

THE BICENTENNIAL OF THE AMERICAN UNITARIAN ASSOCIATION AND CONGREGATIONAL HISTORY

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KYLE ROBERTS: Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Kyle Roberts, and I am the Executive Director of the Congregational Library & Archives. Welcome to today's virtual talk, "The Bicentennial of the American Unitarian Association and Congregational History," with Professor Dan McKanan.

To begin, I want to acknowledge that the Congregational Library & Archives resides in what is now known as Boston, which is in the Place of the Blue Hills, the homeland of the Massachusetts people, whose relationships and connections with the land continue to this day and into the future.

For those joining us for the first time, the Congregational Library & Archives is an independent research library. Established in 1853, the CLA's mission is to foster a deeper understanding of the Congregational story and its ongoing relevance in contemporary society. We do this through free access to our research library of 225,000 books, manuscripts, periodicals, and pamphlets, as well as our digital archive, which has more than 130,000 images, many drawn from our New England's Hidden Histories project.

Throughout the year, we offer educational programs and research fellowships for students, scholars, churches, and anyone interested in Congregationalism's influence on the American story. I do hope you will check out our website, congregationallibrary.org, for more information about forthcoming events and to learn more about what we do.

Now, 2025 marks an important year, not only in Unitarian history, but also Congregational history. The formation of the American Unitarian Association, as you're gonna learn today, in 1825, occurred as part of a decades-long broadening of distance between liberal and conservative wings of the Congregational church. It had a major impact on the New England landscape as 120 Congregational churches around the Boston area became Unitarian and scores of new Congregational churches were founded.

So I'm so glad that we can mark this anniversary with one of the nation's leading historians of Unitarian Universalism. And he actually comes from just across the river, so please let me welcome and introduce our speaker.

Dan McKanan is Emerson Senior Lecturer at Harvard Divinity School, where he works closely with students preparing for Unitarian Universalist ministry and with scholars of Unitarian Universalism from around the world. He's the author of six books, including *Prophetic*

Encounters: Religion and the American Radical Tradition, and then an absolute must that you have to have on your bookshelf, the two-volume *Documentary History of Unitarian Universalism*.

So thank you so much, Dan, for being with us today. And I'll turn it over to you.

DAN MCKANAN: Thank you so much, Kyle. It is wonderful to be here with you and with everyone who's chosen to join us. I'm really grateful, Kyle, that you and your colleagues reached out and decided that the story of the American Unitarian Association is a story that all of us on both sides of the split of 200 years ago need to understand more deeply in the hopes of fostering greater harmony and cooperation over the next 200 years. So, thank you, everyone.

2025 marks the bicentennial of the American Unitarian Association. The religious liberals who reluctantly organized for the Unitarian denomination in 1825 were part of the Congregationalist story, heirs of New England puritanism, who cherished the Congregational polity found in the Cambridge Platform and elsewhere.

So what happened in 1825, and why should it be of interest here at the Congregational Library?

I have several answers, and I've structured them as a series of increasingly complex steps. The first steps represent the standard narrative that you might encounter in the Unitarian Universalist history courses that I teach at Harvard and that others teach at the Unitarian Universalist seminaries. The later steps represent emerging lines of interpretation, culminating with my current research. To get us started, I will summarize each step before delving into them in detail.

Step one frames the creation of the American Unitarian Association as the culmination of a 20-year Unitarian controversy that began when Harvard College called a known Unitarian, Henry Ware, to the prestigious Hollis Chair.

Step two tells a similar, but much longer, story in which Enlightenment ideas that had been spreading in Massachusetts for a full century finally triumphed in the oldest churches of eastern Massachusetts.

Step three emphasizes polity rather than theology. With the rise of Unitarianism, the shared governance of churches and parishes, envisioned in the Cambridge Platform, ceased to function.

Step four views the AUA founding as the beginning, not the end, of a process of denominational formation that culminated only after the Civil War, when both Unitarians and orthodox Congregationalists created true associations of congregations for the first time.

Step five emphasizes what Unitarians and orthodox Congregationalists had in common. Both were eager to spread the unique virtues of New England religion to the rest of an expanding nation.

And step six hypothesizes that the AUA was a reassertion of Congregational ideals over against what I will describe as a quasi-denomination of wealthy Unitarians and Episcopalians in Boston and other port cities.

Okay, now we're ready to take it a little bit more slowly.

Most histories date the so-called Unitarian Controversy from 1805 to 1825. What happened in 1805 was that Harvard chose Henry Ware, Sr. to fill the Hollis Chair. Like other ministers who found the doctrine of the Trinity to be unscriptural and irrational, Ware did not make a point of saying so in public. He and his colleagues thought that the exact relationship between God and Jesus was unknowable. They did not want to divide the church over such matters. But Ware had published a catechism that was based on an earlier, more orthodox publication. The fact that he had omitted references to the Trinity was the tip-off that he was really a Unitarian.

Jedidiah Morse, the zealously orthodox minister in Charlestown, sounded an alarm. Morse fought hard to block Ware's appointment and organized a journal, *The Panoplist*, to amplify his concerns. He warned that Harvard was likely to corrupt future ministers.

Those who agreed with him raised the money needed to create Andover Seminary as a rival to Harvard for ministerial preparation. Now, as a graduate school of theology, Andover was a pedagogical innovation. Previously, ministers in the making earned a Bachelor of Arts, then either apprenticed themselves to settled ministers or remained in Cambridge for a period of extended study. Harvardians and the merchants who supported them decided that Andover's new pedagogy was worth emulating. And so they organized Harvard Divinity School as a distinct entity from Harvard College.

The creation of rival schools, Andover and Harvard Divinity, meant that congregations would, in effect, have to declare their loyalties when choosing a minister from one or the other school. It also meant that ministers would feel a certain degree of kinship with other graduates of their school and a certain degree of opposition to graduates of the rival school.

Still, many ministers remained on the fence. Those who were unable to affirm the Trinitarian doctrines spelled out in the Nicene and Athanasian creeds did not think the issue was worth dividing the churches. That's why, like Ware, they preferred not to share their views from the pulpit. Many congregants genuinely did not know where their ministers stood, and if they had known, they would have discovered that their ministers held middle-of-the-road positions, such as the so-called Arian theology, in which Jesus was not fully equal to God but

still much more than merely human, the incarnation of a divine logos that had been created before the creation of the world.

This began to change when one of the most respected ministers in Boston, William Ellery Channing, who had been courted by partisans on both sides, decided he needed to choose. As an Arian, Channing did not like to call himself a Unitarian because the term was associated with the more radical position of the English liberal Joseph Priestley, who had already begun organizing congregations in Pennsylvania. Channing was offended by Morse's insinuation that anyone holding Priestlian views was immoral and that anyone who was reluctant to declare their views was dishonest. Channing was also vehemently opposed to the Calvinist understanding of human depravity. He feared that theology would push sensitive souls to morbid despair or to infidelity and rebellion.

So Channing turned an 1819 ordination sermon, delivered in a newly organized congregation in Baltimore, into a manifesto for the Liberal Party. Soon thereafter, he accepted Unitarian as a more comprehensive label that would include Arians like himself. Channing's action inspired younger liberal ministers, including his own assistant Ezra Stiles Gannett, to begin organizing what would become the AUA.

Step two draws especially on the research that Conrad Wright, one of my predecessors at Harvard, did in the middle of the 20th century. What Wright realized was that if you took the focus off of anti-Trinitarianism, and consider a wider range of theological topics, the story gets much longer.

For Wright, the beginnings of Unitarianism in America coincided with the First Great Awakening in around 1735. Troubled by the emotional excesses of the awakeners and their attacks on traditional ministerial authority, a counter-tradition of liberal Protestants coalesced around three clusters of ideas that emerged sequentially.

First came Arminianism, the assertion that, though fallen, humans retain the capacity to accept the gift of grace that God offers to all. Next was supernatural rationalism, the belief that human reason is capable of discerning some religious truths on its own and of weighing the evidence needed to accept the additional truths contained in divine revelation. These ideas were widely accepted for more than a generation before ministers in and around Boston began turning to a third claim, that the doctrine of the Trinity violated both scripture and reason.

When we see the rise of Unitarianism as a century-long process, we can better understand a core truth about the organizers of the AUA. They did not understand themselves as revolutionaries, determined to replace puritanism with its opposite. On the contrary, many were quite conservative, which is why they supported the Federalist Party of politics. They saw themselves as deeply faithful to their puritan forebears. They disliked Calvinism, but they didn't think of Calvinism primarily as the faith of the puritans. They thought of it as an upstart

theological distortion, addicted to metaphysical speculation, and prone to excessive emotionalism and cynical hypocrisy.

With step three, we shift the focus from theology to polity, governance, and church-state relations. At the time of the Unitarian controversy, most of the Congregational churches of Massachusetts, both liberal and orthodox, were still funded by taxes. They were, if you liked, established churches. But they functioned differently from the established churches of England. In keeping with Congregational principles, the taxes were collected at a local level, and the congregations had a distinctive two-part governance structure.

On the one hand was the church, consisting of individuals who had testified to a conversion experience. According to the Cambridge Platform of 1648, each church had sole power to choose its minister because scripture was fully silent on anyone else having such authority. On the other hand was the parish, which included all the town's freeholding property owners, the people who were responsible for paying the taxes. The Cambridge Platform specified that everyone that was taught the Word had an equal obligation to provide for the economic support of the minister. This created an inbuilt tension between church and parish that got more intense as the share of population who were full of church members declined.

For this reason, when the government of Massachusetts was reorganized in 1692, the General Court flipped to the opposite extreme, legislating that it was the inhabitants of each town, the parish, who was responsible for providing their own minister. That generated a lively protest, and a year later the statute was amended to give churches power to choose their own minister, so long as all parishes concurred. With some notable exceptions that I'll talk about later, this two-part system survived the American Revolution and remained in place until the time of the Unitarian Controversy. And then it broke apart.

Though some congregations were uniformly liberal and most rural congregations were uniformly orthodox, the suburbs of Boston were divided such that the orthodox held majorities in most churches while liberals held majorities in the corresponding parishes. Now, if a congregation had a long-settled minister with diplomatic skills, this was not an immediate problem.

It became a problem whenever there was a ministerial vacancy. The two factions would unite around rival candidates, and you'd have a clash between church and parish. The list of congregations divided in this way includes Dorchester, Cambridge, and many others, but it was Dedham's controversy over church property that reached the state's Supreme Judicial Court. Chief Justice Isaac Parker ruled that towns, not churches, had the right to elect ministers in the final resort.

Justice Parker, like most Massachusetts elites, was himself on the Unitarian side of the fight. What's more, he was a member of one of the exceptional congregations, Brattle Street, that had never distinguished the church from the parish. Since its founding in 1697, Brattle had

insisted that all members of the congregation had equal authority to elect ministers. So Parker was in effect saying, every church should do it the way my church does it.

After the Dedham Decision, Congregational division accelerated. Even in places where church and parish agreed, the minority typically seceded to form a new congregation, as was the case in such towns as Medford and Concord. The effect of this was to cut nearly in half the number of Massachusetts residents who attended tax-supported churches. Since Baptists, Quakers, Methodists, Universalists, Episcopalians, Catholics, and Free Thinkers already had little stake in a standing order, it was only a matter of time before it would collapse at its own weight.

Step four. Unitarian Universalists remember 1825 as the birth year of the Unitarian side of our denominational family. But in truth, the American Unitarian Association was not a denomination in the sense that we use the word today. It was not a centralized bureaucracy providing a full range of support services to a clearly defined list of congregations, each of which understands itself as a member of the denomination, contributes financially to it, and helps shape its policy.

The AUA was really just a first tentative step toward a denomination in that sense, and the road ahead was long and winding. More precisely, the AUA was an association of individuals, not of congregations. Most ministers with Unitarian views were members, but only a tiny share of the laypeople in the churches they served. Other laypeople had a mix of views.

Dr. James Jackson, one of the founders of Massachusetts General Hospital and a leading member of King's Chapel, gave voice to one common reservation: "I am a firm Unitarian, but I have never been willing to join our Unitarian Association from the fear that something would be done by it, which my conscience would not approve."

For more than a generation after the creation of the AUA, non- or anti-denominational forces remained on the ascendant. On the liberal edge of Unitarianism, Transcendentalists rejected the doctrine of miracles, and with it the underpinnings of biblical authority as taught by their professors at Harvard Divinity School. They also embraced historical-critical approaches to the Bible and, in some cases, created utopian communities as an alternative to conventional congregations.

In the theological space between Unitarianism and orthodox Congregationalism, the Christian connection rejected creeds and affirmed a broadly Arminian theology, experienced multiple schisms, cooperated with Unitarians in the founding of Antioch College, but ultimately merged with the orthodox Congregationalists. Somewhat similarly, the Christian Union movement established several congregations that explicitly declined to take sides in the dispute between Unitarians and Trinitarians.

Ultimately, it was the Civil War that catalyzed true denominational formation for both Unitarians and orthodox Congregationalists. Among Northerners, the war stimulated a general passion for union and an awareness of the importance of coordinated national action. Thus, the National Conference of Unitarian and Other Christian Churches was created in April 1865 at a convention in which each congregation was represented by its minister and two lay delegates. It was no accident that the leading figure in the National Conference, Henry Whitney Bellows, was the minister of All Souls in New York City, a congregation that had been founded almost at the same time as the AUA.

The first gathering of the National Council of Congregational Churches in the United States also took place in 1865. So you see a parallel move to full denominational organization. Its founding declaration was emphatically Trinitarian, but a little bit more broad minded on questions of Calvinism. It took an ecumenical stance in recognizing the unity of the Church of Christ in all the world and knowing that we are but one branch of Christ's people.

So, if the AUA was not yet truly a denomination, what exactly was it? Most fundamentally, it was a voluntary mission society, structurally a close relative of the Bible tract, home mission, and foreign mission societies being created during the same period by orthodox Congregationalists. This is an insight I owe to a recent graduate of Harvard's PhD program, Tom Whitaker, who wrote his dissertation mostly on orthodox mission societies, but chose to include a chapter on Unitarianism because he noticed the similarities.

Voluntary societies were staffed by agents who traveled the countryside encouraging pious people to purchase subscriptions that would then fund a variety of activities intended to spread the Congregational way of religion to new communities, especially in the Midwest.

The AUA was not the first such society created by people on the liberal side of the emerging divide. The confusingly named Evangelical Mission Society was created in 1808 by residents of Middlesex and Worcester counties, who wished to raise funds for financially struggling churches and rural communities. Most, though not all, of the EMS' activists would wind up taking the Unitarian side of the split. Its corresponding secretary, Aaron Bancroft of Worcester, would later be the founding president of the AUA.

Most of the congregations far from Boston, and there weren't too many of them, but most of the rural congregations that ultimately went Unitarian, had ministers who were involved in the Evangelical Mission Society. So the AUA was created in part to offer a more national version of the Evangelical Mission Society, and in part to spare mission-minded liberals the embarrassment of having to choose between donating to an orthodox mission society and not being able to make a donation at all. The AUA allowed them to support church building on the frontier without compromising their theological principles.

Because the goal of a mission society was to spread religion geographically, the AUA was most consequential outside of New England. The church planting impulse slightly predated

the creation of the AUA as liberals established congregations in Baltimore, New York, and Washington, DC in the decade before 1825. The base doubled in the next decade and doubled again between 1835 and 1845 as the movement extended to Rochester, Louisville, Cincinnati, St. Louis, Chicago, and Milwaukee. The pace slackened after that, but Unitarianism had achieved a new and at least semi-national profile.

Many of the congregations established between 1815 and 1845 remain among the largest in the Unitarian Universalist Association today. These congregations were associated with economic, educational, and political power in their respective cities. The founding pastor of the Unitarian Church in St. Louis, also founded Washington University. His son founded both First Unitarian of Portland, Oregon and Reed College. Three of the four Unitarian presidents of the United States were associated with the founding of this cohort of congregations. John Quincy Adams in Washington, Millard Fillmore in Buffalo, and William Howard Taft's father in Cincinnati. So President Taft grew up in a church that was a direct fruit of the AUA.

Viewed within the bubble of Unitarian history, the AUA launched a very significant program of church planting, one of the three most significant programs of church planting in the entire history of the movement. From a broader perspective though, it may not seem so impressive. Those of you who know about the impact of orthodox mission societies, in particular, may feel pretty underwhelmed by the numbers I just showed.

If so, you can probably understand the feelings of Louis Tappan, who served as the AUA's founding treasurer. He was so unimpressed with the missionary zeal of his fellow liberals that he rethought his entire theology, aligned himself with the orthodox, and proved to be a tireless creator of social reform societies. Some of you may be aware of Tappan's role as the most important leader of the orthodox anti-Garrisonian wing of the abolitionist movement.

Now, it may be a little bit surprising that the AUA was so much less successful than the orthodox mission societies, given that it had most of New England's wealthiest donors on its side. But the truth is, the elites of Boston and other port cities didn't really give that much money to the AUA. It's not that they were parsimonious. They were, broadly speaking, the founders of philanthropic tradition in the United States. But their donations mostly went elsewhere. And the reasons why bring us to the sixth and final step on our journey.

With this step, I need to partially take back many of the things I've said already. All of my previous steps have assumed that the AUA emerged because of a schism within the Congregational churches of Massachusetts. Nearly all previous historians have assumed this, even though we also acknowledge that the first Unitarian congregation in Massachusetts, King's Chapel, had Anglican, rather than Congregationalist roots.

When we put a strong emphasis on the Dedham Decision, we imply that the Congregationalist system of churches and parishes was intact until the Unitarian controversy blew it apart. The truth is rather more complicated.

Many of the most prominent congregations that would ultimately become Unitarian had, in fact, stepped out of the church parish system by the middle of the 18th century if they had ever used it at all. In Boston, for example, the two leading congregations were Channing's Federal Street Church and the even more elite Brattle Street Church. Neither came out of the church parish system as envisioned in the Cambridge Platform. Federal Street began as a Presbyterian congregation serving Irish immigrants that later adopted a form of Congregationalism. Brattle Street, founded in 1697, was known as the Manifesto Church, because its founding document vested decision-making authority in all congregants, regardless of conversion experience.

Other important congregations had seen the church parish system break down in the mid-18th century. The greater integration of New England into the British Empire brought two forces that pushed Massachusetts churches in opposite directions. On the one hand, transatlantic revivalists such as George Whitefield pushed some church members toward a stricter Calvinism.

On the other hand, Anglican merchants from the Caribbean and southern colonies began relocating to Massachusetts and intermarrying with the wealthiest Congregationalists. These merchants had little taste for Calvinism or revivals. In the port cities of Salem and Newburyport, revivalists and anti-revivalists clashed so bitterly that the legislature had to intervene. Their solution borrowed from Anglican practice. Instead of relying on tax support from the town, each faction of a divided congregation could build its own meetinghouse, sell pews to members to pay the building costs, and then tax the pews to cover operating costs. A few years later, the legislature expanded this system to Boston. Under the system of pew ownership, a congregation could, of course, still give primary decision-making power to church members.

But in both the liberal Congregationalist congregations and the Angleton parishes, proprietors called the tune, hiring and firing ministers unilaterally. Intermarriage, meanwhile, caused the boundary between liberal Congregationalism and Anglicanism to break down. By the turn of the 19th century, many pew proprietors in both kinds of churches had mixed ancestry, partly descended from the puritan founders of Massachusetts and partly from Anglican newcomers.

William Ellery Channing was emblematic of this dynamic. Raised Congregationalist, he had been married in an Anglican church to the daughter of a prominent Anglican merchant. Channing was typical of the Bostonian elite of the early 19th century, the group that eventually came to be known as the Boston Brahmins.

The Brahmins, I would suggest, were a quasi-denomination in which the distinction between Unitarians and Episcopalians mattered much less than a broadly Armenian theology and a tendency to let the wealthy make the important decisions. The wealthy pew proprietors in Brahman churches preferred ministers with an optimistic view of human nature and a

reluctance to make demands of their congregants. They especially disliked the puritan requirement that individual congregants have to make public testimonies about their religious experience. The quasi-denomination included virtually all the leading merchants in the China trade, virtually all the investors in the textile mills of Waltham, Lowell, and Lawrence. These merchants were spread across about a dozen congregations in Boston, Salem, and Newburyport.

The institution that really brought them together was not the AUA, but the Boston Athenaeum, a private library created in 1807. Now, the Athenaeum today is physically very close to the Congregational Library, but orthodox Congregationalists were not significant players in its founding. The leading proprietors of Episcopalian Trinity Church, Anglican-turned Unitarian King's Chapel, Brattle Street, and Federal Street were all part of that project. The quasi-denomination also created the Society for the Promotion of Theological Education, the group that established Harvard Divinity School.

It's commonly said that the members of this society were all Unitarians, but what exactly could that have meant in 1817? Like Channing, many of them had a mix of Episcopalian and liberal Congregationalist affiliations. Their stated goal was to create a non-sectarian school. If we think only in terms of a divide within Congregationalism, that seems disingenuous since they despised Calvinism. But I suspect they would have welcomed a robust Episcopalian presence at the Divinity School had the Episcopal bishops been interested, which they were not. The two other professional schools established at Harvard around the same time, Law and Medicine, had a similar mix of Unitarians and Episcopalians among their donors and faculty.

So, if you accept my premise that the Brahmins constituted their own quasi-denomination in 1825, what was its relationship to the American Unitarian Association? To be honest, this is what I'm still trying to figure out. The Brahmin preference for theological liberalism was so pronounced that some historians have assumed that the AUA was a vehicle of Brahmin interests. But I'm not convinced. Developing the outline of this talk, I repeatedly changed the phrasing of my sixth step. Was it better to characterize the AUA as an expression of Brahmin religiosity or an alternative to it? I ultimately settled on the latter, but I still think there's an element of truth on both sides.

On the one hand, many of Boston's leading merchants and capitalists joined the AUA eventually. But they weren't necessarily the first to sign up. As my student Terry Dixon discovered in his examination of the AUA's early records, the early donor lists were dominated by ministers and laywomen, some of whom purchased memberships on behalf of their ministers. Early donors were scattered across New England and the entire nation, in part because the cadre of agents were located far from Boston, and the purpose was to plant churches far from Boston.

At the same time, the AUA's financial scope was an order of magnitude smaller than that of typical Brahmin philanthropies, such as the Athenaeum, Harvard, and Massachusetts General

Hospital. To become a member of the AUA, one could pay \$30 for a life membership or \$1 for an annual subscription. After more than a year in operation, it had enticed only 53 people to purchase life memberships. Its overall annual budgets were just a few thousand dollars. By contrast, when the Athenaeum was organized two decades earlier, it offered proprietary shares for \$300 and non-voting life memberships for \$100. And it took them just a few months to sell all 150 shares. By the time of the AUA's founding, the Athenaeum's assets were about \$100,000, vastly more than the AUA could dream of. The Society for the Promotion of Theological Education likewise set its price higher than the AUA, but was initially able to find many more people willing to pay the price.

It's hard to escape the conclusion that Boston's capitalist elite, despite its liberal theology, was more committed to Boston congregations and Boston cultural institutions than to building a national Unitarian movement. The AUA's membership eventually exceeded that of the Athenaeum because the Athenaeum capped its membership. But the AUA's financial resources remained much less. So it shouldn't surprise us that the AUA planted fewer congregations than their orthodox competitors. The orthodox may have had fewer major donors, but more commitment to church planting among the donors they had. This is a pattern that persisted for at least a century, if not right up to the present.

In the wake of the Civil War, Unitarians and orthodox Congregationalists were equally interested in work with formerly enslaved people. But Unitarians donated to nonsectarian organizations such as the Freedmen's Bureau, while Congregationalists created a network of denominational schools and congregations across the South. The fact that wealthy Unitarians were not interested in the AUA also meant that the AUA was relatively less beholden to Boston capitalists, and its founding seems to have catalyzed a pendulum swaying away from proprietary governance.

A more traditional understanding of Congregational authority reasserted itself in congregations such as First Church in Medford, that chose abolitionist ministers despite the objection of their wealthiest members. Those members responded by building an Episcopalian church across the street, suggesting that the wealthy could tolerate bishops more easily than rabble-rousers.

By the second half of the 19th century, leading figures in the AUA, notably James Freeman Clarke, were repudiating the entire system of pew ownership. And with each successive round of church planting, the balance of Unitarian power shifted away from Boston and its capitalist class and toward the freewheeling initiative of local congregations. By far the most significant of those plantings took place between 1945 and 1965 when the denomination encouraged the creation of lay-led fellowships in communities unable to afford a full-time minister. A merger with the Universalists during that time period also helped to decenter the Brahmin class. This is why the Unitarian Universalism of today is more associated with left-wing activism than with capitalist privilege. Still, the work of disentangling is not entirely

complete. Unitarian Universalists remain significantly wealthier than members of any Protestant denomination except, of course, the Episcopalians.

Now, I have no tidy conclusion to this section of my presentation. I'm still very much working through this idea of a Brahmin quasi-denomination and welcome your thoughts on it. But I will conclude the presentation as a whole with a juxtaposition of two denominational visions, one from 1825 and one from 200 years later.

The AUA founders, wary of sectarianism, expressed their shared vision in as simple a form as they could. Last year, their descendants approved a new statement of our shared values, complete with a handy graphic, in which the center once occupied by pure Christianity is now filled, simply, with love. I leave you to reach your own conclusions about how exactly this came to pass. Thank you so much.

KYLE: Well, that was fantastic, Dan. You gave us in 30 minutes such a rich telling of this history. And I think I can speak for our audience. We also appreciate you sharing your work in progress, right? You're sharing that this story is not done. Our understanding of it is not complete. That we are still finding new ways to think about it.

I wonder maybe to kind of start us off, one of the themes that kind of goes through the kind of history of Congregationalists and Unitarianism is that urban-rural divide. And you got to it sort of in the, in the research that you're talking about, but does that persist? I mean, are there ways in which the AUA and this network of sort of people across the country help break down that, or, you know, or are there ways, I guess, that Unitarianism was an essentially urban faith? Like, is there something in the, in the water in the cities that makes it, you know, grow more there?

DAN: Yeah, so thank you very much for this.

I will start by saying that my inclination is to think that there was something inherently urban about the Unitarian impulse as it moved forward across the country. I'm a little bit uncertain about the extent of this because of a corner that I cut in my research on this.

So if you looked at my chart of the churches that were planted, in the immediate wake of the AUA. It definitely looks like they were only interested in starting congregations in places that they assumed would become major metropolises. That is partly because I was working from a list of current UUA member congregations that had their starting dates. So that was a quick way of finding all the churches that survived to today that were started in that period. What I haven't done is really looked harder at how many rural churches were being started at this time. But my guess is that the answer would be not very many.

And this, I think this speaks to another, I think Patricia's question in the chat, that I think there may have been a somewhat implicit division of labor between Unitarians and Universalists,

who were different in some ways and similar in a lot of theological ways. Unitarians scooping up college-educated liberals who tended to be more urban. Universalists speaking to self-educated, often highly intellectual, but not college-educated liberals who tended to be more rural. But that's something I think that I would need to look harder at to feel really confident.

It's also the case that, again, compared to Universalists, it'd be interesting to know more about the pattern of Congregationalist church planting. Unitarians were willing to go very far if they thought there was a place that was likely to succeed economically. So they were very early present in San Francisco and Portland with that kind of dynamic.

Can I just pick up on a couple of the questions I've seen already picked up here? Richard Taylor poses the question, I think basically, does the fact that the new churches founded in relation to the AUA, let's just say All Souls New York City and First Unitarian of San Francisco to give two examples on opposite coasts, the fact that they are catering to the wealthiest stratum in those respective cities, does that undercut my argument that the AUA is a counter to Brahmin power? And I'm honestly really curious about that.

I will tell you one thing about All Souls New York. One of the leading capitalist families in that congregation, the Tylestons, the family that Bellows recruits to give a lot of money to Harvard when he's running Harvard Divinity School's first big capital campaign after the Civil War. Their daughter, Mary Hemingway, winds up in Boston and a very strong supporter of James Freeman Clark, whose church is the kind of preeminent anti-pew proprietors church. So at least that one family at All Souls is a wealthy family that likes having its own way in certain respects, but also has some sympathy with the anti-pew-proprietorship ethos that I'm associating with the AUA.

So there may be, yeah, that's all just to say there may be different flavors of wealthy people involved in this story.

KYLE: So, you know, we've got the questions are rolling in maybe to take a little bit more of Pat Vondal's question. Is there documentation on what the early view of Unitarians were of the Universalists? You kind of talk a little bit of, your answer talked a little bit about potential motivations they saw, but was that merger for ordained? You know, did they know that that was gonna be coming?

DAN: You know, so as long as Unitarian churches are still getting tax support, they are on opposite sides of a very hot political fight. And for the most part, you know, they're also on opposite partisan sides, with Universalists tending to be Jeffersonian slash Jacksonian Democrats and Unitarians tending to be Federalists and then Whigs. Once disestablishment comes to Massachusetts, a lot of people on both sides are really kind of realizing that they have more in common theologically.

You know, one thing I didn't have a chance to say in this presentation, because I was talking about Unitarians, is that by and large Universalists were more radical in their anti-Trinitarian views earlier than Unitarians were. So, though there certainly were some Trinitarian Universalists, the issue of the Trinity was definitely not something that was dividing Unitarians from Universalists. Self-educated people have a tendency to produce college-educated children, which is to say that as a lot of Universalists rose in the economic scale, they found a comfortable home in Unitarianism.

As Universalists had their own doctrinal disputes, most notably, between those who thought everybody would go to heaven immediately and those who thought some needed a little purgatorial fire first. People who found themselves on the losing end of that fight often found a more comfortable home with the Unitarians.

So it's just all sorts of factors that cause people to move back and forth for well over a century before the traditions decide to seal the deal.

KYLE: There's so many great questions. Going to one that, from our friend Tom Tweed out at Notre Dame. Tom asks, you mentioned at the start that the UUs are heirs of New England puritanism. I wonder if you can say more about how their inclination to align with puritanism might have changed over time and across regions and varied among those who have favored and condemned immigration, for example?

DAN: Yeah, wow, the immigration question is so complicated. There've been so many Unitarians over time who have taken very strong positions on both sides and in ways that... complicate easy moral judgments about pro and anti-immigration positions.

So for example, in San Francisco, you have some prominent Unitarians who are very strong advocates of open immigration of people from China because they're the employers who are employing those people. And you have working class activists who are opposed to immigration because they see those immigrants as competitors for jobs. So, the immigration question is really complicated.

I think, what I really want to say about the inclination to align with puritanism is to kind of reinforce what I said before, that when Unitarians thought about puritanism, they didn't think about Calvinism. I think they mostly knew that, you know, John Winthrop was some version of a Calvinist or a Zwinglian, but they didn't like to think about that. There were other aspects of puritanism, especially Congregational polity, a love of freedom, that they thought was the real essence of puritanism, which is why they sincerely thought that they were the authentic heirs of puritanism.

In my first book, I wrote about some people at, some of them at the radical edge of Unitarianism, people like Lydia Moriah Child, who were very tuned in to the racial violence perpetrated by their puritan forebears. But they very much thought that in thinking about

that, they did not see themselves as other from those puritan forebears. They thought of that racial violence as a legacy that they had to correct. Whereas a lot of Unitarian Universalists today assume, of course, we were the kind of people that John Winthrop would have been against. Not so simple as that.

And Tom, your second part of your question has to do with the clever name for the Unitarian Episcopal Alliance. I don't know. I think I'm sticking with Brahmin quasi-denomination for now. I mean, one of the things that, on this front, that kind of got me thinking is I had sort of assumed that if somebody from a Unitarian family became an Episcopalian in say 1850, as many did, it was either because of a theological change of heart or because they were annoyed at a Unitarian abolitionist. But so many of those people also had an Anglican grandfather or an Anglican great-grandfather that I've really had to question whether they really thought it was such a big change after all.

KYLE: Wonderful reflection here from Jay Atkinson, who's recently been preaching on the irony of the UU return or re-recognition of love as its axiological center, a reaffirmation of moral Christianity without being willing to so name it. And I wonder what you think about that. And maybe it's a larger question about how similar or apart are Unitarians and Congregationalists in 2025 from where they were in 1825?

DAN: Yeah, so partly this is a question of how to think about the class side of it. In 1825, Unitarians and Episcopalians were the two wealthiest Protestant denominations. In 2025, Protestant denomination might no longer be the right word for UUA, but they're still the two wealthiest. And yet, UU wealth today doesn't feel the same. We don't have very many of the titans of industry that Unitarians absolutely had in 1825. So that's a big difference.

Jay's question, though, is more theological to does the love center, represent a reaffirmation of the moral Christianity of 1825? And I would say, I would say generally, yes. You know, it's also a very clever way of holding together the early love theology of Universalists, which was much, primarily about God's love, and the early love ethic of Unitarians, which was a lot about social responsibility and care for the common good.

KYLE: We are at two o'clock. We could keep going, and Dan I see your eyes, you're reading these...

DAN: Yeah, I'm reading all these great questions. I want to thank Sheri Prud'homme for this point about... nobody but us can see these. So Sheri points out that First Unitarian in Oakland was inspired by James Freeman Clarke to try to avoid pew rentals, but couldn't make it work financially. So that's, I'm really curious how often that was the case.

KYLE: Well that's great. Well, when I download these, you'll get Sheri's email address in with the questions.

Thanks everyone so much for being here today. I imagine, Dan, this is just the beginning of these talks that you'll be giving as the anniversary... We'll be excited. We'll be paying attention to how your arguments continue to evolve. So thank you so much for being with us today.

DAN: Thank you.