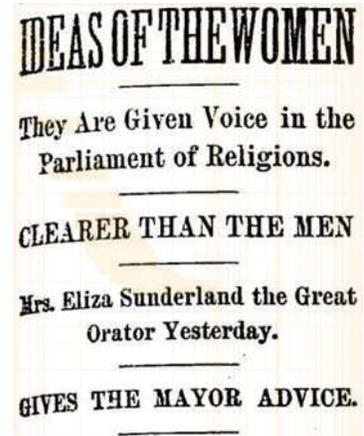


Eliza Jane Read Sunderland



Eliza Jane Read was born on an Illinois farm in 1839. Her father was a Quaker from Massachusetts. Her mother valued education for both her sons and her daughter. At age 15, Eliza began teaching at a district school where several men before her “had been driven out.” She quickly earned “the respect of the students much older than herself and maintained order in the classroom.” (Lavan, UU Bio) At age 24 she went east to Mt. Holyoke Seminary, graduated, and returned to Illinois to teach at the Aurora, Illinois High School. There, she became one of the first American women to be a High School Principal. She was noted for her excellence in teaching as well as her organizational and management skills.

In 1871, upon marrying the Reverend Jabez Sunderland of Wisconsin, Eliza gave up being a High School Principal. Both originally Baptist, in 1872, the Sunderlands converted to Unitarianism and Jabez was called to the Unitarian pulpit in Northfield, Massachusetts. They had three children, spent two years settled in Chicago, and came to Ann Arbor in 1878 when Jabez was called as the minister to succeed Charles Henry Brigham with the First Unitarian Society of Ann Arbor.

Eliza taught high school for five years in Ann Arbor. She then went on to spend five years of graduate study in philosophy and psychology at the University of Michigan, earning a PhD in Philosophy in 1892. Her dissertation was titled, “The Relation of the Philosophy of Kant to that of Hegel.” Two years later, a student petition failed to add women to the University of Michigan faculty. The petition had included the goal of adding Eliza to the faculty as an Assistant Professor of Philosophy. All along, Eliza kept an important, influential, and informal role at the University where she was a frequent public speaker and lecturer, she maintained a Bible Study for 17 years, and she counseled student, especially women.

Charles Henry Brigham began the Unitarian Bible Study in Ann Arbor. He was sent here specifically to influence the thinking of the students at the University. The work was briefly continued by his successor, Jabez Sunderland, who quickly gave that important work over to his wife, Eliza Jane. Eliza’s Bible Study and her lectures were regularly attended by upwards of 100 students. These were numbers rare for Bible Study, and unheard of for women educators.

The 1933 history of this Congregation confirms the attendance at Eliza Sunderland's Bible Study at over 100 students every week. It claims, "this was the largest attendance of any Bible class in town and the largest to assemble in the Unitarian Church in Ann Arbor at any time." The history interprets her achievement in this way.

"It is difficult to over-estimate the value of this one phase of the Sunderland's work here. The greatest number of university students who were in this manner brought in close touch with the doctrines of Unitarianism at this formative period of their lives - the number who must have seen the clarity and beauty of religious freedom thru this class - is one of the most cheering aspects of Unitarianism in this town. Too great tribute cannot be paid Mrs. Sunderland for her share in disseminating Unitarianism through the middle west."

Eliza Sunderland preached often and eloquently in Ann Arbor as well as for other pulpits, both Unitarian and Universalist. Seventy years before merger, Eliza taught that Unitarians and Universalists ought to join together. She held a special dislike for the conservative Christian doctrines of eternal punishment. And she preached a religion based not of rigid creeds but on faith and ethics uniting people in common ideals. Her considerable influence joined her husband in the theological and ecclesial arguments, characterized later as the Western Controversy, that nearly split the Western Unitarian Conference. The Sunderlands believed that all who would be credentialed Unitarian ministers in the West needed to confess a theistic theology. The younger voices wanted ethics and character as goals for clergy credentialing. In the end, a compromise was made. But, as we will hear in December, the seeds for a unique Western articulation of Unitarian theology were sown and would prosper.

In 1893, Eliza Sunderland was invited to speak in Chicago at the very first World Parliament of Religions. It was new to invite women to speak at gatherings of this size. It was new to articulate the goal of global dialogue on all religions. Eliza's speech was greeted with a standing ovation. "According to the *Chicago Tribune*, "Three thousand people in the hall of Columbus stood up and cheered and applauded the remarkable address of Mrs. Eliza R. Sunderland. Hers was the clearest and most eloquent voice in all the great parliament of religions yesterday." Eliza's speech, titled "A Serious Study of All Religions," called for an as yet undefined academic discipline, the comparative study of religion. "She defined religion as "a feeling out after a bond on union between the human and the divine." and claimed that the study of all religions was necessary to the intelligent comprehension of any one religion."" (Lavan, UU Bio).

Eliza Jane Sunderland pioneered the voice of educated strong women in this pulpit and in the international discourses on religion. At her death in 1910, she said, "I should have been glad for a few more years of work. but I am content; it is all right as it is, exactly right. I have been given a very beautiful life. If this is death, then it is beautiful too." (Lavan, UU Bio).

Presented by the Reverend Gail R Geisenhainer
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