



FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF PHILADELPHIA

A UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CONGREGATION

2125 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia PA 19103

Office (215) 563-3980 www.philauu.org Fax (215) 563-4209

UNDER OUR CARE: THE UTES AND THE UNITARIANS

A SERMON BY DR. TED FETTER DELIVERED ON NOVEMBER 22, 2009

Ted Fetter earned his Ph.D. in American history from the University of Wisconsin, Madison, in 1974. He recently retired from a 35-year career in court management, having served as the State Court Administrator in Wyoming and for more than 20 years as the Deputy Administrative Director of the Courts in New Jersey. He has published a number of books and articles related to court management and history. Ted is very active in Unitarian Universalism. His home congregation is the UU Congregation of Princeton, NJ. He currently is the president of the Metro New York District Board of Trustees, and he holds several other UU positions. Ted and his wife, Jane, live in Lawrenceville, NJ. They have three adult sons, two daughters-in-law and a daughter-in-law-to-be, and a three-year-old grandson named Theo.

Native Americans have always given European Americans like me a problem, a moral quandary. The problem has existed from the very start of European settlement of the Americas. How can we speak of Columbus or anyone else “discovering” America when it’s perfectly clear that human beings were here when the Europeans arrived? How can those settlers have declared bits of the American continents as Spanish or English or belonging to another European sovereign when it’s obvious they were already under the control of the people who were there? And how, once the United States was formed and started to expand across North America can we pretend that the land was there for our settlement and exploitation when there were thousands of native peoples and hundreds of cultures already there?

These are familiar questions. They may be the first moral issues that students in elementary school discuss: their first introduction (at least in school) to concepts of power, imperialism, and injustice. We know that there is little to be proud of in our nation’s story of contact with its native peoples: power, imperialism and injustice seem to be the dominant themes. And as we celebrate Thanksgiving this week, we have our annual reminder of the sad story of European contact with Native Americans.

But did you know that our faith has its own small corner of this sad story? I did not know it, until about a year ago when I volunteered to help UUA staff research the story of Unitarians who were appointed Indian agents on the Ute reservation in Colorado. The UUA wanted to learn more about this story because of a 2007 General Assembly resolution. Called Truth, Repair and Reconciliation, the UUA was instructed to uncover all aspects of our denomination’s experiences with minority cultures so that we could know the truth and go about the work of repair and reconciliation with the groups of people affected.

Shortly after he became President, Ulysses S. Grant announced a new policy toward Native Americans. Dubbed the “peace policy,” its core was to involve religious organizations in the operation of the Indian agencies located on reservations throughout the country. Religious professionals, Grant reasoned, would give the government at least three advantages: there would

be less corruption compared to politically-appointed Indian agents, there was a greater chance for the denominations to support the Indian agency with supplemental funding for things like schools, and there was a much greater likelihood to convert the Indians to Christianity, a major step towards assimilating the Natives with the dominant culture. President Grant first asked Quakers to assume responsibility for some Indian agencies in 1869; they were pacifists, and naturally he thought that was very good model for the Indians. They agreed, but when the Quakers said they could only supply some of the agencies, Grant asked other denominations. Eventually twenty different denominations supplied Indian agents. The American Unitarian Association accepted responsibility for two Indian agencies on the Ute reservation in Colorado, and from 1871 to 1878 the Unitarians nominated five different men, including four ministers, to serve as Indian agents there.

The work of Indian agents was to carry out U.S. government policy on the reservation. The agents distributed supplies as guaranteed by treaty (but seldom delivered in full or on time), heard Indian grievances against whites (but without any power over white settlers), investigated and dealt with white complaints against the Indians, and insisted that the natives learn English and learn how to farm on their reservations so they could become just like white settlers.

The Utes were a proud people. They lived in what they called the “Shining Mountains,” most of the land that is now the state of Colorado and a bit of Wyoming and Utah. They prospered as hunter-gatherers, using summer and winter camps to follow buffalo and other game. Houses that could not be moved seemed impractical, and there was no need or desire to cultivate crops. The best estimates are that there were never more than 5000 Utes, and in the 1870s, probably between 2500 and 4000. My favorite quote about the life of the Utes before white settlers came to Colorado is this, said in 1947 by a Ute chief named Saponise Cuch, remembering his own childhood and the stories of his parents: “It was a life with little hunger and want, where play and humor were taught to smother pain, sickness and death; a life where the good play of the hunt brought food, and the pleasure of the dance brought a man a wife, a woman a husband; a life where a man owned little and belonged to everything.”

The Utes had little interaction with whites until gold was discovered in Colorado in 1858, and of course that brought a horde of white settlers. The United States needed to make a treaty with the Utes to designate a reservation and limit the Indian activity to that parcel of land. The U.S. designated Ouray, chief of one band of the Utes, as the head chief, and fortunately for the Utes Ouray was a realistic diplomat and a skilled negotiator. The treaty finally agreed to in 1868 gave the Utes pretty much the western third of Colorado, along with a designation of annual supplies to be provided by the government and the right of the Utes to bar any whites from entering the Western Slope of Colorado. Ouray insisted that the treaty’s terms be “final and forever,” and the government agreed. For the next decade, the Utes overwhelmingly abided by the treaty and the laws and generally sought to live alongside the white settlers, even when more gold was discovered on reservation land and the government unilaterally forced a new treaty that reduced severely the size of the original reservation. It infuriated white leaders in Colorado that the Utes were peaceful. They constantly pointed out that only a few thousand Indians had rights to thousands of acres of land that could be so much better used by the white settlers.

Enter the Unitarians. It was in the decade after the Treaty of 1868 that the American Unitarian Association recommended Indian agents to the President, who in turn sent the names

to the Senate for confirmation. The Revs. J. Nelson Trask and John S. Littlefield were the first two agents, Trask to the more southern agency, called Los Pinos, and Littlefield to the more northern, called White River. Trask and Littlefield were followed by others – a total of five, four of whom were ministers. These Unitarians were hard working, honest, and dedicated. They saw the needs of the Utes and tried their best to assist them. For example, when the supplies guaranteed by treaty were not forthcoming because Congress failed to appropriate the funds, or the shipment was delayed, they entreated Washington to meet its obligations, and the Union Pacific Railroad to complete the shipment, pointing out again and again the simple clear command of the treaties. It didn't work. When white settlers came onto the reservation and the Utes objected, the agents pointed out the treaty violation and told the whites to leave, but they were unable to force them to do so or to get local law enforcement to remove them. They were not able to secure added funding from the government or the AUA for schools; generally the agents' wives were the teachers, and the schools barely survived with just a few students who came and went as they felt inclined. And perhaps most interestingly, when the United States insisted on having the Utes farm the land on the reservation, the agents wrote pleadingly to Washington to understand that right at the agency settlements and throughout the mountains frost occurred all twelve months of the year, that practically all usable land was infested with grasshoppers, and that the arid conditions would require a substantial investment in irrigation. Rev. Edward H. Danforth, who followed Littlefield at the White River agency in northern Colorado, wrote in his annual report to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs in 1877, "Fourteen different families have commenced in a small way at farming. Unfortunately for them and the esteem in which the work will be held in future the grasshoppers, the extraordinary drought and the July frost have cut their crops off entirely. About twelve acres were prepared and planted by Indians – potatoes, corn, garden vegetables, and oats were planted and sown, but they will get nothing for their labor."

In addition, the Unitarians were often not able to secure the support or esteem of the Utes themselves. They were not able to keep the Utes from migrating from summer to winter camps, where the settlements were away from the agencies and thus seemed "out of sight" to the whites. Also, some of the Unitarian agents had personalities that seemed odd on the Colorado frontier. The best example is Rev. Trask. One description goes this way: "Trask walked about the agency in a dark blue swallow-tail coat, skin-tight trousers, and, to protect himself from the sun, an old-fashioned floppy beaver hat with a broad brim and a set of green eye goggles." The Utes laughed at him and called him a frog. It's interesting to know, though, that Rev. Trask had the clearest sense of outrage and injustice about the treatment of the Utes. He maintained a respect for their culture, and he constantly reminded both Washington and local white leaders that the Utes had social and political within their reservation and that they obeyed all the white laws and conditions. Trask insisted that it was the whites who were violating the treaty and disrupting the chance for peace between the two peoples. Nevertheless, he never established a good relationship with the Utes, and he was forced to resign and return to New England only a little more than a year after he arrived.

The story of the Utes in Colorado ends badly. In 1878, after Grant left office and the "peace policy" had ended, Washington appointed a new Indian agent named Nathan Meeker to the White River agency in northern Colorado. Meeker was not a Unitarian and the Unitarians were not consulted on his appointment, though he continued to correspond with the AUA and sometimes asked for their assistance and financial support. Meeker was much stronger than his

predecessors in insisting on farming, and he was much more forceful with the Ute chiefs in his directions and instructions, respecting them much less than the Unitarian agents had. His intransigence led to growing unrest and greater conflict among the Utes. I'd love to tell the whole story of Meeker, but I think all I have time for is to say that these difficulties climaxed with the killing of Meeker and the other white men at the White River agency by about twenty young Utes. One insightful quote is this: "The Utes killed Meeker for his inability to understand the Indian people he was supposed to represent. They drove a barrel stave through his throat so in the afterlife he could not tell lies." The so-called Meeker Massacre of 1879 led to the Ute Removal Act of 1880. Congress insisted that the Utes be forcibly removed from the "Shining Mountains" and relocated to parched dry acres in eastern Utah. I offer one more quote about that removal. The U.S. Cavalry officer who led the removal wrote, "As we pushed the Indians onward, we permitted the whites to follow, and in three days the rich land of the Uncompaghe River was all occupied, towns being laid out and lots being sold at high prices."

Well, what are we to make of this story, and of the Unitarian contribution? Unitarians were agents of U.S. government policy. That included some things that didn't make any sense, like the insistence on farming in a land that did not support it, and some things that were not at all fair, like guaranteeing annual shipments of supplies in exchange for the land ceded in the treaties and then failing to meet that promise. More important, being part of U.S. policy meant that the Unitarians were agents of cultural imperialism. Now it wasn't called that, of course. It was called bringing civilization to savage peoples. The Unitarians generally shared 19th century American assumptions about the proper interactions with the natives: that white American culture was better, and that the Natives needed to change their way of life to become part of it. Simply put, the Natives' choice was between assimilation and annihilation. There was no serious way to develop a multicultural approach to what European Americans called "the Indian problem." And the Unitarians generally agreed. The idea of multiculturalism wasn't on the table; it's a much more modern concept. To be fair, though, Rev. Trask's letters to Washington come as close as any writing I've seen toward the idea of multiculturalism, urging whites to stay away from the reservation and granting the Utes their choices and their self-identity.

The Unitarian agents felt as though they were fulfilling a duty to both their own culture and the Utes. They were there because the government asked the Unitarians to participate, and the denomination asked these ministers to be there. Once there, they were sympathetic and humane, and they showed many other admirable qualities of support for the Utes under their care. But to what end? While they tried to be helpful and reasonable to the Natives, the simple truth is that they were agents of the majority culture's program of forcing those Natives to change their ways or just disappear.

My own judgment here is a bit complex. The Unitarian agents saw the injustice of what was happening. They knew the rationalization about "bringing civilization to savage peoples" was simply that; what was really happening was the use of power against the interests of people who could not defend themselves. And it's noteworthy that when the Unitarians left and were replaced with a harsher, more determined, and less flexible Indian agent, within months there was violence, death on both sides, and expulsion from Colorado. It could be said that the Unitarians at least delayed the unfortunate end of the story, though surely they did not prevent it or engineer a better outcome for the Utes.

And yet we must return to the fact of Unitarian complicity with U.S. government policy. In this important element of American history, the American Unitarian Association and the individual agents did not see that they were participating in an unworthy effort, part of a centuries-long program of dominating Native people and exterminating Native cultures. The 19th century Unitarians pretty much agreed with the assumption that the United States had to deal with “its Indian problem,” with the only possible result being control by the majority culture. They were part of a structure, a system of dominance over Native Americans.

This story has lessons for me personally. What assumptions am I making today that the future will show to be cruel or unjust? What systems exist today that benefit me while harming others or keeping others from sharing the benefits I enjoy? I must always be on guard that now, while my table is filled with bounty this Thanksgiving and my loving family is around me, I have these gifts partly because of a structure I’m participating in that make my life easier, and the journey of others to be much more difficult.

Last June at the General Assembly in Salt Lake City, I, along with some UUA staff, presented this story. At the Opening Ceremony, UUA President Bill Sinkford sincerely and profoundly apologized to the Utes for the Unitarians’ role in this history. Two Ute leaders were there to receive the apology, and they offered continued communication and the building of a long-term relationship between the denomination and the Utes. The UUA project is called “Truth, Repair, and Reconciliation.” This story told at least a part of the Truth, though it’s still largely unknown to most UUs. We are very good at telling stories that serve us well, such as the Unitarian Universalist heroes of antislavery work, of civil rights, of women’s rights, and others. We need to acknowledge and frankly deal with the areas where our movement fell short of its ideals, and the interaction with the Utes in the 1870s is one of them.

Then the more difficult work can begin, that of reconciliation and repair. The UUA is now pursuing opportunities to help build empowerment among current Ute leaders, as well as leaders of neighboring tribes in Utah. That is good, and I’m proud to be part of it. But I am sure there is more to do, and I invite your thoughts and insights both for yourselves and for our denomination. Let us go about this holy and transforming work with resolve and with hope for the future, and let us be thankful for the opportunity to make a contribution.