



## **Interim Report on a Church Conflict 1917: Freedom of Speech in a Time of War**

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### **XENOPHOBIA**

Our sermon continues the fall series on the history of our church. We celebrate the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the dedication of our being here at Reading and Linton. Also, the world is recognizing the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the outbreak of the Great War, World War I. This week will be Veterans Day, originally Armistice Day for the end of the Great War.

In 1917, a few months after the US entered World War One there was a contested church meeting in this room. Recently retired minister George Thayer and new minister Alson Robinson disagreed about what William Howard Taft meant at a denominational meeting. In our church history, Ed Lutton underscores they held different views, highlighting “doubtless far different.”<sup>i</sup>

In my ministry I served five years as an interim minister, spending two years at a church in transition between settled ministers. Pretend I am reporting after serving as an interim minister, 1918. A primary cause for developing the profession of Interim Minister was the ‘BFP’ as it is known in the interim trade. ‘BFP’ is short for “beloved former pastor,” one who hangs around and can’t let go after retired. There’s probably no better case of the BFP than First’s George Thayer. An inquiry in 1917 by a Unitarian official reported that “the roots of the trouble” lay in the situation of the church, Robinson correctly pointing to the need for “democratization.”<sup>ii</sup> Interims make similar observations as we go along, listening appreciatively to each participant to generate transformative conversation.

About the first exercise an Interim leads is inviting church members to write on the church's time line, similar to the wall in coffee hour. We are reminded Harvard philosopher George Santayana said, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." A good way of remembering the past is practicing lessons from it: no pain - no gain. In his history Ed Lutton offers a number of lessons from 1917. In this age of mass surveillance I think it is worth remembering the efforts democratizing this church after the conflict,

Then ethnic profiling was intensifying. The nation was undergoing massive change, becoming an industrial power-house with immigrants escaping tyranny and poverty throughout Europe. Americans were already anxious about immigrants before the war. A leading war hawk, Theodore Roosevelt, was anxious to lead the fight into Europe. On Columbus Day, 1915 in NYC, Roosevelt gave an address. He said in part,

... a hyphenated American is not an American at all. ... those hyphenated Americans who terrorize American politicians by threats of the foreign vote are engaged in treason to the American Republic.... Pay heed to [two] principle essentials: (1) The need of a common language; [and] (2) the need of a common civil standard, similar ideals, beliefs, and customs symbolized by the oath of allegiance to America...<sup>iii</sup>

In those days of old Jim Crow hyphenated Americans were not African Americans but Irish- and German-Americans. America would win the war by turning Americans against each other. Hatred is a hard habit to break.

Cincinnati was overrun with anti-German hysteria. The historical marker in Findlay Market reminds us. At First Unitarian the new minister, Alson Robinson sought to avoid offending members by discussing the war in Europe, a number of longstanding German American members belonged.<sup>iv</sup>

In the Queen City UU's need to keep in mind another narrative. I call this alterative the 'UUA narrative,' found on the UUA website. In this version there is no mention of the immigration issue at all. I find this: "Peace and social justice organizations, minority political parties, and radical labor unions were repressed."<sup>v</sup> Nothing of immigrants. For our own history we must strike out on our own. To us in this city this sin of omission is painful.

The Wilson administration added fuel to this fire, this hysteria, as Congress passed the Espionage Act in June 1917. The administration was disappointed by the Act Congress passed. Attorney General Gregory complained to the American Bar Association Congress had "most of the teeth we tried to put into it ... retaken out."<sup>vi</sup>

Wilson began an unprecedented propaganda campaign to rally support. He hired a publicist, George Creel, to head the "Committee on Public Information" (CPI), a propaganda ministry designed to "sell the war." The CPI produced films, pamphlets, curriculum guides and other instruments designed to "paint Germany in a bad light." It encouraged businesses to spy on their employees, parents to spy on their children, and neighbors to spy on neighbors, and to report "disloyal," pro-German sentiments.

In the UUA narrative, we read, “The act made it a crime for people to speak out against the country's involvement in the war.”

I read that to mean that Robinson, and his hero and that of the UUA narrative, Rev. John Haynes Holmes, would have, if correct, been imprisoned.

They were not.

Just what the 1917 Espionage Act means is contested. University of Chicago Law Professor, George R Stone tells us things were complicated. As we look through events here in 1917 with the lens of our present UU values, I suggest keeping in mind Professor Stone's remark;

The responsibility for what occurred during World War I rests less with the Congress that enacted the Espionage Act of 1917 than with the Wilson administration, which sought to exploit and manipulate public opinion....; the federal judiciary, which rashly interpreted and applied the law...<sup>vii</sup>

Our 7 Principles have a history, as does our building. UUism has a narrative(s), a history of dissent, as does our nation. Stone wrote, “there was yet no deeply rooted commitment to civil liberties with the legal profession, and no well-developed understanding of the freedom of speech.”<sup>viii</sup> So too with UU's.

With a take on the hysteria, Committee on Public Information and 1917 Espionage Act, we enter the action. Principle players are the two ministers of our church in 1917 – Thayer & Robinson. Then NYC Unitarian minister and pacifist, John Haynes Holmes, and one time First Church member, ex-President of the US, William Howard Taft. Taft was neither a warmonger nor pacifist having a lifelong commitment to international arbitration of conflict.

MEDITATION silent & spoken

## II. DEMOCRATIZATION.

Unitarians in Cincinnati and Montreal – and Boston and Washington – awoke on Thursday, September 27, 1917 to read in the **New York Times** ”TAFT PUTS QUIETUS TO A PACIFIST MOVE; Routs Minority and Obtains Indorsement of War Measures at Unitarian Conference”. The news story continued “unprecedented in dramatic power in the annals of religions conventions.” The media was writing the narrative.<sup>ix</sup>

Unitarians -- Thayer, Robinson Holmes, Taft plus several hundred others – had traveled to Montreal for a denominational conference. In Cincinnati, reading about the conference, they talked about Taft, Holmes and pacifism. Free speech was *not* part of the **Times** news line. Nor did the **New York Times** find it fit to print about Cincinnati's Rev. Alson Haven Robinson. The only mention of Robinson you can find of him in Montreal is the official records of American Unitarian Association.

After the welcome at the Montreal Conference, the first item of business was the report of the Council, given by John Haynes Holmes of NYC.

Speaking of the American involvement in the European war, Holmes said "... nothing is more important at this time than opportunity for full, free and fair statement of all points of view..." Holmes concluded his offering, "It is inconsistent neither with support of nor opposition to the war but is supplementary to both."<sup>x</sup>

Taft "was outraged." During this period of uncertainty, of tension and anxiety in Montreal as well as Cincinnati, lack of clarity, of who says what to whom and when, are constant dimensions. Taft offered clarity. He called on delegates to pass a resolution,

Resolved: it is the sense of this Unitarian Conference that this war must be carried to a successful issue to stamp out militarism in the world; that we as the Unitarian body approve the measures of President Wilson and Congress to carry on this war as restrictive as they may be<sup>xi</sup>

It seems to me Holmes failure was not that his Report is not insightful. It remains so. Holmes failure lacked clarity: in a time of crisis Holmes did not offer leadership.

Taft was not one of those Unitarians who believe in the minimalist opinion that we can believe whatever we like. There is substance to our faith, as there was substance to Taft,

... it is not a time for a great body like this Unitarian Conference ..., to send out to the world a declaration that means nothing in the way of decisiveness as to the policy to be pursued in this war,<sup>xii</sup>

Just prior to Taft's concluding remarks, Rev. Christopher Eliot asked Taft, "whether our endorsement of President Wilson's policies would be voting to uphold the restriction of free speech when it was not definitely disloyal?" Closing, Judge Taft responded, "With reference to the question raised by Mr. Christopher Eliot, I had no intention of referring to anything other than existing legislation."<sup>xiii</sup>

Then Cincinnati's Rev. Robinson rose. The record shows

**Rev. ALSON H. ROBINSON.—I move an amendment to this resolution to the effect that the words "to justify by measures however restrictive" shall be eliminated.**

**This amendment was voted down.**

**The motion as to the acceptance of Mr. Taft's resolution was put, delegates alone voting, and carried by a majority of 227: 236 in favor, 9 opposed.**

<sup>xiv</sup>

Robinson's proposed amendment brings us back to freedom of speech. There is no explicit mention of the 1917 Espionage Act or Creel Committee in the record of the Montreal meetings. Possibly Holmes spoke with it on his mind. Was Holmes extremely cautious referring to it in his remarks about our history of dissent, "By tradition and by practice we are dissenters. The cause of all dissent is our cause.... [As Wm E Channing said in the War

of 1812] 'In war, then, as in peace assert the freedom of speech. Cling to this as the bulwark of all your rights and privileges.'"<sup>xv</sup>

Holmes then continued, "Such is the law of liberty which we have long since adopted as our own. The stress and strain of war places this law in peril among us, as among all peoples everywhere." Without naming it, Robinson has pointed to the elephant in the room. Had the delegates voted for his amendment, they would have supported the war effort, but not Wilson's Committee on Public Information. Was part of the confusion that free speech appeared as part of pacifist agenda? That would explain the media as well as the conflict in this space in 1917.

Back from Montreal in church at Reading & Linton, in his diary for the day, Sunday Sept 30, Herbert Koch wrote Robinson had reported on the Montreal Conference and upheld "the pacifist viewpoint & bitterly criticized President Taft. His statement, under present conditions, rises to my mind almost treason..."<sup>xvi</sup>

The next day, October 1, 1917, Minister Emeritus, Rev. Thayer typed a letter to Judge Taft:

Upon my return from Montreal I called on your brother, Charles, to tell him something of the stirring day of our Unitarian Conference at Montreal ... that you saved the day and the Conference...

My successor here, Mr. Robinson, who was the mover of the rejected amendment to your resolution last Wednesday, is a fanatical **ultra-peace** man, and announced last Sunday to our congregation that the friends of Mr. Holmes were going to print and circulate his address. I should like, upon the heels of that distribution here, which will have very scanty respect from anybody but the semi-disloyal Germans, to send out widely your discussion, in which undertaking I shall have the hearty cooperation of the best part of the congregation. So, if assured that it is agreeable to you, I will make a movement toward that printing and distribution.<sup>xvii</sup>

Koch reports nothing again until Tuesday, October 23; the day of the contested meeting first I mentioned. Attending that evening, he records in his diary,

Mr. Punshon read the Taft resolution, explained and moved the endorsement... This resolution was originally offered by Taft as Chairman at the General Conference ... held in Montreal Sept 25 to 28. The resolution is "That this war must be carried to a successful issue to stamp out militarism in the world and that we, as a Unitarian body, approve of the measures of Pres. Wilson and Congress to carry this war, restricted as they may be." It was this "*restrictive as they may be*" clause caused the discussion. Mr. R, pale and earnest arose and "interpreted" this resolution and said that, interpreting it in this way he WOULD support the resolution. This is rather a surprise as the purpose of this meeting was primarily to have Mr. Robinson object this, then give them excuse to fire him. Thayer then gave his "interpretation" ... The resolution was unanimously carried.<sup>xviii</sup>

Did you follow? Robinson brought up – or was it Thayer – the language of his amendment in Montreal, suggesting to me he was not against the war so much, but against restriction of free speech. Now you can parse that and nuance that, but finally it doesn't matter. Robinson resigned from the pulpit the following Sunday.

Robinson's resignation took effect Nov. 17. Nov. 7 the Board held a meeting to explain to the congregation its actions. "The [petition to reject his resignation] having the most signatures has been carefully analyzed by your Board with the result that of the 103 persons whose names are signed thereto only 44 are found to be church members."<sup>xix</sup> Thayer used the war hysteria to sabotage democratizing the congregation.

OFFERTORY.

III, FALLOUT.

April 1918 Robinson was serving as the director of the War Camp Community Service at Newport News, Virginia. This organization provided recreation for service personal on leave, without them having to go into the seedier parts of town. Robinson was notified he was under investigation by the Military Intelligence Division of the Army, (MID).

In the early years of the 20th century, Ralph Van Deman created an Army Intelligence network, the MID, targeting four prime foes: the Industrial Workers of the World, opponents of the draft, Socialists, and "Negro unrest." Fear that the Germans would take advantage of black grievances was great. Van Deman was much preoccupied with the role of black churches as possible centers of sedition. The MID had three hundred thousand citizen spies called the American Protective League.<sup>xx</sup>

Colonel Van Deman forwarded a request, March 8<sup>th</sup>, to investigate Robinson to the Chief of the Intelligence Department of the YMCA. Learning of MID's inquiry, Robinson went to Washington, DC, to meet with the Assistant Secretary of the War Camp Community Service. He denied any disagreement with President Wilson. He thought the person behind the allegation was the Emeritus pastor, George Thayer. Robinson alleged Thayer did not want to relinquish control of the church to a young minister. Thayer was supported by a small group of influential people.<sup>xxi</sup>

Robinson's version was supported at the MID by J. Jefferson Tyndall, a former member of First. Thayer was displeased with the types of new members. Thayer had two sets of books, records of members' monetary and social standing, one set of records with members he approved and another he did not. The former members would have voting rights, while the latter, no matter how much they contributed, not able to vote. Tyndall stated: "There were dozens of people who had been attending the church for years, paying pew rent, attending all the social affairs of the church, and giving liberally of their means, who were disenfranchised when it came to voting on the resignation." Thayer worked behind the scenes slandering Robinson.

A small group of dominant members were unhappy with Robinson. Tyndall wrote this group was made of manufacturers who had sold supplies to the Allies before American

entrance into the war. Once Congress declared war, this group “wanted Dr. Robinson to immediately begin preaching the righteousness of War, the traitor-like character of the germans (sic).” However, he sought to create a place of worship where members could avoid “all thoughts of strife, hatred, and killing,”

Once it became clear to Robinson that Thayer was determined to block him, he resigned. He did so during a sermon. The congregation was shocked. Eighty percent of the congregation told the Trustees to refuse Robinson’s offer to resign. However, the cards were stacked against Robinson.

A month after this visit with the MID, Robinson then journeyed to Boston visiting with AUA President Samuel Atkins Eliot. A curious letter of June 1, 1918 emerges. Apparently Robinson had asked Eliot to inform Taft that he, Robinson, apologized. Thinking it over, Eliot thought better and wrote Robinson, “I am ready to testify to Mr. Taft ... that your word can be relied upon in this matter ... You did Mr. Taft a great injustice. He himself paid no attention to it, but his friends cannot forget what you said and did.”<sup>xxiii</sup> What he said and did we are left to presume. Most likely his remarks at the Sept 30 1917 church service hounded Robinson. The church’s Board complained of “his action at Montreal in opposing the Taft resolution;” and “his sermon following the conference in such he unbecomingly criticized Mr. Taft.” It is unsmart for a minister to insult any parishioner, let alone an eminent one. Given also the double set of books, there was but one possible outcome.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Not long after, fearful that Robinson would cause trouble, he was transferred to the Galveston, TX, office. From Texas in 1919 we find him writing Unitarian officials about returning to the ministry. He was reminded of his behavior at Cincinnati’s First:

I should not feel justified in commending you to any Unitarian church until I had satisfied myself that the experiences of the past two years had matured your judgment and rendered you somewhat more tolerant concerning the opinions or prejudices of other people, and particularly of people older than yourself.<sup>xxiv</sup>

The end of 1919 found Robinson, his wife and daughter Margery settled at the Unitarian church in Plainfield NJ where he served for twenty five years.

What happened to free speech? At some point, when Xopher Eliot asked, this was about free speech.

From a legal perspective, there was enough cause for confusion. It was only 1919 that Unitarian Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote his epochal and controversial ruling regarding free speech in *Schenck v United States*. He propounded the test of “clear and present danger,” that a person who yells fire in a crowded theatre is responsible for the subsequent chaos. In 1923 Justice Louis Brandeis confided to Felix Frankfurter that in 1920 he had “not thought through the issues of freedom of speech...”<sup>xxv</sup>

Given this confusion with resulting anxiety there is little surprise Taft, Holmes, Robinson and other Unitarians gathered in Montréal Sept. 1917 where anxious about what was illegal to say about the war. Nor that George Thayer led the church on a classic witch hunt.

The Unitarian heritage of free speech was also underdeveloped. While Rev. Holmes said “By tradition and by practice we are dissenters,” this tradition is not unchecked. The most common statement of faith among Unitarians in that age, James Freeman Clarke’s ‘Five Points of Unitarian Belief,’ says nothing about free speech. Clarke’s five points are: “Fatherhood of God, leadership of Jesus, brotherhood of man, salvation by character and progress onward and upward forever.” Only our Seven Principles of 1961 speaks finally of “The right of conscience” and “the democratic process” in the Fifth Principle.

I mentioned the UUA’s alternate to our account. While events here are not in the UU history, the debate between Taft and John Haynes Holmes makes Conrad Wright’s STREAM OF LIGHT. At that time, Taft was the leading Unitarian Laymen. In 1933 Taft was dead and Holmes became the progressive hero of UU’s. In my mind both Taft and Holmes played their parts well and we can be proud Taft learned his Unitarian faith here.<sup>xxvi</sup>

In the late winter of 1918, the President of the church Board of Trustees Anglicized his name, from Robert Hochstetter to Robert Hilton, as did his father and sister, Agnes.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Neither our faith nor our church is handed to us readymade. Years of work and devotion have brought us to this space. Ed Lytton’s account of events reminds us to make our church safe for democracy

Second class citizenship causes conflict, in a church and in a free country. Be it of wealth, age or ethnicity, a lack of trust underlies tensions. However feel-good it is, however carefully taught to hang with your own kind, we cannot build a just, free church on that bias.

It’s about citizens learning to talk to each other across the lines that divide us as key to preserving our precious heritage. Is there someone here at church you want to avoid? Turn around, approach them with open hand and open mind.

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<sup>i</sup> Ed Lutton, FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF CINCINNATI, Cincinnati, 1982; page 9.

<sup>ii</sup> Ernest C Smith to Robert Hochstetter, Oct. 11, 1917, First Unitarian Church Collection, Cincinnati Historical Society Library.

<sup>iii</sup> New York Times, October 13, 1915.

<sup>iv</sup> Lon J Strauss, A PARANOID STATE, thesis, University of Kansas, 2012; page 243.

[https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/bitstream/handle/1808/10313/Strauss\\_ku\\_0099D\\_12068\\_DATA\\_1.pdf?sequence=1](https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/bitstream/handle/1808/10313/Strauss_ku_0099D_12068_DATA_1.pdf?sequence=1) accessed Nov 11, 2014.

<sup>v</sup> UUA Taft-Homes Debate,

<http://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/adults/resistance/workshop5/workshopplan/stories/182323.shtml> , accessed November 10, 2014.

<sup>vi</sup> Geoffrey R. Stone, PERILOUS TIMES, Free Speech in Wartime, New York, Norton, 2004; 152

<sup>vii</sup> Stone, page 229.

<sup>viii</sup> Stone, 159.

<sup>ix</sup> NY Times Sept. 27, 1917, page 4.

<sup>x</sup> OFFICIAL REPORT OF THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE TWENTY-SEVENTH MEETING OF THE GENERAL CONFERENCE OF UNITARIAN AND OTHER CHRISTIAN CHURCHES HELD AT MONTREAL, CANADA, SEPT. 25-28,1917; Boston, Geo H Ellis, 1918; pages 56 & 63.

<sup>xi</sup> OFFICIAL REPORT PAGE 3.

<sup>xii</sup> OFFICIAL REPORT, page 14.

<sup>xiii</sup> OFFICIAL REPORT, page 11.

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- xiv OFFICIAL REPORT, page 14
- xv IBID, page 57.
- xvi Herbert Koch, Diary, Sept 30, 1917; Cincinnati Historical Society Library.
- xvii G A Thayer to W. H. Taft, October 1, 1917, William Hoard Taft Papers, Library of Congress.
- xviii Koch, Dairy, October 23, 1917.
- xix "Report from the Board of Trustees, November 7, 1917, page 3; First Unitarian Collection, Cincinnati Historical Society Library.
- xx Alexander Cockburn, **Whiteout: The CIA, Drugs, and the Press**, Verso, 1998; page 67.
- xxi Lon J Strauss, A PARANOID STATE, thesis, University of Kansas, 2012; page 243ff.
- xxii S A Elliot to A H Robinson, June 1, 1918; Samuel Atkins Eliot Papers, Harvard Divinity School Library
- xxiii "Report from the Board of Trustees, November 7, 1917, page 3; First Unitarian Collection, Cincinnati Historical Society Library.
- xxiv Eliot to Robinson, May 26, 1919, HDS.
- xxv Stone page 198
- xxvi Conrad Wright, ed., STREAM OF LIGHT, Boston, 1980; page 103ff.
- xxvii Ed Rider, personal communication.