

Charles Dickens, Unitarian

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We like to claim historical figures as being “one of us”. In the books we give to newcomers, there’s always a list in the back of all the famous people who’ve been Unitarian or Universalist. Names as diverse as John Adams and John Dewey; Clara Barton, Florence Nightingale, and Fanny Farmer; Frank Lloyd Wright, P.T. Barnum and Paul Newman ... Why do we keep track?

Some people might say that since we’re on the outskirts of respectable religion, we need to remind ourselves that we’re legitimate. But I think it’s healthy to know where we come from. We place ourselves in a long line of prophets, thinkers and reformers, in the stream of progressive religion: people who embody values that we share today, and hope to carry on.

Charles Dickens belongs on this list “to begin with. There is no doubt about that”. He’s worth a sermon because, as an early Unitarian, he embraced many of the ideas we care about. And especially at Christmas time, he’s worth a sermon, because Charles Dickens helped invent the very idea of Christmas as we know it.

With the industrial age roaring ahead like a runaway train, old traditions being broken and social ties being tossed aside, Charles Dickens saw just how much we need Christmas. Through his writing, he created an unforgettable image of Christmas as it was meant to be, an image that strengthens old traditions with a strong dose of compassion.

What does it mean to say that Charles Dickens was a Unitarian? It meant something different back then, than it does today – but maybe not so different. In the 1800s, to be Unitarian in England was to be outside the bounds of respectable religion.

The Unitarians were actually part of larger group of dissenting churches, outside the Church of England. From the time Henry VIII established it, the Church of England fought against these dissenting churches, and tried hold on to its authority. Property was seized. People were persecuted and burned as heretics. In 1662, two thousand ministers were dismissed from their pulpits and exiled from their parishes. Relations improved after 1689, and most of the nonconformists were granted freedom to worship. But Unitarianism remained illegal until 1813.

Unitarians were excluded from the great universities in England. So they founded universities of their own. Many Unitarians became well educated. But tradesmen and working-people joined with them too, including “weavers, warpers, wool-sorters, overlookers, hatters, cloggers, and shoemakers”. The UU historian Mark Harris describes it this way:

The Unitarians became the vanguard of a new middle class. They were aspiring, independent folk, who wanted to overcome the religious and civil prejudices they had encountered ... Unitarians were consistent critics of government policies and advocates of reform – especially in education but also in economic policies and women’s rights”. (Mark Harris, *Elite*, 2011; pp.13, 18)

Charles Dickens had much the same attitude. He grew up on the borderline between the middle and the working class and he experienced both sides of it. As a young boy, Dickens had to leave school to support his family. He worked in a shoe-blackening factory while his father was languishing in debtors’ prison. Although Dickens eventually went to school again, it wasn’t long before he went back to work, first as a law-clerk and then as a reporter. As a young man, Charles Dickens developed the life-long habit of walking the streets of London, and mingling with all kinds of people. Up close, he witnessed the workings of inhumane laws, official neglect, and religious intolerance and their effects on ordinary people.

When he became a novelist, Dickens continued to walk and mingle and observe. He came to know the many ways in which Ignorance and Want keep people down, and extinguish their hope, from one generation to the next. And he became famous for writing about these social concerns in his novels.

Dickens was a religious man, but his faith had to do with people, not platitudes. He had no respect for churches that did nothing to make life better for poor people, or who offered their charity in a condescending way, with strings attached.

In 1842, Charles Dickens came to the United States for the first time. He was horrified by the slavery he saw in in the South. He was disappointed by the ingrown culture he found in New England. But he was impressed with some of the people he met here, including William Ellery Channing, one of the leading Unitarians.

Returning home to London, Dickens joined a Unitarian congregation there, the Little Portland Street Chapel. In a letter to a friend, he wrote,

Disgusted with our Established Church ... and daily outrages on common sense and humanity, I have carried into effect an old idea of mine, and joined the Unitarians, who would do something for human improvement, if they could; and who practice Charity and Toleration.

Some people don't like to hear Charles Dickens called a Unitarian. They treat his Unitarianism as a passing phase. They try to reclaim him for respectable religion. To which I say, "Bah, Humbug!"

This much we do know: Charles Dickens' faith had to do with people, including the teachings of a human being named Jesus. To teach his own children, Dickens wrote a small book titled *The Life of Our Lord*. In this book, he presents human Jesus as an example of how people are meant to live, and to take care of each other, with humility, compassion and forgiveness. The most important lesson, Dickens told his children, is to "do good always".

He had no use for religious dogma. He didn't join with the Unitarians because of their distinctive beliefs about miracles, or the Trinity, or any of the other issues that church people fought over in 19th century. He joined with the Unitarians because he cared about the same things they cared about, and which we still care about.

Charles Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol* while he was an active member of the Unitarian chapel. Compared to his major novels, it's a very small book. But it touches on many of the same themes about society and human nature.

Without saying much about religion, *A Christmas Carol* presents deeply religious values. It paints a picture of a Christmas which is more than a holiday: it's a way of being. For a few days, at least, people are encouraged to treat one another the way God would intend for them to be treated all the time. This Christmas provides the occasion for acts of kindness and gestures of good will not just to people we know, not just to people like us, but to everyone.

Charles Dickens was no joyless reformer. His vision of the good life is more than the absence of want.

I have a beer mug, with a quotation on it, that's attributed to Benjamin Franklin. It says "Beer is proof that God loves us and wants us to be happy" So it is with Dickens' Christmas: God wants us to be happy: to listen to music, to laugh, to dance together; to

enjoy plenty of good food and companionship; and to spend some time under the mistletoe.

Here's the message of Christmas, for Dickens: *It is our destiny is to be kind to one another.*

This is a Universalist vision. It's the vision not of a distant world populated by angels and saints. It's the kind of heaven we can create in this world, a heaven that includes all kinds of people. It includes every one of us who has ever felt cut off from life; who has ever experienced a change of heart; who has ever wanted to throw off the chains that bind us, especially the ones we have forged for ourselves.

In *A Christmas Carol*, the miser Scrooge is forced to confront the man he has become. The ghosts of Christmas show him the choices he's made, how much these choices have truly cost him, and the lonely fate that awaits him if he will not change.

But when Scrooge is finally moved, it is not by concern for himself. It's his empathy for another human being, the little boy Tiny Tim, who is sure to die, before another year passes, if nothing changes.

In his novels, Dickens often wrote about children. In their vulnerability and innocence, each one of them is like the canary in a coal mine. They are exposed to the dangers of a social system in which we all participate. They are the first to succumb to these dangers. Dickens wants us to care. He wants us to do whatever we can to create the kind of world in which defenseless children don't have to die.

Dickens preaches a theology of second chances. Scrooge can turn around; he can undo some of the harm that he has done. He can be healed through the kindness he shows to others, and the kindness he is willing to receive.

As long as we live, each one of us has this opportunity. The embers of love may be hidden within us, but they still burn. They can still be fanned into flame. God loves us and wants us to be happy. "God bless us, everyone!"