

Endmatter

A NINETEENTH-CENTURY IRASIAN: SARAH ALDEN BRADFORD RIPLEY

by Joan W. Goodwin

Abstract. Almost entirely self-educated, Sarah Alden Bradford Ripley (1793–1867) combined wide-ranging personal studies with the daily responsibilities of a New England minister's wife, mother, and teacher in her husband's boarding school. As she struggled to reconcile the conventional Unitarian Christian beliefs of her time with her own life experience and with the discoveries of advancing science, her childhood faith gave way to skepticism. Gradually she was able to integrate her understanding of nature, science, philosophy, and religion into a mature faith. She would have welcomed the companionship and support of IRAS if it had existed in her day.

Keywords: afterlife; deism; self-cultivation; skepticism; supernatural rationalism; transcendentalism; Unitarian.

For a number of years, I have been working on a biography of Sarah Alden Bradford Ripley, a little-known but fascinating woman who lived in the Boston area from 1793 to 1867. As daughter of a sea captain, wife of a Unitarian parish minister, mother of seven, and teacher of boys preparing for Harvard, her external life was more or less conventional for the period. Intellectually and spiritually, however, she lived on the cutting edge and struggled to reconcile the internal contradictions of a Unitarian worldview that clung to traditional tenets of Christianity even as it opened the door to new thought in philosophy and science.

Now that I have joined the Institute on Religion in an Age of

Joan W. Goodwin is an independent scholar whose address is 56 Hawes Street, Brookline, MA 02146. This essay is adapted from a vesper talk given at the IRAS Star Island Conference in 1994. Quotations from the Sarah Alden Bradford Ripley Papers are used with permission of the Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, Mass.

[*Zygon*, vol. 31, no. 1 (March 1996).]

© 1996 by the Joint Publication Board of *Zygon*. ISSN 0591-2385

Science (IRAS) and attended two of its Star Island gatherings, I realize that Sarah Bradford Ripley would fit right into the organization if she were living today. Instead, this nineteenth-century “IRASian” spent a lifetime in a lonely effort to synthesize her inherited religious faith and the revelations of science, which she eagerly welcomed. This brilliant woman, largely self-educated, read the books that constituted the literary, theological, and philosophical canon of the day and those that challenged the prevailing ideas. Learned in science and mathematics as well as letters, she struggled with the questions her studies posed to her religion. How she would have welcomed an IRAS Star Island conference where she could have found companionship in her soul-wrestling!

Young Sarah Bradford was fortunate in having parents who believed that daughters as well as sons should be well educated. She was allowed to study Latin along with her brothers and later independently learned Greek. Her father brought home from his European travels books of all kinds in many languages, which Sarah eagerly devoured. Everything interested her. Literature was a special love, but she early branched out into mathematics and the sciences.

Her first and lifelong study was botany, thought in the early nineteenth century to be especially appropriate for young women. It was, according to Sarah,

an innocent amusement and enables us to discover Divine Wisdom, even in the construction of the smallest flower. . . . What a world of wonders the vegetable creation unfolds to the enquiring eye! If the grand, magnificent, stupendous frame of some parts of the Divine scheme have oft compelled the exclamation “what is man that thou art mindful of him,” how instantly is the doubt relieved when we behold the admirable and complicated provision for the preservation, multiplication, and dispersion of the most minute and to limited human knowledge apparently most useless species of vegetation! (Ripley Papers)

Still in her teens, she took on astronomy and chemistry. In 1811, when a blazing comet appeared over the Boston area, Sarah read all the current commentary on comets and, later, on sunspots. She was delighted to “hear Dr. Herschel talk about strata of stars as a naturalist would about as many layers of earth.”

A five-volume French work on chemistry and natural history Sarah found “quite elementary, perfectly intelligible” and described herself as “up to the mind’s elbows in carbon.” There was, she thought, “something vastly amusing and novel in the variety of chemical changes and rapidity of chemical combinations.” The family kitchen became a laboratory for her evening diversion, a chemical analysis of leftovers from the family meals.

In a letter to a friend, written in her early twenties, Sarah made an attempt to put it all together:

What a noble simplicity we observe in every department of natural philosophy, characterizing the Divine operations, numberless phenomena apparently unconnected and opposite are traced as the results of the same general law operating in different circumstances, the floating feather, falling leaf, Jupiter rolling in his orbit are but varied exemplifications of the great principle of gravitation. How many different effects are produced by the tendency of caloric to an equilibrium? the marble table chills your hand while it melts the piece of ice applied. On the power of chemical attraction depend all the phenomena of the science. [W]e observe its regular effects, give names to the various combinations it forms and changes it causes in bodies, but here our investigations stop, all beyond is the terra incog[nita] of speculations, we can in no way explain the affinity of one substance for another, the acute eye of the chemist can no more perceive the secret instrument which the metal employs to seize the oxygen from the air than the telescope of the astronomer discover the invisible chain which binds to our sun the comet visiting regularly our system after an absence of centuries. In all his enquiries in natural science the philosopher must at last arrive at some general law of which no account can be given, which can be resolved alone into Omnipotence; religion here comes in aid of philosophy and points "the unambiguous footsteps of a god"; to the student of moral taste and feeling it is a demonstration worth the most laboured and artful the metaphysician ever frames, but I am ranting as usual in pompous style on subjects that I do not understand; a dissertation on sleep would be much more level to my faculties just at the present moment. (Ripley Papers)

Despite her characteristic self-deprecation, she was beginning to synthesize the insights of science and religion. However, divine revelation through nature was not enough, according to the supernatural rationalist Unitarians. Revelation through Scripture also was necessary, and Sarah plunged into German biblical criticism with her usual zest for learning. Her father gave her permission to buy Johann Jakob Griesbach's two thick volumes of the New Testament in Greek with a dry critical introduction in Latin, which she later described as "far more exciting than any reading can ever be to me again." Though very few New Englanders knew German at the time, Sarah located a German grammar and a German dictionary with definitions in French and Russian and proceeded to teach herself enough of the language to read Johann Gottfried Eichhorn's New Testament criticism in the original.

The early years of the nineteenth century were a time of controversy in the church as Unitarians became increasingly articulate and Trinitarians increasingly hardened in their stance. Sarah had little patience with theological disputation but fell into the midst of it when she married the Reverend Samuel Ripley of Waltham. After eight or ten years of witnessing parish squabbles, coping with the

demands of her own steadily growing family, and tending a boarding school under her own roof, she felt a growing dichotomy between her life experience and the tenets and tone of Unitarianism. "The new school says action produces the conviction of the divinity within; my experience is negative," she wrote tersely from the midst of her "bustle of life." Still she persisted with her own reading and study in late hours after the household was settled for the night.

Sarah had grown up with the Unitarian idea that self-improvement was a moral obligation; however, the more she read and the more she reflected upon life, the farther she moved from the religion of her childhood and youth. Along with the importance of self-cultivation and the life of the mind, Sarah repeatedly heard preached the existence of a future state that would "reconcile the ways of God to man." In the spirit of intellectual freedom so dear to her, she read Hume, Voltaire, and the latest works in natural history as well as the basic Unitarian texts: Joseph Butler's *Analogy*, William Paley's *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy*, and the works of the "common sense" Scottish school by Thomas Reid and Dugald Stewart. Her reading, reflection, and experience led to conclusions in violation of the very keystone of Christian faith. She found no basis for belief in an afterlife.

Such personal doubts were troubling to this woman, who remembered having been "a zealous champion for liberty, glorying in the power of the human intellect, dreaming about human perfectibility, entering in imagination on a career of improvement to which even death would not form an interruption, much less an end." In her younger days, she wrote, nature was "clad to us in a gala dress, and we would not look at the deformities which it covered. There were no difficulties in the philosophy of mind or matter, in Theology all was clear, there was an answer to every objection which satisfied the answerer if not the objector." Now in her thirties, she was "certain of nothing but successive states of pain or pleasure. The mystery of human condition, a riddle without a solution, a gordian knot which metaphysicians and Theologians may cut but cant [*sic*] untie. Man a mere puppet moved by strings in the hand of some higher power."

She saw no "exalted purpose" to human life beyond that

for which the toadstool, the snail, and polypus, the oyster are produced, to propagate our race and fertilize the earth with our carcass, that it may raise another noble growth. The dirty planet on which we creep, if it were blotted from existence would not be missed, and generation after generation of our ephemeral race are passing in quick succession beneath its surface, and yet we flatter ourselves with the idea of having hereafter the whole range of the

Universe, of being admitted to the secret councils of the most High and perhaps employed on some mighty errand to other worlds and made ministers to them of weal or woe. (Ripley Papers)

Sarah's more orthodox friends were deeply concerned by her skepticism, some seeing her on the slippery slope from deism to atheism and fearing for her soul. Her husband, a conventional believer, knowing that she daily lived all Christian virtues regardless of her doubts, seems not to have seriously worried about her future state. To Sarah, however, "skepticism, my bad genius" was itself a kind of hell. "But oh for faith, faith unalloyed with doubt," she cried out. "But how to be obtained? Can one think oneself into it? Can one pray oneself into it? Can one dream oneself into it? Yes, dream, but not in the hurry and bustle of active life."

During the 1830s a new heresy emerged in the form of transcendentalism. Sarah and her husband, a kinsman of Ralph Waldo Emerson, were well acquainted with the ministers and writers who gathered around him in defiance of the old-guard Unitarians. Along with them, Sarah read Coleridge, Spinoza, Kant, Goethe, and others of the German romantic school, but she was not convinced that "human reason is a turnpike straight down from the divine. . . . The metaphysics of the head and heart are equally unsatisfying," she wrote; "the soul of the universe is the only conception which satisfies my imagination; but what have the conceptions of a finite mind to do with the essence of the infinite?" Always open to new ideas, Sarah remained a child of the enlightenment, honest enough to accept the limitations of her most strenuous intellectual searching, and suspicious of any leap of faith beyond what she thought verifiable.

Gradually she grew away from the church altogether, but she continued to read and search on her own and to follow scientific advances in many fields. Asa Gray of Harvard sent her a new French work on botany, which helped her to see things she had not observed before. She found it "much more satisfactory to begin from the root and study upwards, than to pick open a flower, count the stamens, refer it to a class and give it a name." When another botanical acquaintance, John Russell, set up his microscope on her parlor table, she excitedly wrote: "One could see the current of little globules passing up one side and down the other of the magnified cell. This is the Eureka of modern botany. Nothing was detected before so like the circulation of blood in the animal economy."

With Thomas Hill, Unitarian minister, mathematician, and later president of Harvard, Sarah carried on conversations and correspondence relating mathematics to botany and astronomy. She made a special study of cell structure and took careful notes from

works on comparative anatomy and paleontology by Georges Cuvier and Richard Owen, indicating a particular interest in the interrelationship and harmony of natural forms. When Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* was published, she was ready to take his side against all detractors.

Although Sarah's "doubting spirit" found little comfort and less guidance from what she called the "self-satisfied formalists which swarm in Unitarian pulpits," she finally began to come to terms with her skepticism. Although she regretted the loss of her youthful faith, she found no turning back from a deism that included a humanistic view of Jesus. By the time she reached her fifties, she was able to write: "How the line in life, nature, science, philosophy, religion constantly returns into itself. The opposite poles become one when the circle is completed. All truth revolves about one centre. All is a manifestation of one law."

If there had been an IRAS and a *Zygon* in her day, Sarah's soul-searching would have been less lonely. Although she was admired and respected within her circle for her quiet brilliance and wide-ranging knowledge, she was able to share her deepest thoughts with only a few intimates. As a reflective, often sharply critical layperson, she has her present-day counterparts, both lay and professional, who question established thinking. What she left us of her pilgrimage gives an interesting perspective to our continuing efforts to reconcile science and religion.

REFERENCE

Ripley, Sarah Alden Bradford. Papers. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, Mass.