The Price We Pay: The Demise of the Harlem Unitarian Church

Even... a free liberal church must pay the price. There is the price of tolerating all the different types of persons all the varying types of minds which are attracted by the word liberal. It must pay the price of a small following while it slowly, painfully builds up itself without compromise, without the shadow of a turning either to the right or the left. We here know it is a hard price to pay, for we all have a liking for the crowd.... And at our best we thank God that we are willing to pay the price, if this is the price which loyalty to Truth demands—believing that the day will come when real success will crown our efforts, and that in those days we shall realize that the success attained at last has fully paid us for the price we paid in heart-breaking toil and in faith disturbing patience.

—Rev. Ethelred Brown, “The Price We Pay”

The 1940s and 1950s were especially tumultuous years for the Harlem Unitarian Church. Although Rev. Brown invested heart and soul in his efforts to make this church a reality, he saw himself as the only person able to bring this to fruition. Consequently, Rev. Brown’s personal determination and enthusiasm regarding his ministry took its toll on those around him. Although Brown was able to keep his church movement going for over three decades, his personal life deteriorated as a result of his stubbornness. From 1922 until 1942, Ella Matilda Brown, Rev. Brown’s wife, suffered a series of debilitating nervous breakdowns. She finally recovered in 1942 but died on November 1, 1947. As can be imagined, her mental collapse was a considerable hardship on the Brown family. Of their six children, one
son, an alcoholic, was sent to an asylum while another son committed suicide. Tragically, Brown died at the age of eighty without building the edifice for the Harlem Unitarian Church. The church Rev. Brown loved so dearly folded shortly after his death in 1956.

Having always struggled with a small number of attendees, the Harlem Unitarian Church was now fighting for its very survival. No stranger to marginalization, Rev. Brown speculated that the Harlem Unitarian Church and the liberal religion it embodied had fallen out of favor with its neighbors. In September 1947, Rev. Brown addressed this dilemma as a twofold crisis during a Sunday service. First, there was a “menacing tide of fanaticism and superstition and ignorance wrongly labeled as religion” that had to be stopped. Second and more importantly, Brown contended that “the youth of Harlem…have intellectually outgrown the popular teachings of the orthodox churches” that dominated the local scene. With indefatigable zeal, Brown reassured his congregation that in spite of those dual trends there was still a disaffected contingent in Harlem that might receive the Unitarian movement as “a type of religion which appeals to and satisfies both mind and heart,” rather than merely being a compromise “between a discredited orthodoxy and a sterile materialism.”

But Brown’s defiant proclamations about the end of religious orthodoxy were a bit premature.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the Black population in the United States was between estimated twelve and fifteen million individuals during the 1940s with eight million claiming membership in one of the mainline Black Church denominations. The statistics concerning Black religious self-identification vary somewhat due to the numerous Black alternative religious movements (the Nation of Islam, Father Divine’s Peace Mission, the Black Jews, storefront evangelicals, etc.) that lacked denominational associations. Nevertheless, these estimates reveal that about half of Black America was not gravitating toward liberal Christianity. Undeterred by this realization, Brown became more dedicated that ever to finding a home for his church in Harlem.

In addition to the transformations occurring on a national and international level, the church’s situation in Harlem also changed profoundly during this period. The core membership of the Harlem Unitarian Church departed from the church for various reasons. Socialist leader Frank R. Crosswaith became wholeheartedly devoted to the struggle of organized labor. Richard B. Moore’s involvement in the Harlem Unitarian Church gradually waned as he focused on a public campaign to abolish the common usage of the term “Negro”