

He could have had a comfortable life as an advisor to Kings. He could have had a long and illustrious career as Governor in Massachusetts Bay. He could have lived to a ripe old age. He could have done any of those things, but, instead Henry Vane chose to pursue his convictions with the determination borne of righteousness.

Born in 1612, this son of Henry Vane, could have capitalized on the trusted positions his father held. Henry Vane the elder entertained royalty, and enjoyed their confidence in positions of power, and eventually became Secretary of State. Henry Vane the Younger became convinced of the Puritan view however, and took one of his first principled stands at Oxford. He would not give allegiance to the Church of England. He went instead to spend time on the Continent, especially Geneva, where he studied, with great passion, religion and theology.

After some time, he returned to England, where his Puritan beliefs made him an embarrassment to his father, and an annoyance to the King. Even the Bishop could not dissuade the younger Vane of his Puritan beliefs. Henry Vane set his mind on going to the Bay Colony, a move both his father and the monarch thought the wisest course. And, indeed it was a good move, at first. In the first year of his residence, and at the tender age of 24, he was elected Governor of Massachusetts.

Demonstrating an ability to negotiate successful alliances, Vane ably addressed the first crisis of his administration. On the day he was elected there were no fewer than 15 foreign ships in the harbor, each one representing a threat to the stability of the fledgling colony. Vane invited the captains of the ships to dinner and worked out an agreement that established a system of passes and inspections, as well as a sunset curfew for sailors wandering about on shore.

In the same year Henry Vane arrived in Massachusetts, Roger Williams was exiled by law for religious views not welcome in Puritan settlements. As luck would have it, Williams settled in Narragansett Bay, and there established good relations with the native tribe of the same name. In the areas south and west called Connecticut, the Puritans were chaffing at the presence and needs of the Pequot tribes, and the Pequot War was heating up. A Pequot and Narragansett alliance would put Massachusetts at grave risk, and so Governor Vane appealed to Roger Williams to begin negotiations with the Narragansetts. After initial talks bore some fruit several sachems and twenty other Narragansett traveled to Boston, dined with the Governor, and left with a treaty that aligned the Narragansetts with the English around them.

Despite the outstanding successes of his administration, Governor Vane would soon disclose an adherence to principles of liberty that would cost him the next election. Anne Hutchinson and her family followed John Cotton (a minister of First Church) to Massachusetts. Anne Hutchinson began the practice of gathering a group to hear and study a sermon each week. In the beginning, her gatherings attracted only women, but, after a while men, including Henry Vane, became regulars. Anne Hutchinson was not shy about sharing her theological views, even though those often differed from the ministers who regularly preached from the pulpits. She believed, among other things, that each person could experience the Holy Spirit directly in their own life, and that a person so endowed with the Holy Spirit was not bound to laws. This last is known as the Antinomian (or anti-law) view, and in a rules and laws oriented faith, the unruly freedom of such beliefs are especially unwelcome. Anne Hutchinson also suggested that the outward piety of a person was not a sure sign of the inward purity of that person. Henry Vane's biographer (Charles Wentworth Upham) finds that this last was her fatal flaw. She was known to "utter disparaging criticisms upon the discourse of the preceding Sunday or Lecture-day, to circulate insinuations against the learning and talents of the clergy, and even to start suspicions respecting the soundness of their preaching." Moreover, she found John Cotton imbued with the Spirit, but the other minister at First Church – Mr. Wilson – she decried as one who did not have the substance of salvation implanted in his soul.

What Anne Hutchinson said – to whom she said it – and who she offered freely to criticize – all led to a trial for heresy. One of Anne Hutchinson's few supporters, and a fellow congregant at First Church, Governor Henry Vane, took up her cause. But, the formidable opposition of almost all the clergy led to Anne Hutchinson's exile as a heretic.

It also led to the end of Governor Vane's service as magistrate. At the very next election, the minister, Mr. Wilson climbed a tree outside the polls and exhorted the voters to oust Henry Vane. Then, when John Winthrop took office, the majority instituted a law that forbid anyone from accepting a stranger as a guest without that person passing the muster of magistrates. In other words, every new person who came to Massachusetts would first be vetted, and accepted only if their beliefs reflected the proper Puritan theology. Henry Vane wrote a pamphlet opposing the new law, and in it some essentials of the beliefs that led him to support Anne Hutchinson are outlined.

Though Henry Vane was a Puritan, choosing to live with other Puritans in Massachusetts, he was a firm believer in religious liberty. In a pamphlet entitled, "A Brief Answer to a certain Declaration, made of the Intent and Equity of the Order of Court, that none should be received to inhabit within this jurisdiction but such as should be allowed by some of the magistrates." Henry Vane answered Winthrop's argument that churches have the power to accept or reject people at their will with his own theological findings. "...Should churches have this power, as you say they have, to receive or reject at their discretion, they would quickly grow corrupt enough. Churches have no liberty to receive or reject, at their discretions, but at the discretion of Christ...When Christ opens a door to any, there's none may take the liberty to shut them out. In one word, there is no liberty to be taken, neither in church nor commonwealth, but that which Christ gives and is according unto him." In his 'Brief Answer, etc.' Henry Vane might be thought only to include Christian thinkers in his liberal view, but, in later writings he points out that Christians cannot know what the future of any religious belief might be, and again he concludes that only Christ (or God) will judge between religious perspectives. All religions, Vane believed, are to be tolerated, and none made special by state protection and furtherance.

So it is that we claim Henry Vane as one of our own. Not only was he attached to First Church Boston, which is to this day a Unitarian Universalist congregation; but, his very understanding of the Christian gospel preceeds and parallels the inclusivity we still seek in our congregations and country.

Today, we are often surrounded by Christians who see their faith a bulwark against change. They want a creed cast in stone, exempt from new revelations. Some would even turn the clock back to 1638, when Anne Hutchinson was excommunicated from First Church, in part because she gathered other women around her to discuss theology. But, that is not the Christian faith Henry Vane espoused. He found instead a faith that encouraged him to see his Christ standing over and behind new discoveries, new theologies, new hope for the human race. This is the liberality of thought that created the foundation for Unitarian Universalism. It reveals an attitude toward difference that is open and unafraid. It couples humility with faith, and sets aside the arrogance that rejects scientific knowledge and challenging theologies. It is the attitude toward which all Unitarian Universalists can and should strive, whether they call themselves UU Buddhists, or UU Christians, or UU Humanists.

Henry Vane returned to England and was elected to Parliament in 1640. There, he was recognized as an orator and a champion of liberty. He believed fervently in the right of the people to govern themselves. Unfortunately this was not the belief held by the reigning King Charles. After a series of onerous taxes imposed by Charles, Parliament began to oppose the monarch vigorously. Once again demonstrating his skills in negotiating alliances, Henry Vane headed a delegation to Scotland, and there crafted an agreement that brought the Scottish and English together in opposition. After the civil war, the victors in Parliament decided Charles should die. Vane opposed regicide and removed himself from Parliament when he could see no hope of turning aside the execution.

Oliver Cromwell came to power ready to proclaim himself the next monarch. This was not the outcome Vane had worked toward, but, it's very opposite. He wrote an impassioned plea promoting liberty for the people, a voice in decisions through a 400 member Parliament, and a convention to draft a constitution that would set out the minimum requirements of liberty. The "first right" Vane wrote, should be to "have and enjoy the freedom ...to set up meet persons in the place of supreme judicature and authority among them whereby they may have the use and benefit of the choicest light and wisdom of the nation that they are capable to call forth, for the rule and government under which they will live..." The second right Vane reserved was freedom in "matters of religion, or that concern the service and worship of God." He wrote, "For why shouldst thou set at naught thy brother in matters of faith and conscience, and herein intrude into the proper office of Christ..." arguing again that matters of faith and belief will be decided by a court exceeding human grasp.

Henry Vane the Younger's vision was not brought to bear, and in fact he was imprisoned for the ideas it encompassed. Vane retired from political life. Then, Cromwell died and a new opportunity to put forth the foundations of a republic preserving essential liberties and rights for the people arose. Henry Vane took himself again to the electorate, and though the power-elite cheated him out of two elections, he was seated in a third successful election. He worked hard to bring the elements of a republic to the fore; but, Oliver Cromwell had named his son, Richard, as his successor in the Protectorate and the tide of support seemed to be in his favor.

Once again standing on the side of his convictions, Vane read a speech opposing the second Cromwell, he said, in part: "One could bear a little with Oliver Cromwell, though, contrary to his oath of fidelity to Parliament...he usurped the government. His merit was so extraordinary,

that our judgment and passions might be blinded by it. He made his way to empire by the most illustrious actions. He held under his command an army that had made him a conqueror, and a people that had made him their general.

But as for Richard Cromwell, his son, who is he?...And, what is of more importance in this case, is he fit to get obedience from a mighty nation, who could never make a footman obey him...For my part, I declare, Sir, it shall never be said that I made such a man my master.”

Routed by Vane, Richard Cromwell and his party withdrew, and a new season of preparing to set up a government began. Vane was instrumental in the committees that deliberated, and they came back with a report that included a constitution, ousted the position of monarch, and declared against compulsion in faith and worship.

But, then, the army helped Charles II rise to the throne. Those who were so outspoken against the monarchy and in favor of the establishment of a republic were in distinct danger. Henry Vane the Younger was set under house arrest, then sent to the Isles of Scilly for two years. Returned for trial, the verdict was set before the opening arguments, and Sir Henry Vane was taken to the Tower and beheaded.

Through all his life Vane sought the liberties of self-governance, guided by a constitution. He proposed, defended, and found himself defeated in the struggle to establish freedom of religion. Though we are separated from him by almost 400 years of history, in attitude and vision it seems we are only removed by a few years. As Unitarian Universalists we work in the public arena to help insure liberty as a right for all the people. We struggle as individuals and in our congregations to make ‘religious liberty’ more than just a catch-phrase. We defend the right of each to hold his or her credo, and we seek the humility that reminds us we cannot judge another person’s beliefs.

Those 400 years stand as a testament to the gains that have been made in each succeeding century. None of us will lose our heads over liberty and religious freedom. Perhaps the best we can hope for is that each of us will lose our hearts to one cause, or maybe two, that can shape our country, our Association, our future more firmly along the lines of justice and equality.