Potter had abandoned the whole God idea.

The debates brought in big numbers to Potter’s Unitarian church, but within a year he left that church. He says the dispute was over his salary, but one wonders if once again the church elders found him a bit much to take. Among the ideas he promoted at the time was to create a new American Bible, one that would replace the old Middle Eastern prophets and teachers like Moses and Jesus with Americans like Abraham Lincoln. The idea never got off the ground.

Freed from his minister job, Potter headed with his wife to Dayton, Tennessee in the spring of 1925. He went there to write magazine articles on the famous Scopes Monkey Trial, the trial of teacher John Scopes for teaching evolution in violation of Tennessee law. But Potter being Potter, he also went there to be part of what promised to be an international media circus on the topic of evolution.

Once in Dayton, Potter attached himself to the defence team of Clarence Darrow as a Bible expert – ready to challenge any Bible claims of the prosecuting lawyer, William Jennings Bryan. In the end Potter had little to do, except on one occasion, to give the opening prayer at the start of the day’s court hearing. The deeply religious judge insisted on an opening prayer, and when Darrow argued at least for the prayer to come from a variety of preachers, the judge called Potter to give the prayer.

After the trial, Potter found a job with a college but was let go after a year. Then he tried being the minister of a Universalist church in New York City – the Unitarians and Universalists were very supportive of each other and had talked about merger, so he figured he could fit in. He was wrong; he was gone in a year. “The congregation as a whole,” he said, “was frankly suspicious of all Unitarians and apparently regarded them as foreign and peculiar people.”

Potter then abandoned traditional religion altogether. In 1929 he set up The First Humanist Society of New York. He was by no means the original humanist in the U.S.; there was already a humanist movement within Unitarian ministers and religious academics. And within that movement, Potter was sometimes seen as a showboating outsider. Raymond Bragg, the Unitarian minister who was a leader in creating the Humanist Manifesto of 1933, later wrote: “Some had doubts as to whether the description of the humanist movement should be left to Potter. Charles had some slap-dash quality regretted by not a few.”

Still, he was one of the signers of the Humanist Manifesto and gave countless hours to the cause – he never took a salary from the First Humanist Society he created. For the rest of his life Potter supported himself with book-writing and speech-making.
But he never got boring. In 1938 he formed the National Society for the Legalization of Euthanasia. I was happy to read that the society endorsed assisted suicide only for those suffering a terminal illness that chose to end their life, not for the mentally handicapped.
He also became enamoured of the paranormal – in particular he believed his wife was psychic. To be fair, séances and mediums and the like were popular in the 1930s. But as Potter himself acknowledges, his interest in psychic phenomena "caused me to be looked upon with heavy suspicion by a number of Humanists." Oh, I'm sure that was very true. This was a guy who lived fully but burned a lot of bridges in his life.
Potter lived till 1966, yet his most impressive years were as a Unitarian minister, between 1914 and 1929.
I called him in my title The Wild Unitarian, and in many ways he was wild. But also fearless, in a way I rather envy. His sermons today are almost shocking, because of how completely he challenges the traditional God of Christianity. Unitarians today get along with other faiths, as we should, and we accept among our members a wide variety of beliefs. We even enjoy the old gospel songs like the ones from the movie O Brother Where Art Thou that we're hearing today.
We realize that our job is to offer an alternative to fundamentalist religions, not to attack them as Potter did. Our role is to provide a place where individuals walk their own spiritual path.
Yet I hope we don't get too polite. I hope we are sure enough in our Unitarianism to speak and live its truths boldly. I was never so proud of our church members as during the summer, a few years ago, when there were a series of protests around Edmonton opposing gay marriage – protests with the backing of some Christian churches. At every one of these protest rallies there was a small counter-protest of UCE members holding signs supporting gay marriage.
Potter's 1916 sermon on the Good Samaritan sets out a path that fits modern Unitarians very well. I love his idea of the Better Samaritan, the person who wants to make the road to Jericho safer for travellers, who wonders why so many people are driven to steal to feed their families. That's our role.
Unitarians don't stop at simply helping the downtrodden and the sick, important though that is. We're the people who say, why are these people toppling over the cliff of life into poverty and despair in the first place? What needs to happen in our society and our government to make a more just world – to protect people from that cliff?
If our world is unjust, we say, then the world must change. That's a radical statement, and it's a Unitarian statement.
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