

UU Saints: John Haynes Holmes

Delivered to the First Unitarian Church of Wilmington Delaware

February 15, 2014

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There are few people who were as loved and hated in their life time as was Rev. John Haynes Holmes. Of course the main reason for that was that once John Haynes Holmes believed something, he never let it go. He was never one for half measures. It defined his life, his ministry and his legacy within Unitarian Universalism.

John Haynes Holmes was born on November 29, 1879 in Philadelphia. He attended Harvard University and then Harvard Divinity School. He began his first ministry in Dorchester Massachusetts in 1904. However he was there only three years before moving on to the church where he would be most associated with: the Church of the Messiah in Manhattan. Later at his insistence the church would be renamed the Community Church of New York which is how it is known today. He came initially as the junior minister in 1907 and then became the senior minister in 1918. John Haynes Holmes served as senior minister of the Community Church of New York for 31 years before

being named minister emeritus in 1949. In total, Holmes served the same congregation in the middle of New York City for 42 years.

Holmes was definitely a man of his time and of his city. He regularly contributed to the *New Yorker*, the *Nation*, and other national magazines with numerous articles and essays. He was the editor of *Unity*, a Unitarian magazine and had a regular column in the journal *Unitarian Advance*. Of course now we are so accustomed to a barrage of media and opinions, but in those days, these magazines and journals were all there was. It was how we stayed connected, and John Haynes Holmes was a major voice in contributing to that connection.

Being connected in a social network is something that resonated strongly with Holmes. He wrote many books, and in them he soundly criticized what he perceived to be an extreme form of individualism in American culture and thought. Holmes you see was a proponent of the Social Gospel. This was a movement throughout many Protestant denominations that emphasized and encouraged churches to engage with social problems, particularly in cities. The early twentieth century was a period in which a number of cities were expanding at an astounding rate. So fast, in fact that they were unprepared for the problems we now associate with urban life. They were crowded, dirty,

and full of crime. Labor movements were just getting started as a response to laissez faire capitalism. And with it so came the churches.

Writers such as Walter Rauschenbusch, Washington Gladden and Francis Peabody applied Christian ethics to these urban problems. They read the parts of the New Testament that talked about the Kingdom of God being made real on earth. They asked themselves, sometimes quite literally, “What would Jesus do?” if he saw rampant poverty and disease in the Hell’s Kitchen neighborhood of New York? Jane Adams started Hull House in Chicago to assist women and families who were especially vulnerable to poverty and hunger.

This was really the beginning of what we would call “social action” in the context of church life. The churches of all denominations began to understand their job as not merely to win souls for heaven, but to help people facing real problems in this life. John Haynes Holmes studied under Francis Peabody, a Unitarian professor at Harvard Divinity School, and was impressed by Peabody’s social analysis. Ever since Martin Luther made the salvation of the individual the center of the Reformation, Protestants had been focused at that level. With the social gospel Holmes and others learned that larger forces are at play, and one’s personal state of salvation has little to do with it. And so the church was called to engage the culture in a whole new way.

John Haynes Holmes embraced this mindset. He preached socialism, social Darwinism, and even at times eugenics. These were all three tied up together back in those days. In the nineteen teens and twenties Holmes was a very enthusiastic socialist who believed in the redistribution of wealth. In 1919 he spoke at Madison Square Garden no less to criticize the American government for its opposition to the Bolshevik party in Russia. It was also his “socialist mindset” that lead him to be among the founding members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The NAACP was founded in 1909. And it was the socialist John Haynes Holmes that also helped to start the American Civil Liberties Union in 1920. Holmes would go on to be the President of the ACLU for a term.

However the ideology that John Haynes Holmes was most known for, and continues to be best known for was his radical pacifism, particularly during World War One. I shant recount for you the outbreak of World War One, America’s initial isolationism and eventual entrance into the war. Initially most Americans were neutral on World War One, and many took a pacifist stance. However that sentiment changed when Germans U-boats began sinking American supply ships in the North Atlantic and the Zimmerman Telegraph was intercepted which detailed an Alliance the Germans were proposing to Mexico to go to war with America. These and many other incidents began to turn

the public against the German side and eventually into entrance into the war to keep the world safe for democracy. That phrase, so common now was actually coined by Wilson in his appeal to Congress to declare war on Germany.

It is perhaps also worth noting, that neither Unitarians nor Universalists have historically been pacifist traditions. We broke with that part of the radical reformation a very long time ago. In fact there are many examples of both Unitarians and Universalists participating in most if not all American wars. Robert Gould Shaw, played by Matthew Brodrick in the movie Glory, was a Unitarian who lead one of the first African American divisions of the Civil War. John Murray, the father of Universalism in America, served as a chaplain in George Washington's army. More recently William Cohen served as Secretary of Defense under Bill Clinton. Thus Holmes' pacifism was more a matter of his personal convictions and principles than it was part of our history.

From our reading this morning we hear the story of the May Meeting of 1917. Normally I would not offer up the minutes of an annual meeting of the American Unitarian Association that took place nearly one hundred years ago, but this particular meeting was one of the most significant. It took place in Montreal because they were celebrating the one hundred fiftieth anniversary of having a peaceful

boarder with Canada. Why was President, by then former President, William Howard Taft there? He was the last US President to be an honest to goodness Unitarian. And in his post-Presidency he had gained a fair amount of prominence within the denomination as one might imagine.

We still have meetings like this, except we moved them to June and call it General Assembly now. But the idea is pretty similar. There are issues that go on in the world, and they are debated among now Unitarian Universalists. Believe it or not we don't agree on everything. In fact the debates can get pretty vociferous. For the most part, in my direct experience, we refrain from the sort of personal attacks that Taft and Holmes engaged in. Yes it is good to care about issues such as war and peace, particularly when war is looming on the horizon. Even a less than radical pacifist than Holmes would surely not wish to rush into war without some reflection and debate on the matter. Furthermore, our Unitarian Universalist values include diversity of thought. Having differing opinions and expressing them respectfully is an asset not a weakness. It is the "expressing them respectfully" clause that makes this particular debate notable.

For the bellicosity Taft expressed toward John Haynes Holmes did not end at the meeting. For Taft and other liberals at that moment,

pacifism was tantamount to aiding and abetting the enemy. Ministers who did not encourage their congregations to support the war were considered spiritual allies of the Germans. It did not help that German planes, were dropping propaganda pamphlets onto British soil, included “A Statement to My People on the Eve of War” – a sermon by John Haynes Holmes. Sort of ruins your credibility a bit.

Nevertheless, the Unitarians were staunchly non-creedal. One’s beliefs do not dictate membership in the church; commitment to the shared covenant does. And it is precisely here where this particular story takes an unfortunate turn. Taft had the ear of the President of the AUA, Samuel Atkins Eliot. Together they decided to root out these ministers who preached pacifism in their congregations. And so the AUA issued a statement:

“Any society who employs a minister who is not a willing, earnest, and outspoken supporter of the United States in the vigorous and resolute prosecution of the war cannot be considered eligible for aid from the Association.”

Essentially this was the Headquarters of the American Unitarian Association telling congregations that if their minister didn’t get in line with their political thinking, then they would be ineligible for aid. It is not clear what precisely this “aid” entailed. At least in the case of John

Haynes Holmes, this strategy worked. Holmes resigned as a member of the AUA – back then you joined as an individual as well as a congregation – and the Church of the Messiah changed its name to the Community Church of New York. You will notice that the word “Unitarian” is conspicuously absent from the new name. Indeed, it would not be until the eve of merger with the Universalists, that Holmes would rejoin the Unitarian denomination.

It is one thing to disagree over ideas and debate those ideas. This is fine. Severing covenant with someone because of that disagreement goes against pretty much everything we have been taught about congregational polity. The head of the Association can't dictate to ministers or churches what to believe or teach, no matter how high emotions run. Historians universally point to this moment, not so much between Taft and Holmes as juicy as that debate was, but the statement by the AUA afterwards. This was an example of the Unitarians backing down from their own history. In later years, when those debates in June got overheated and filled with emotion over one issue or another such as the Vietnam War or Black Empowerment, others have been tempted to urge UUA headquarters to issue a similar ultimatum: go along with the party line or you are out. In every instance that I know of, we have calmed down from that extreme position and cooler heads have prevailed. In some cases citing John

Haynes Holmes as the reason. We made that mistake once; let us not repeat it.

Ironically for all of his insistence on the social construction of the individual and his critique of individualism in religion and society, John Haynes Holmes stood almost by himself in his radical pacifism. Although he was older of course at the outbreak of World War Two; nearly at the end of his ministry, he again insisted on peace and staying out of war. As a result of his position he incurred the ire of no less than Theodore Giesel who drew a scathing political cartoon of John Haynes Holmes and his pacifism. Giesel even had to issue an apology when Holmes' supporters rose to his defense. You know you are a radical when you can get Dr. Seuss that mad at you!

Holmes was a long time admirer of Gandhi and is often credited as the person who introduced Gandhi's ideas to America. They even met a few times. But in Gandhi, John Haynes Holmes met someone as committed to peace as he was. Furthermore, Gandhi demonstrated that peace could be as effective as force was in accomplishing political change and social justice. It was this method that prompted Holmes to christen Gandhi as the "greatest man in the world."

There are many reasons why we could list John Haynes Holmes among the pantheon of Unitarian and Universalist saints. His

commitment to justice for people of all races and creeds, his devotion to a religion that was focused on the here and now and not on the supernatural, and his love of peace. These would all be worthy. But I think what John Haynes Holmes demonstrated with his life was the importance of living according to your beliefs even when the whole world goes against you. In this sense he was very much like his hero Theodore Parker. Sometimes even the Unitarians need to be reminded of what it is they stand for. If not the radical position of peace, at least the adherence to their covenant which defines our religious movement.

May we have the courage and depth of spirit to live our beliefs and fully as he did. Amen Blessed Be.