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L. Griswold Williams and the Friends Reconstruction Unit

By Donne Hayden

Love is the Doctrine of this Church,
The quest of truth is its Sacrament,
And service is its Prayer.
To dwell together in Peace,
To seek knowledge in Freedom,
To serve mankind in Fellowship,
To the end that all souls shall grow
 into harmony with the Divine,
Thus do we Covenant with each other
 and with our God.

ARRANGED BY
L. GRISWOLD WILLIAMS

If you have ever attended a Unitarian Universalist (UU) church, this name may be familiar to you in connection with “the Williams Covenant” in the UU hymnal, *Singing the Living Tradition* (“Love is the doctrine of this church . . . ”). According to *Engaging our Theological Diversity* (2005), of 370 UU congregations responding to a survey, “A total of forty-two congregations reported regular use of the Williams covenant, twenty-seven of them with some adaptation” (102).

Though the words in the covenant still resonate with some contemporary UUs, most know little about the man responsible for them. In the Eldorado congregation, for instance, these words—slightly modified—are at the front of the church on a nicely painted plaque. Long before I came to be their minister, the congregation had been reciting these words every Sunday, re-affirming their belief that “Love is the doctrine” of their church. I became curious about the person credited with “arranging” the

covenant my congregation says every Sunday. In researching Williams, in addition to the reference in *Engaging our Theological Diversity* mentioned above, I found the following information:

- L. Griswold Williams is listed in Susan M. Shaw's *An Annotated Bibliography of Universalist Hymn and Song Books* as Chairman of the Universalist Commission on Hymns and Services which, along the Unitarian Commission on Hymns and Services chaired by Henry Wilder Foote, produced the 1937 hymnal, *Hymns of the Spirit, With Services*.
- Griswold Williams was the editor/compiler of a book published in 1933, *Antiphonal Readings for Free Worship* in which the "Williams Covenant" first appeared.

That's it. Griswold Williams does not appear in the *Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography*, nor is other information about him readily available. The fact that I could find no biographical information spurred me to do more research. Among other things, I now have copies of some of his personal papers from the Andover-Harvard Theological Library, and, as an amateur genealogist, I found other sources that give a clear picture of a certain period in the life of this brilliant young man.

Using old newspaper accounts, reports from the Bureau of Investigation (forerunner of the FBI), copies of Williams' draft registration and passport applications, as well as Rufus Jones' book, *A Service of Love in Wartime*, I uncovered fascinating information about Griswold Williams' experiences as a young Universalist minister at the beginning of World War I.

To begin, Leo Griswold Williams entered Meadville Theological School in 1912 at age 19. He was dismissed in 1915 from Meadville for his activities in a student strike against the war. Following his dismissal from Meadville, Griswold Williams went West to Ohio. There the fresh-faced 22-year-old from Connecticut spent a year as a circuit-riding preacher for small Universalist congregations in and around Greenville, Ohio, and in 1916, he was hired as minister of All Soul's Universalist church in Marion, Ohio.

During Williams' last year at seminary and his first years as a Universalist minister, war raged across Europe. By 1917, President Woodrow Wilson was succumbing to pressure for the United States to enter the war on the side of Britain and France against Germany and its allies. To gain the support of a

reluctant American people, propaganda stressing the necessity of America's participation in the war began to appear in debates and newspapers. As he read newspapers and listened to speakers, young Griswold Williams held strong opinions about the United States entering the European war.

To understand some of his sentiments and put ourselves in the minds of those who lived at the time, we must erase what we know of world wars, depressions and "police actions," and consider U.S. participation in a war in Europe using only history up to 1917. In 1917, the United States had never fought a war on foreign soil—the Revolutionary War was fought against the British who were an occupying force; the War of 1812 was also fought to stop encroachment of the British; the Civil War of course was fought in America; the so-called 1846 War with Mexico was fought on the western frontiers of the United States. Only the 109-day Spanish-American War of 1898 came close to being "a foreign war"; it initially focused on Spanish territories in the Caribbean, and eventually extended to the Philippines. But American soldiers in Europe? This was a new and unpopular notion. In fact, the famous orator and populist, William Jennings Bryan, then Secretary of State, resigned over Wilson's decision to get America involved in the European War.

The United States officially declared war on Germany April 6, 1917, but the debate over whether to do so or not had been going on for some time. Two months before war was declared, Griswold Williams wrote a letter to the editor of the *Marion Tribune*, published February 23, 1917, in which he expressed opposition to the United States entering the war. As the son of working class parents (his father was a silk dyer and his mother a dressmaker), Williams was concerned that the common working man was being led to fight, kill and die for a cause not properly his own. Here is an excerpt from his letter to the editor:

I read only the other day that the exports of the United States had increased three billions or one hundred per cent in three years. It seems passing strange that in times of such prosperity, men, women and little children should be without food, starving in the midst of luxury. These half fed laborers are being told that they must be ready to defend our legitimate rights by going out and murdering as many Germans as they can. I for one wish to register myself as one who refuses to do any of this defending. If the owners want the markets let them do the fighting, not the workers. The workers of America have no quarrel with the workers of any other country. Is this unpatriotic? If you mean by patriotism the willingness to die for the good of humanity, then I am a Patriot, but if you

mean the willingness to die for the sake of bank accounts of the Capitalists of this country, I am not. For the sake of the working men of the world whose struggle for Justice is one, and in the name of the workingman of Nazareth, Brother of Humanity, I refuse to uphold or engage in any war.

—L. Griswold Williams, Minister, All Souls Church Universalist

A few months later, in the week leading up to Sunday June 3, 1917, Williams had printed and distributed the following cards announcing his sermon for Sunday evening.

There is the Patriotism of the gunmaker who wants his country to fight to maintain his bloody trade. There is the Patriotism of the woman willing to have her sons die in battle. There is the Patriotism of the food speculator who waves a flag to cover his theft. There is the Patriotism of those who believe that war can be ended by war, and there is the Patriotism of a Follower of Jesus.

The day after he gave that sermon, on June 4, he registered with the Marion, Ohio draft board as a conscientious objector, giving “religious beliefs” as his reason. A month later on July 4, he gave a speech on the steps of the Marion County courthouse. The incident made statewide news; for instance, from the *Hamilton Evening Journal*, July 6, 1917:

Tonight the United States District Attorney at Cleveland was requested to send a federal officer [to Marion] for Rev. L. Griswold Williams, pastor of All Souls' Universalist church, who has been under the surveillance of Postmaster Frank T. Campbell for several weeks because of his alleged pro-German utterances.

Mr. Williams in an address on the courthouse esplanade, scolded President Wilson and the government for warring against Germany until an angry crowd forced him to stop speaking.

Though there was much excitement, the minister was at no time in danger of physical violence, according to the police (“BAKER STOPPED At Marion In His Haranguing Against War”).

And from the *Elyria Evening Telegram*, July 7, 1917:

Marion, July 7—On the heels of the meeting on the court house steps Fourth of July night, when Rev. Griswold Williams of All Souls' Universalist church is alleged to have delivered an address against America sending troops and supplies to Europe, a meeting of the church congregation was held and it was decided not to re-employ Rev. Mr. Williams when his contract expires. His first year as pastor will not be up until Nov. 30 (“WON'T RE-EMPLOY PASTOR”).

Some concerned citizens reported the activities of young Griswold Williams to the Bureau of Investigation (forerunner of the FBI), and on July 20, 1917, Special Agent Mulholland was sent to Marion, Ohio to investigate the “German neutrality” of Griswold Williams. Here is the report he filed.

July 24, 1917 - Enroute from Cleveland to Marion, Ohio, arriving at Marion at 3:00 o'clock.

The information at hand against Rev. L. Griswold Williams was to this effect.

Rev. Williams is charged with having repeatedly denounced the Government method of conscription, declaring that the U.S. Government had not the right to send soldiers abroad, and publicly advised and coaxed [sic] the young men to pay no attention to Government demands; that the Government had no right to send food supplies or munitions to the allies, when the people in the United States were starving. He denounced the Stars and Stripes as a "filthy rag" unworthy the respect of anyone, and he refused to permit the patriotic women of his congregation to use the flag in church decoration. The informant states that his conduct in this regard seemed to grow more radical and vituperative [sic] with every utterance, and that his action is having a baneful effect upon the young men of this community and should be immediately suppressed. The informant gives the following witnesses to Rev. Williams conduct.

J. H. Eymon,	Marion, Ohio, Attorney at Law
Geo. Cook,	" " Ohio, Manufacturer
Ed Dorwood	" " Mechanic
H. W. Donithin	" " Attorney at Law
Robt. Cheney	" " Painter
Geo. McCormich	" " Newspaper Reporter

Upon arriving at Marion I called at the office of Mr. Eymon, not finding him in I went to the Post Office and interviewed Postmaster Campbell [sic]. The Postmaster first called my attention to an open letter written by Rev. Williams and addressed to the

Editor of the Marion Tribune. . . . It will be noted that this came out before war was declared between the United States and Germany.

While nothing further was said by Williams after the publication of this letter, nevertheless his attitude did not change. . . . [however]

Instead of making the statements set forth by me in the first part of this report, the witnesses testify that the following was said by Williams, on the night of July 4th, at which meeting Williams was told to get down off the stump, which he did. The statements of Williams on the occasion just mentioned:

- (1) "Pastors of Marion have no right to talk against Germany nor call Germany unchristian and stir their people up against them."
- (2) "This Government has no right to send men to European Countries."
- (3) "No one man should have the power to send men to war to be killed."
- (4) "The United States has no right to send men to France under the protection of the American flag."
- (5) "This nation has no right to send food to Europe when there are hundreds starving at home."

After careful consideration of these words as uttered by Williams, I could not find where there was a case for the Federal Authorities. It was also reported that Williams had called the American flag a "filthy rag." This however I believe is not true as no where could I find a person who could testify to this.

I interviewed all of the men mentioned in my report, save Messrs. Cheney, Cook and McCormick. Each man was there and heard all that was said, and they all testify to the same thing.

It was also reported that Williams would not allow the women of the congregation to put up the American flag at the church. This also is unfounded as the

most he done in this respect was to take no part in putting the flag up even though he was around at the time.

About 9:30 this evening I located Williams and took him to the Sheriff's office and there questioned him at length. He was born in this country as was his Father and Mother, and has lived here all his life. . . About 11:30 P.M. I released him after I had cautioned him to be careful in the future about what he said.

On October 11, 1917, the unemployed Griswold Williams attended a Universalist gathering in Brooklyn, New York where he came under the suspicious eye of Harris Crist, influential editor of the *Brooklyn Eagle* newspaper, who reported him to the Bureau of Investigation for his "anti-Conscriptionist" activities. Here is the report filed by Special Agent Bradley on October 13:

Information was given me yesterday by Mr. Harris M. Crist of the Brooklyn Eagle that the Rev. Griswold Williams at a meeting of delegates of the Universal Church held in Brooklyn on October 11th had introduced and secured the passage of a very cleverly worded resolution which in substance put the church on record as being against the war. Shortly after the passage of this resolution Mr. Williams, who seemed very much elated thereby, stated that it would make a good article for the "Call" and other papers of a like character. The resolution was then carefully examined by other delegates and when its nature was fully ascertained it was promptly repealed at the evening session of the delegates. Mr. Crist informed me that he understood that Mr. Williams had been dismissed from his parish in Marion, Ohio for his pacifist and anti-conscription and otherwise un-American attitude, and that he was now endeavoring to secure a call to the Universal Church in Rockport, N.Y.¹ Mr. Crist further stated that he was informed that Mr. Williams had an abundant supply of pacifist literature in his possession and that was staying temporarily as a guest of M.J. Gaus, 761 Kenmore Place Brooklyn but that Mr. Gaus highly disapproved of Williams' attitude and that he was not a personal friend of his but simply was entertaining him as a visiting minister.

This information was reported immediately upon receipt to Assistant Division Superintendent Baker who instructed me to make a formal report thereof but to take no further action in the premises.

Sometime in the next six months, Griswold Williams was hired as minister at First Universalist Church in Lockport, New York where at least some of the congregation supported his pacifist beliefs. He also became aware of Rufus Jones and the American Quakers who were organizing non-military service alternatives for their young men who had been drafted in spite of their religious beliefs.

By April 20, 1918, Griswold Williams was in the lengthy process of applying for a passport to go to France to work with the American Friends Reconstruction Unit.

¹ Probably Lockport, N.Y. as that is where Williams was employed in the spring of 1918 when he applied for a passport.

Later that year, in the Marne Valley of France, he wrote the following poem which is quoted in Rufus Jones' book, *A Service of Love in Wartime*.

THE FRIENDS RECONSTRUC'TION UNIT - THE MANUFACTURING DEPARTMENT

by L. Griswold Williams, in France, 1918

I've been making windows—
 Oak windows in our shop along the river—
 Thinking of where they'll go and what they'll maybe do:
 Windows to overlook the crumpled roofs of clattering towns,
 To open out across the silent wastedness of trampled farms,
 On white-scarred vineyard slopes,
 Or shattered woodlands healing at the touch of Spring.

Some may be gates of magic liberation,
 Giving on living worlds of leaf and sky,
 Where those whose feet can never tread dear earth
 Shall send their spirits wandering far;
 At these will children climb to greet the infant moon,
 Or press their noses tight, watching the first snow feathers fall;
 Through here may little breaths of morning murmur;
 This humble shrine day's glowing altar fires. . . .

And I've been making doors—
 Doors that shall open as a sheltering hand to harassed hearts
 Praying a solace in some broken place;
 Doors guarding at last those helpless ones
 Guns could not guard nor armies make secure.

Here homing age may fumble at a lock,
 Or venturing youth push wide with eager hand;
 This door may usher Birth with hopefulness,
 Close quietly when Death has passed with friendly eyes,
 Or part relentlessly two lovers, lingering with reluctant lips at dusk;
 Here may a woman lean with shadowed face,
 Waiting a lad who lies in an untrilled field. . . .

I've not made doors and windows for chateaux or palaces—
 Only for little wooden *démontables*²
 To shelter mostly simple folk
 Dripped from the grinding jaws of War.
 Red tiles will be for roof, the walls be brown, and green the
 white-knobbed doors.
 The sections bolt together easily,
 As barren as a shed for animals almost,
 Until my doors and windows make it—Home. . . .

² “*Démontable*” – adjective describing something that may be disassembled. The “pre-fab” houses Friends constructed for French villages were called “*les démontables*.”

O patient Master Workman of the world,
Shaper of all this home of humankind!
Teach me the truer trade of making doors and windows for men's souls:
Windows for letting in Love's widening dawn,
Doors swinging outward freely on Truth's pleasant ways.

Now, when I read the Covenant for a Free Church, I can see that for L. Griswold Williams, “Love,” “Truth,” “Service,” “Peace,” “Freedom,” “serving mankind,” and “harmony with the Divine” were not empty words. He knew about love and service, tested and honed in wartime. His was faith in action. Listen again:

Love is the Doctrine of this Church,
The quest of truth is its Sacrament,
And service is its Prayer.
To dwell together in Peace,
To seek knowledge in Freedom,
To serve mankind in Fellowship,
To the end that all souls shall grow
 into harmony with the Divine,
Thus do we Covenant with each other
 and with our God.