

---

*Liberal Theology in Dialogue:  
Discovering the Life and Theology of  
Dorcas Hiller Cleveland*

MEGAN LLOYD JOINER

**Introduction**

In a series of five pamphlets first published anonymously by the American Unitarian Association (AUA) between 1827 and 1829, Mrs. Dorcas Hiller Cleveland made a case for liberal Christianity as a “third way” between Calvinism and deism.<sup>1</sup> Cleveland’s writing is conversational, distinct in tone and structure from the sermons and essays that comprise the remainder of the AUA’s first series of religious tracts. She was one of only two women published in the first series of 300 tracts. In her series of five “dialogues,” comprising 125 pages, the Henderson family—mother, father, and son George—discuss the development of “life-giving” Christian faith.<sup>2</sup> Dominated by the theological treatises of Mrs. Henderson, these tracts provided Cleveland’s generation and the next with a method for teaching liberal Christianity that would avoid what the author considered the overly excited and damaging false doctrines of orthodox Calvinists and the materialistic logic of revelation-denying deists.

The series I call *The Henderson Dialogues* demonstrates Cleveland’s self-representation as author and theologian and establishes the nuanced understanding with which she approached the doctrinal debates of her time. In her writing, we meet Mrs. Henderson, possibly modeled after Cleveland’s grandmother, and are drawn into a family saga that makes the doctrinal debates of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries vividly personal.<sup>3</sup> They illustrate Cleveland’s own experience and represent her views on doctrine, theological education, and religious life. Cleveland positioned herself squarely between the



*B. C. Cleaveland.*

“error and falsehood” of Calvinist doctrines and the “arrogance and folly” of “deistical” notions. Furthermore, she, like her liberal Christian colleagues, put the two systems in relation, understanding orthodoxy as the primary cause of disbelief in the truth of the Christian system. In the preface to her fourth pamphlet, published in 1829, Cleveland outlined the purpose of the series: to mark out a “line of conduct” for use by Christians to correct the “false notions” of “deistical friends or acquaintances” with “more justice and with greater prospect of success” than a harsher approach.<sup>4</sup> Possibly in response to anticipated criticism, she offered a disclaimer in the hope that her objective “will not be misunderstood.” Cleveland stated that “to bring forward the Evidences of Christianity was not a part of the main design” of her project. Her work was undertaken in response to skeptical individuals who seemed to be gratified by Christians who “candidly examine into the state of their feelings, or urge them on the importance of doing it themselves.”<sup>5</sup>

Unique in presentation and well-versed in liberal as well as orthodox doctrine and moral philosophy, Cleveland’s *Dialogues* provide a rare example of women’s theology from the first half of the nineteenth century. Seventy years before Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s *The Woman’s Bible* was shunned by both liberal Christians and feminists in 1895,<sup>6</sup> Cleveland’s *Dialogues* asserted the authority of female experience as theological source, and portrayed a mother, Mrs. Henderson, as spiritual guide. This proto-feminist work was published by the American Unitarian Association in pamphlet form just as Boston Unitarianism began to define and defend its foundational beliefs. That the AUA published Cleveland’s work speaks to the quality of her writing and the esteem accorded her theological voice within Unitarian circles. She was associated with many of the founding members of the association, including Rev. Jared Sparks (1789-1866) and Rev. Dr. Nathaniel Thayer (1769-1840). Despite these relationships, her relative anonymity as a woman contributed to the fact that her work was taken seriously by reviewers, who, on the whole, assumed her voice to be male.

### **A Writing Woman’s Life**

Cleveland was born September 11, 1773, in Salem, Massachusetts. The families of both her mother and her father were intimately tied to New England’s shipping industry; she benefited from the mercantile trading

business throughout her life. Beyond her family pedigree, we know little of Cleveland's childhood or young adult life, other than that she was "finely educated" for a woman of her time.<sup>7</sup>

After her marriage at age 31 to her first cousin, shipping magnate Richard Cleveland, Dorcas settled in Lancaster, Massachusetts. Her husband was often at sea. In Lancaster, she was known as a "writing woman," the facilitator of intellectual symposia, and an educator. As convener of parlor conversations on education reform and theology, she acted as mentor to educators and ministers, including Jared Sparks, George B. Emerson, and Elizabeth Peabody. Cleveland's life is recorded as tangential to the life of her husband and those of her social and intellectual circle. She is mentioned off-handedly in diaries, letters, memoirs, and biographies both as an accomplished "literary lady" and as little more than a "meddling" gossip.

The Clevelands' life in Lancaster during the 1810s and 1820s was described by their son as "simple and unostentatious."<sup>8</sup> The couple took delight in their "tastes and acquirements and the interests of domestic and social life," and they participated as partners in various projects of "benevolence and improvement."<sup>9</sup> According to Daniel Nadenicek, biographer of the Clevelands' son Horace, the Cleveland family considered themselves "leaders of society" and believed that they "had a responsibility to guide the rest of society to better lives and greater fortune."<sup>10</sup>

In town, Rev. Nathaniel Thayer, then an early Unitarian, pastored the First Church of Christ. Thayer's ministry lasted the duration of the Clevelands' years in Lancaster (1794 to 1840) and the couple were active members of the church. Their three sons were dedicated in First Church: Richard Jr. (dates unknown), Henry (1806-1843), and Horace William Shaler (1814-1900). Dorcas Cleveland raised and educated her three sons at home. Richard Jr. later studied civil engineering<sup>11</sup> and became "an adventurous youth."<sup>12</sup> Henry Cleveland became "a highly regarded scholar and educator" who met with a literary organization known as the "Five of Clubs," whose membership included Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and abolitionist Charles Sumner.<sup>13</sup> Horace became a celebrated landscape architect known for a natural aesthetic founded upon the theories of Transcendentalism. As they grew older, the boys' mother employed tutors for them from Harvard University and

then Harvard Divinity School after its founding in 1816. She eventually expanded her home-school efforts to organize a boys' academy. As we investigate the historical record in search of clues to Dorcas Cleveland's life, we discover not only a dedicated mother and wife, but a highly intellectual woman who was both inspired by and influential in education reform and the foundations of New England Unitarian Christianity.

Megan Marshall's biography of the Peabody sisters – Elizabeth, Mary, and Sophia – provides valuable insight into the extent of Cleveland's intellectual and religious influence. Marshall positions the three young Peabody women in the midst of the "internal revolution" that permeated early nineteenth-century New England.<sup>14</sup> Central to this cultural exuberance were intellectual circles where "women's ideas were welcome in conversation, if not always in print."<sup>15</sup>

Cleveland, Marshall relates, was "an accomplished musician and essayist," and "the proprietress of [Lancaster's] intellectual salon."<sup>16</sup> This was no small claim to fame. Lancaster in the early 1820s was an "outpost" of Boston's intellectual and cultural elite. The town was a hub of radical pedagogy; teachers, students, and recent Harvard graduates filled parlors and classrooms with lively discussions on developing educational theories and liberal theologies. Lancaster's two celebrated private schools – one for girls and one for boys – both overseen by Cleveland, drew the finest Boston talent in teachers.<sup>17</sup> Sophia Peabody and her sister Mary were students at the girls' school in 1821; older sister Elizabeth was a teacher. The boys' academy, "The Lancaster School," was envisioned in part by the absent Richard, and organized by Dorcas to fulfill the couple's desire to lay a solid educational foundation for their three sons. In addition to the Cleveland boys, students at the school included William Ellery Channing's nephew, William Henry. Jared Sparks was a tutor and teacher during his student years at Harvard Divinity School and became the Lancaster School's first official headmaster after his graduation.

Inspirational evenings at the Cleveland estate focused on implementation of the ideas of European educational theorists such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau – authors whom, according to Elizabeth Peabody, Mrs. Cleveland had read "without losing her own originality."<sup>18</sup> Peabody wrote after Cleveland's death, "It was not merely the new methods of intellectual education that were discussed at these symposia of Mrs.

Cleveland's." Participants regularly engaged the "necessity and method of building up *character* of the Christian and the heroic ideal of inspiring children with the power to educate themselves."<sup>19</sup>

Elizabeth Peabody was the eldest child of educator Elizabeth Palmer Peabody. The Peabodys moved to the Lancaster area in 1821, in part to be nearer to the Clevelands who were their close friends.<sup>20</sup> At the young age of seventeen, the Peabodys' eldest daughter, Elizabeth, was asked by Cleveland to teach at her girls' school. Peabody relates that Mrs. Cleveland was "deeply absorbed" in the subject of education, "having herself educated her three boys with the help in the last years of ... Sparks, Emerson, and Miles." More than an employer, Cleveland was a "most respected and beloved counsellor [sic]" to the young men.<sup>21</sup> Cleveland also became a mentor to the young Elizabeth Peabody – future pioneer in the field of early childhood education, devoted proponent of kindergarten, and one of the most well-known woman educators of her time.<sup>22</sup>

Peabody and young women like her struggled to negotiate the possession of advanced intellect in a society infatuated with the "cult of true womanhood" – an ideal that did not favor smart or outspoken women. A wealthy, married woman of intellectual acclaim and significant independence – the latter due partly to her husband's prolonged absence – Mrs. Cleveland "seemed to fulfill the feminine ideal" for Elizabeth Peabody. The younger woman wrote of the elder that she was a "highly cultivated and interesting" woman who "never says anything unmarked with deep thought, and yet her manners are so unaffected [and] so elegant that you do not think of her as being a *professed literary lady*."<sup>23</sup>

Their relationship was not always amicable. Cleveland was known to criticize Elizabeth's social propriety as well as her intellectual and professional capabilities. Nonetheless, one observes Cleveland's influence on Elizabeth Peabody's theological and educational thought. Like Cleveland, Elizabeth's faith was biblically based, and she advocated a systematic but personal approach to doctrinal controversies. "The new-Testament [sic] must ... be your test," she once wrote to her younger sister, Sophia, instructing her to weigh each Unitarian doctrine against her own biblical analysis.<sup>24</sup>

The Cleveland family relocated to Havana, Cuba in 1828 where Richard served as vice-consul from 1828 to 1834. Trading and slaving

interests ruled the city; plantations dominated the countryside. The Cleveland home in Havana became central to the social and intellectual life of American elite society in Cuba, which had “achieved a decadence hardly imaginable to New Englanders.”<sup>25</sup> The Peabody sisters and other members of the Lancaster circle visited them there. The Clevelands fled Cuba in the midst of a cholera epidemic in 1834, returning to the States to settle in Burlington, New Jersey, where Mrs. Cleveland died in 1850.<sup>26</sup>

### Theology in Dialogue

With this backdrop of her life in mind, we now turn to Cleveland’s writing. The twelfth theological tract published by the American Unitarian Association was *A Dialogue on Providence, Faith, and Prayer*.<sup>27</sup> First in a series of five authored by Cleveland, this tract centers on a mother and father, Mr. and Mrs. Henderson, who are mourning the death of their eighteen-year-old daughter, who had been “lovely in person and mind.” The Hendersons are “amiable people,” married for twenty years. They inhabit the “middle ranks of society, as far removed from degradation on one side, as from reigning in the circles of fashion on the other.” As such, Cleveland wrote, the Hendersons had “escaped the severest trials of virtue.” They are described as having “no other notoriety, than that of being spoken of . . . as an inoffensive, kind-hearted, unassuming couple, with a family of orderly and good children.” The family is solidly situated in their connection to Boston, with two sons “apprenticed to substantial good men” in the city.<sup>28</sup> Cleveland’s main characters are, beyond doubt, the very sort of people nineteenth-century New England Unitarianism sought to reach.

Credited as “the author of a *Dialogue on Providence, Faith, and Prayer*,” Cleveland wrote four more AUA tracts featuring the Hendersons: *A Dialogue on Some of the Causes of Infidelity*, *A Dialogue Between a Christian and a Deist*, *Divine Revelation Advocated and Illustrated*, and *The Divine Authority of the Christian Revelation Acknowledged*. Throughout her work, she gently but firmly asserted the rationality and pragmatism of liberal Christianity.

The *Henderson Dialogues* were published during the fledgling years of the American Unitarian Association, most likely due to Cleveland’s friendships with Sparks, Thayer, and George B. Emerson. Her

writing was, by all accounts, well received by the majority of liberal ministers. Cleveland's straightforward and colloquial composition packaged the fiercely-held beliefs of younger Unitarian leaders with the understated individualism of the old-guard. Throughout the series, with the "happiness and peace" of a young man's mind and soul at stake, Cleveland applied the doctrinal assertions of the newly formed American Unitarian Association in a practical manner designed to be replicated by all liberal Christians—especially lay women—in the continued battle against orthodoxy on one side and deism on the other.

The *Dialogues* follow Mr. and Mrs. Henderson as they seek to provide support for their son in matters of faith. Mrs. Henderson is a spiritual director and theological logician as well as a mother. Mr. Henderson is a father absent in both body and mind who does not understand the toll that negative religious influences might take on a young person's mind. Their son George is an impressionable youth who, given the correct strategy, could be convinced (his mother hopes) of the rational truth of the "true" Christian system. Amidst friends who believed either "too much" or "not enough," George struggles to discern his own faith. Cleveland used the dilemma facing George to directly take on conservative Christianity and what she perceived as the dangers of deism and the extremes of orthodoxy. She sought to "annihilate" the "army" of infidelity by refuting each argument against Christianity with unassailable logic.<sup>29</sup> Despite this violent imagery, Cleveland's tracts use a gentle but firm theological and educational method that establishes liberal (Unitarian) Christianity as a middle way for persons seeking a religious system to satisfy both mind and spirit.<sup>30</sup> Cleveland believed that divine revelation occurred when a person reflected upon his or her own thoughts and feelings. "In this way," Mrs. Henderson states, "we can all come at some truths which it is important we should all possess."<sup>31</sup>

In thick nineteenth-century prose, Cleveland expressed her understanding of the human predicament through detailed descriptions of the "states of mind" of her subjects and proposed theological solutions through carefully constructed dialogues. She accepted skepticism as a part of rational Christian faith, and addressed doubt with firm articulations of what was, for the time, radical liberal theological thought. She presented her arguments against orthodox belief, and just as clearly



argued that appeals to transcendent authority can provide comfort. She wrote that prayer is the “most natural of all acts,” explaining, “when the mind is deeply wounded ... and can find no hope of relief from any quarter where human reason directs us ... the very despair we feel prompts us to raise our thoughts to some power above ourselves, and to implore relief.”<sup>32</sup>

The reader encounters the Hendersons as they discuss whether religion and prayer will aid them in their grief. Though they had assured their friends and minister that they would not “murmur at the dispensations of Providence,” Mr. Henderson nevertheless admits to his wife that he cannot “see the hand of a merciful God” in the “dark and mysterious dispensation” of their daughter’s death.<sup>33</sup> Mr. Henderson’s difficulty provides the opportunity for Mrs. Henderson to enumerate the finiteness of the human mind, the nature of God as “infinite mind” and loving Father, and the importance of “early impressions in favor of an overruling Providence.”<sup>34</sup> Mrs. Henderson clarifies to her husband (and Cleveland to her readers) the definition of the Christian spirit and life as “conformity to the precepts of Jesus Christ.” For Cleveland, the “comforting” power of prayer came, not by praying “unconditionally” for God to change the course of events, but by offering a prayer for “inner changes” and seeking to align the mind’s will with that of the Divine.<sup>35</sup>

Through Mrs. Henderson, Cleveland did not “pretend to be so much clearer sighted” than others that she could perceive the “benevolence of God in every event of life.” Despite this, Mrs. Henderson asserts that she does not doubt the existence of God’s benevolence as her husband does, his faith being “weaker” than hers.<sup>36</sup> The mother/theologian has satisfied herself “with the clearest reasoning that God is infinite mind, and that mind infinitely good.”<sup>37</sup> In Mrs. Henderson, Cleveland asserted that both sensory awareness and rationality confirm the existence of the Deity as “a kind and watchful guardian, who orders all our affairs from benevolent motives.”<sup>38</sup> As the starting point for her theology, Cleveland adopted the Unitarian view that God’s character is infinitely merciful. She claimed that the only logical explanation for any apparent contradiction between God’s mercy and the course of history is the limited nature of the human mind. Instead of doubting God’s mercy in the event of tragedy, Mrs. Henderson says that she

observes her “own small and imperfect powers, which are incapable of ever penetrating into the mysterious arrangement of events.”<sup>39</sup> For Cleveland, the limited nature of human understanding was not due to human depravity, but was instead born out of the need to maintain a theological system based upon the infallible goodness of the creator and to make sense of the harsh realities of human existence.

Such faith is difficult, if not out of the question, for Mr. Henderson, who can “believe what he sees” but continues to doubt that which he cannot see. Mr. Henderson requests the guidance of his wife as he contemplates the theological system she presents, saying, “I should be glad to receive light from your way of viewing.”<sup>40</sup> Cleveland’s “way of viewing” reconciled Christian faith with Enlightenment thought, stating that God does not act in the modern world by affecting the course of events, but continues to intervene in the world by influencing the nature of the human mind. “What is called natural means, what is called miracle, are all divine interpositions,” she maintained, “and uniformly pursued by God to reform and elevate the human character, and unite the spirit of man with his Maker.”<sup>41</sup>

In the same stroke, Cleveland “solved” the problem of evil in the world by relinquishing the need for supernatural expressions of divine power through the prevention of suffering. She called instead for acquiescence to God’s power and will in difficult times, believing that prayer provides the space for transformation of the human character in order to enter into more perfect union with God. At the conclusion of the first dialogue, Mr. Henderson professes that “never did [his] relation to [God as] gracious Being seem so near and intimate.”<sup>42</sup> Mrs. Henderson’s explanations of “rational” religion were an apparent success.

The Boston-based orthodox magazine, *The Spirit of the Pilgrims*, reviewed Cleveland’s first dialogue in April 1828. Undertaking a thorough critique of each point of doctrine contained within the text, the editors lamented Cleveland’s illustration of God’s loving concern with human happiness, and they dismissed doubt as fundamentally inconsistent with Christian spirit and practice. Characterizing the tract as “a specimen of the instruction and consolation which Unitarianism affords” to suffering people, the reviewer was distressed by the seeming spiritual ignorance of Mr. Henderson and the perceived false doctrines proffered by his wife.<sup>43</sup> The reviewer rejected Cleveland’s belief that

all people are destined for happiness, and stated that the idea that God means to bring all humanity into union with himself was inadequate to "satisfy the necessities of bereaved persons."<sup>44</sup>

Instead, the reviewer argued, the Hendersons should have understood their daughter's death as an indictment by God against their character. The parents should have considered the fact that they loved their daughter too well and should have asked themselves: "Was there no danger of her coming between us and God? ... Was it not necessary that this idol of our hearts should be removed?"<sup>45</sup> Indeed, the reviewer's sentiments bespoke the fundamental disagreements between Unitarians and their orthodox opponents over the nature of God, of piety, and of humanity. The fact that Cleveland's work was reviewed at all indicates that she wrote with authority and that her voice was taken as seriously as those of the male ministers whom she considered colleagues.

According to Linda Kerber, an eminent historian of women's experience, the model American Protestant woman of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was "a teacher as well as a mother."<sup>46</sup> Working within the accepted cultural expectations of what Kerber terms the "Republican Mother," Cleveland established the theological authority of wife and mother over husband and son. Owing to her experience as a woman, Mrs. Henderson has a special sense for "the spiritual affections." In response to his inquiry as to why their perceptions differ in regard to religious subjects, she tells her husband:

You have lived in the world of business, my dear, while I, secluded, and moving only in the little circle of my domestic duties, have lived in an internal world of thought, observing and reflecting on the operations of my own mind ... Hence the difference in the character of our minds, which originally, I believe, were constituted very much alike.<sup>47</sup>

In a move characteristic of many early female theologians who purported to deny their authority even as they established it, Mrs. Henderson tells her son that her knowledge is "extremely limited," saying, "let us leave the whole field of polemic divinity to those who are properly qualified." Having said this, she simultaneously affirmed the validity of her experience and faithful witness by asserting that "everybody can look into his own heart."<sup>48</sup>

### On Religious Edification and a Loving God

Throughout the *Dialogues*, Cleveland expounded upon her understanding of Christian truth and elucidated the method of instilling “true” Christian faith in the minds of youth and their elders. “Adapting her treatment” to the specific needs of individuals, Mrs. Henderson exemplifies the gentleness and forbearance with which Cleveland believed one must approach young people on the subject of religion in order to give them “clearer and juster” views instead of confirming “false” ones.<sup>49</sup> Cleveland, with nuanced theological and philosophical pressure, appealed precisely to the rational and psychological “state” of those she sought to influence. The “maternalistic” tone found in the *Dialogues* echoes the paternalism of religious debates of the time. Mrs. Henderson’s quiet authority is based in the belief that “mother knows best.” Indeed, Mrs. Henderson’s approach to her son’s religious edification is carefully calculated: she “had previously considered and marked out in her own mind the course she thought best to pursue.”<sup>50</sup> Though faced with convincing George of the error of his “deistical notions,” Mrs. Henderson is grateful that her son’s mind is protected from the “abyss of atheism” because he has been “led from his earliest recollections to perceive and adore the wonderful manifestations of God’s love to man [and] his wisdom and power in the glorious works of creation and providence.”<sup>51</sup>

Young George Henderson represents those damaged by the “many pernicious errors” and “lasting evils” of Calvinist doctrines.<sup>52</sup> Cleveland asserted that Calvinist tenets “made more infidels than all the open attacks upon Christianity ever made by professed deists.”<sup>53</sup> In *Dialogue on Some of the Causes of Infidelity*, Cleveland explicitly stated that the Calvinist obsession with damnation and conversion caused “an unconquerable aversion to the subject of religion” among young people. The narrative follows George to the home of his staunch Calvinist aunt and uncle with whom he lives during his schooling at an unnamed Calvinist academy. Mrs. Henderson outlines for her husband the “states of mind” she has astutely observed in her son. First, “excessive ennui and disgust” marked his introduction into a system with so many restrictions on his behavior and compulsory “religious exercises that he did not understand.” Second, he experienced “fear and horror on

account of the inevitable dreadful sufferings he was taught to believe he was doomed to endure eternally, unless the irresistible grace of God were vouchsafed to save him." Remarkably, Cleveland asserted that the dangers of Calvinism were not only mental or emotional, but also physical, stating that "such a nervous excitement was produced as it threw [George] into a slow fever."<sup>54</sup>

In a scene she drew from personal experience, Cleveland portrayed an aunt and uncle's interpretation of the boy's feverish dreams as "interpositions of Providence to save his soul from perdition." Shouting to him that "that he was hanging over hell, as by a single hair," his mother recounts, they told George that he "must wrestle with the Lord, until he conquered, and compelled [the Lord] to grant salvation to his soul." As the narrative continues, George regains his health and seeks to reconcile these views of "the divine character" that contradict both his own reflections and what he had been taught about God by his mother.

In a proto-transcendentalist move, Cleveland suggested that George received his understanding of God best in nature, where "his heart expanded with gratitude and love to the God who spoke to his soul."<sup>55</sup> Nonetheless, in his confusion over such contradictions, and confronted with an understanding of religion as punitive and horrible, George begins to study the arguments refuting revelation and is convinced that he does not need "a belief in Christianity" in order to be happy. To the contrary, he thinks to himself, "Any change in my opinions on this subject would render me far less happy than I am now."<sup>56</sup> Such a shift in religious allegiance, Cleveland claimed, results in negative effects upon the character, including "pride and prejudice,"<sup>57</sup> and is fundamentally fueled by ignorance of the true doctrines of Christian religion.

For Cleveland, the purpose of Christian faith was a positive transformation of the individual character through aspiration to the example of the suffering Christ. Thus, her christology was Socinian in nature. Jesus is Savior, she writes, "not by any change his death wrought in God, rendering him in any degree more able or more willing to forgive sinners ... but by the change produced in the hearts and lives of mankind ... by showing the way of righteousness..."<sup>58</sup> Thus Jesus does not effect, but illuminates, the mercy of God for all people. Cleveland presented her christology as a more logical interpretation of Jesus as Christ than orthodox doctrine because it retained the goodness of God. George

protests that he cannot accept the Christian system because he “cannot believe” that God, infinitely benevolent and just, would “require the suffering and death of his only and dear son to satisfy his vengeance.” Moreover, he rejects the “absurd” doctrine of atonement because he believes that each person must “see his own wickedness and repent of it, and amend his life,” not “depend upon the death of an innocent person to restore his innocence.”<sup>59</sup> His mother agrees and affirms his rejection of the “popular view” of the Christian religion, urging him to forge his own way in faith.

Advocating early religious education for children, Cleveland stated that “religion should be presented to them in the simplest and plainest manner” so as to inculcate young minds with the “correct” understanding of God as infinitely wise and benevolent and of Jesus as model of Christian character. Reflecting educational theory grounded in theories of childhood development, she believed that young children should be not only educated in how to reason about their own religious beliefs, but should be taught theological positions that would insulate them from harmful doctrines.

According to Cleveland, parents should strive “to give [their children] the deepest, the highest, and the most expanded ideas of the character of God; and to dwell particularly on his infinite benevolence, as the quality best calculated to inspire confidence and devout affection on their young hearts.” Parents should, however, not express “the mysteries of religion” and should refrain from discussing with children the human misinterpretations of doctrine until “their hearts [are] imbued with the pure spirit of the gospel, and their understanding enlightened by its wisdom.” Thus adequately prepared, she believed young people would later “be able to grapple with the dogmas they might learn, and resist the falsehood offered as divine truth.”<sup>60</sup> “I think it of very great importance,” Mrs. Henderson tells her husband, that “children’s minds should be early and deeply impressed with the great and fundamental truths of religion.” She adds, “if our infant notions are correct, our rational convictions in mature life will confirm them, and our faith will be solid and satisfactory.”<sup>61</sup>

Cleveland approached dogmatics with a sophisticated understanding of the arguments in Christian history against religion. “Ever since the world was created,” she wrote, “men have striven for power

and influence, and there is no engine they have found so effectual for obtaining and holding it, as that of enslaving the minds of the multitude by religious dogmas."<sup>62</sup> Nonetheless, she believed that the faithful must "look farther into the subject" in order to separate Christian truth from human corruption. Cleveland encouraged discussion, study, and informed engagement in matters of faith, but cautioned against arrogance in pitting one theological system against another. "Until you have looked deeply into your own heart to perceive that you, like all others, are disposed to be presumptuous," Mrs. Henderson cautions her son, "you can be in no fit state of mind to seek truth sincerely, or embrace it when presented to you."<sup>63</sup> She concludes that the seeker must be open to the possibility of revelation and the transformation of one's mind if indeed one "argues for truth" and not "for victory."<sup>64</sup>

Cleveland asserted a deeply pragmatic view of Christian truth, reminiscent of Pascal's wager.<sup>65</sup> Likening the gospel to a diamond disguised as a stone, she stated that the discoverer of such a stone "might doubt its true nature, and present every argument to prove it worthless." Nonetheless, she would "hesitate to put it down for fear of being proved wrong."<sup>66</sup> Pushing still further, Cleveland proposed that in order to compare the relative truths of divergent religious systems, one must "examine the effects on the human character" and ascertain "which belief, fully acted upon, is most conducive to the happiness of this life."<sup>67</sup> If a system:

increases happiness, and diminishes sorrow, even in this world ... should [one] not think it highly desirable that [humankind], *whether the system is true or false*, should be induced to give a full and hearty credence to it?<sup>68</sup>

Cleveland saw such an exercise as a transition from skepticism to acceptance. If one did not believe the truth of a religious system that affords comfort to the afflicted, one should, she continued, "hold [one's] opinion in silence and secrecy." Mrs. Henderson instructs her son George to that practice, should he "continue to believe that [his] superior intellect enables him to see farther and deeper and higher than all the Christian world." No person "of kind and benevolent disposition," she tells George, would "utter a word to raise a doubt in the mind of the believer" or feel the need to argue as "false" what the faithful "receive as divine truth."

As a case in point, Mrs. Henderson asks George to join her in visiting a desperately poor dying woman, Mrs. Brown. With condescension that makes the modern reader cringe, Cleveland declared that the widow Brown exemplifies the Christian virtues of “meekness, gentleness, forbearance, and charity.” Though met with trial and tribulation, including the misery of her three daughters caught in dangerous and abusive marriages, the dying “saint” has been “always resigned, always grateful, always cheerful, her docile mind [yielding] to the circumstances in which she has been placed, as a child receives the instructions of its parent.”<sup>69</sup> In the model of Christ, who submitted to “persecution, sufferings, and death, and thereby prov[ed] his sincerity in the great cause for which he appeared in the world,” Mrs. Brown “claims no merit” for herself and thanks God for an “abundance of grace” through which she has “found strength for every hour,” including the hour of her death. “It is the privilege of a Christian, Mrs. Henderson,” says Mrs. Brown, “to rejoice in death. To me this is the happiest hour of my life...”<sup>70</sup>

Cleveland used the deathbed scene, “the whole picture” of which, she stated, was “taken from life” to illustrate the power of religion in the lives of those who suffer. Faith in the goodness of God, the example of the suffering Jesus, and the comfort of prayer were, for Cleveland, “manifestation[s] of divine benevolence, that God gives to his dependent creatures . . . as a solace, when the world holds out no joy or comfort for them.”<sup>71</sup> She challenged George (and her readers): in the search for “truth,” would he “be willing to deprive [God’s creatures] of these sources of comfort?” As a result of the visit, George finds his prejudice softened, and he begins to lose interest in disproving religious doctrines.

Ultimately, Cleveland’s prescription for rational faith in the revealed truth of the Christian system required in-depth biblical study and personal reflection upon human character. In order to overcome emotional rejection of abhorrent doctrines, Mrs. Henderson advises George that he “must release [his] mind from all former ideas of the Gospel, and take it up simply as it is given in the New Testament.” She instructs him, “Study it deeply; compare the several histories; illustrate and explain one passage by another on the same subject.” She illustrates how her pragmatic thought could lead to a sincere wish to be a Christian:



Reason upon the [text] as connected with the character of God, and the nature and happiness of [humanity], and you will perceive its perfect harmony with both ... thus your understanding will be convinced and your feelings will yield to your convictions.<sup>72</sup>

By the end of the series, George follows his mother's advice and proclaims his acceptance of the Christian gospel as a rational theological system that fulfills the "spiritual wants" of humanity and, in addition, proclaims his desire to attend a Christian church.

Cleveland's theology is what Paul Tillich calls a "kerygmatic theology," one that uses the "conceptual tools of its period" to answer opposing systems of thought and belief and express the centrality of the Christian message.<sup>73</sup> Like many liberal theologians, Cleveland sought to separate the "kernel from the husk" – doing away with what she considered damaging doctrine and retaining the life-giving message of Christianity as expressed by Jesus in the gospels.

## Conclusion

Dorcas Hiller Cleveland was raised and educated in the eighteenth century and was twenty-seven years old at the dawn of the nineteenth century. Her theological thought, as expressed in her writings, positioned her within the culture and philosophy of the New England Unitarian elite. She was not a social radical and was focused primarily on educational reform as a means to improve the character of boys and girls of her social class and race. Despite her family's commercial orientation – their connections to Salem ports, her husband's involvement in the realities of maritime life and trade, and her own exposure to plantation slavery in Cuba – she pursued a very different path, mentoring young women and men in a world consumed with the beauty of the natural world and the life of the mind and soul.

Margaret Fuller was born in 1810, the year that Dorcas Cleveland turned thirty-seven. Fuller wrote in her controversial 1843 work, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, that, by the nineteenth century, many literary women were able to "express publicly the fullness of thought and creation, without losing any of the peculiar beauty of [their] sex."<sup>74</sup> Nevertheless, popular opinion of the time was reticent to recognize the authority of women's voices in print or in public. Fuller lamented

popular opposition to women's "seizing on the rostrum or the desk."<sup>75</sup> As forerunners of the movement for woman suffrage, "writing women" like Cleveland and Fuller bridged the separate generations of revolution and reform. Their lives and written works were radical in their assertion of female intellect and authority in matters of self-expression, religion, politics, education, and civil society.

Radical though they were, these women were concerned first and foremost with the rights and agency of white women of the middle and upper classes. They fought for equal appreciation of their thought within intellectual and religious circles, such as the symposia organized by Cleveland, and the "Transcendental Club" of which Fuller and the younger Peabody were a part. Like many Unitarian moral philosophers, Unitarian women did not generally see connections between their lives and the lives of non-white women, whether slave or free, or the lives of working-class women toiling twelve hours a day in textile mills. With a few notable exceptions – one being Lydia Maria Child, many of whose readers abandoned her after she published *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans* (1833) – evidence of antislavery sentiments and abolitionism were rare in white Unitarian women's published writings during Cleveland's time. Even in the work of Elizabeth Peabody, considered by many a staunch abolitionist, "evidence of antislavery activity is sparse before 1859."<sup>76</sup> In Cleveland's work, we can see the limitations of a theology that reflected the complacency and apathy of her time and station.

Recognizing Cleveland's contribution – to American Unitarianism and liberal Christianity – is a crucial part of recovering the systematic loss of women's voices, theologies, and Christianities within the study of theology as a whole, and specifically within Unitarian Universalist history. Cleveland was a woman on the cusp of new ways of thinking: theological shifts within the Unitarian movement, the emergence of Transcendentalist thought versus a classical focus on Christian character, and the radical reform movements for abolition and women's rights. Bridging Enlightenment and proto-modern theologies, she reached out to young people who would shape the future of American consciousness through their contributions to literature, education, Unitarian theology, and social reform. In her *Dialogues*, Cleveland outlined what she understood as the crucial paths to follow for a future that would lead to human flourishing

for all people. She asked each seeker to search her heart, examine her ego and be ready to be transformed when engaging in the quest for religious truth. Through her life and her written work, Cleveland challenged her readers, then and now, to push the boundaries of theological expression even further.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Gary Dorrien asserts that the quest for the “third way” between “the authority-based orthodoxies of traditional Christianities and the spiritual materialism of modern atheism or deism” is the foundational subject of theological liberalism. Gary J. Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion, 1805-1900* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), xiii.

<sup>2</sup> Nineteenth-century writings used both the non-capitalized “christian” as well as capitalized “Christian” and “Christianity.” Christian will be capitalized throughout this paper except in direct quotation.

<sup>3</sup> It is likely that the character of Mrs. Henderson was loosely based upon Dorcas Cleveland’s grandmother, Susanna Porter Cleveland (1716-1789). Susanna’s son, George, set out to be a seaman and died of yellow fever in Havana at the young age of sixteen. Cleveland wrote that her maternal uncle, whom she never met, was “remarkable for the sweetness of his temper.” Susanna’s daughter, also named Dorcas, was “the flower of the family” but died at the age of twenty, a loss from which Susanna never recovered. Dorcas Hiller Cleveland wrote that her grandmother was “unable to overcome her grief” and considered herself the “single object of malice of the powers of evil.” Cleveland’s aunt and uncle were immortalized in the characters of the *Dialogues*. Dorcas C. Hiller Cleveland, quoted in Edward Janes Cleveland, *The Genealogy of the Cleveland and Cleaveland Families* (Hartford CT: Case, Lockwood & Brainard Company, 1899), 130.

<sup>4</sup> Dorcas Hiller Cleveland, *Divine Revelation Advocated and Illustrated* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, tract no. 24, 1829), 1.

<sup>5</sup> Cleveland, *Divine Revelation*, 1.

<sup>6</sup> See Dorrien, *Making of American Liberal Theology*, 253-260.

<sup>7</sup> “Lowry, Mary,” *Portrait and Biographical Record of Dubuque, Jones and Clayton Counties* (Chicago: Chapman Publishing Co, 1894).

<sup>8</sup> H.W.S. Cleveland, *Voyages of a Merchant Navigator of the Days that are Past: Compiled from the Journals and Letters of the Late Richard J. Cleveland* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1886), 101.

<sup>9</sup> H.W.S. Cleveland, *Voyages of a Merchant Navigator*, 102.

<sup>10</sup> Daniel Joseph Nadenicek, “Nature in the City: Horace Cleveland’s Aesthetic,” *Landscape and Urban Planning* 26 (1993), 5-15.

<sup>11</sup> Mary Gardner Lowell, *New Year in Cuba: Mary Gardner Lowell’s Travel Diary, 1831-1832*, ed. Karen Robert (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society: Northeastern University Press, 2003).

- <sup>12</sup> Richard Jr. traveled to Poland in 1830 to participate in the Polish-Russian Revolt of November 1830, ending in defeat of the Polish rebels in September 1831. Lowell, *New Year in Cuba*, 112n.
- <sup>13</sup> Joachim Wolschke-Bulmahn, *Nature and Ideology: Natural Garden Design in the Twentieth Century* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1997), 62n.
- <sup>14</sup> Megan Marshall, *The Peabody Sisters: Three Women Who Ignited American Romanticism* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), xvi.
- <sup>15</sup> Marshall, *The Peabody Sisters*, xv.
- <sup>16</sup> Marshall, *The Peabody Sisters*, 105.
- <sup>17</sup> Richard Kopley, *The Threads of the Scarlet Letter: A Study of Hawthorne's Transformative Art* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2003), 144n.
- <sup>18</sup> H.W.S. Cleveland, *Voyages of a Merchant Navigator*, 243.
- <sup>19</sup> Abijah P. Marvin, *History of the Town of Lancaster, Massachusetts: From the First Settlement to the Present Time: 1643-1879* (Lancaster, 1879) [emphasis original].
- <sup>20</sup> Patricia Dunlavy Valenti, *Sophia Peabody Hawthorne: A Life* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 8.
- <sup>21</sup> H.W.S. Cleveland, *Voyages of a Merchant Navigator*, 243.
- <sup>22</sup> See Bruce A. Ronda, *Elizabeth Palmer Peabody: A Reformer on Her Own Terms* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).
- <sup>23</sup> Marshall, *The Peabody Sisters*, 105 [emphasis original].
- <sup>24</sup> Marshall, *The Peabody Sisters*, 8.
- <sup>25</sup> Marshall, *The Peabody Sisters*, 8.
- <sup>26</sup> H.W.S. Cleveland, *Voyages of a Merchant Navigator*, 238.
- <sup>27</sup> *Christian Examiner* 4, no. 5, (Sept.-Oct. 1827).
- <sup>28</sup> Dorcas Hiller Cleveland, *A Dialogue on Providence, Faith, and Prayer* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1829), 1.
- <sup>29</sup> Dorcas Hiller Cleveland, *A Dialogue Between a Christian and a Deist* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1829), 8.
- <sup>30</sup> Cleveland did not expressly identify any of her characters as Unitarian.
- <sup>31</sup> Cleveland, *Christian and Deist*, 17.
- <sup>32</sup> Cleveland, *Providence, Faith, and Prayer*, 12.
- <sup>33</sup> Cleveland, *Providence, Faith, and Prayer*, 4.
- <sup>34</sup> Cleveland, *Providence, Faith, and Prayer*, 8.
- <sup>35</sup> Cleveland, *Providence, Faith, and Prayer*, 14.
- <sup>36</sup> Cleveland, *Providence, Faith, and Prayer*, 5.
- <sup>37</sup> Cleveland, *Providence, Faith, and Prayer*, 6.
- <sup>38</sup> Cleveland, *Providence, Faith, and Prayer*, 9.
- <sup>39</sup> Cleveland, *Providence, Faith, and Prayer*, 6.
- <sup>40</sup> Cleveland, *Providence, Faith, and Prayer*, 12-13.
- <sup>41</sup> Cleveland, *Providence, Faith, and Prayer*, 20.
- <sup>42</sup> Cleveland, *Providence, Faith, and Prayer*, 22.
- <sup>43</sup> Cleveland, *Providence, Faith, and Prayer*, 181.

- <sup>44</sup> Cleveland, *Providence, Faith, and Prayer*, 184.
- <sup>45</sup> Cleveland, *Providence, Faith, and Prayer*, 186.
- <sup>46</sup> Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 235.
- <sup>47</sup> Dorcas Hiller Cleveland, *A Dialogue on Some of the Causes of Infidelity* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1829), 20.
- <sup>48</sup> Cleveland, *Christian and Deist*, 17.
- <sup>49</sup> Cleveland, *Causes of Infidelity*, 5.
- <sup>50</sup> Cleveland, *Christian and Deist*, 5.
- <sup>51</sup> Cleveland, *Causes of Infidelity*, 24.
- <sup>52</sup> Cleveland, *Causes of Infidelity*, 6-7.
- <sup>53</sup> Cleveland, *Causes of Infidelity*, 6.
- <sup>54</sup> Cleveland, *Causes of Infidelity*, 8-13.
- <sup>55</sup> Cleveland, *Causes of Infidelity*, 14-15.
- <sup>56</sup> Cleveland, *Divine Revelation*, 4.
- <sup>57</sup> Cleveland, *Divine Revelation*, 3.
- <sup>58</sup> Dorcas Hiller Cleveland, *The Divine Authority of the Christian Revelation Acknowledged* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1829), 12.
- <sup>59</sup> Cleveland, *Divine Authority*, 12.
- <sup>60</sup> Cleveland, *Divine Authority*, 8.
- <sup>61</sup> Cleveland, *Providence, Faith, and Prayer*, 8-9.
- <sup>62</sup> Cleveland, *Christian and Deist*, 10.
- <sup>63</sup> Cleveland, *Christian and Deist*, 16.
- <sup>64</sup> Cleveland, *Christian and Deist*, 21.
- <sup>65</sup> See William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), 1-19.
- <sup>66</sup> Cleveland, *Christian and Deist*, 20.
- <sup>67</sup> Cleveland, *Christian and Deist*, 21.
- <sup>68</sup> Cleveland, *Christian and Deist*, 21 [emphasis added].
- <sup>69</sup> Cleveland, *Divine Revelation*, 9.
- <sup>70</sup> Cleveland, *Divine Revelation*, 15.
- <sup>71</sup> Cleveland, *Divine Revelation*, 10.
- <sup>72</sup> Cleveland, *Divine Revelation*, 9.
- <sup>73</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), 7.
- <sup>74</sup> Margaret Fuller and Donna Dickenson, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century and Other Writings* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 19.
- <sup>75</sup> Fuller and Dickenson, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century and Other Writings*, 18.
- <sup>76</sup> Nina Baym, "The Ann Sisters: Elizabeth Palmer Peabody's Gendered Millennialism," *Feminism and American Literary History: Essays* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 140.