

## The Unitarian Universalist Religious Educator



### **Sophia Lyon Fahs (1876-1978)**

Sophia Lyon Fahs was a woman whose work, spanning most of her 101 years of life, would reshape religious education in Unitarian Universalist churches across the nation, and would help restore the place of religious liberalism during a time when our heresies had become less, well, heretical.

Sophia was born in China in 1876, the daughter of Presbyterian missionaries. Her family moved back to the United States early in her life and as a teen she professed a passion to take up the missionary work of her parents. This particular passion would never be realized, at least not in the way that young Sophia envisioned.

In 1897, she graduated with a B.A. from Wooster College and began a lifelong relationship with the Student Volunteer Movement. She would travel to colleges, encouraging students to pledge themselves to service, often as missionaries. Through this work, she met fellow student volunteer Charles Harvey Fahs, whom she would marry in 1902.

Living in Chicago and working actively with the YWCA at this time, Sophia took courses at the University of Chicago where she was, to put it bluntly, radicalized by the likes of then University President William Rainey Harper and Professor John Dewey, one of the fathers of the progressive education movement.

Because of her husband's health, Sophia would never travel to do the missionary work she had first dreamed of. Instead, the couple lived in New York City where Harvey held a position with the Methodist Church's national board of Missions.

In New York, Sophia earned her M.A. at Columbia University's Teachers College in 1904, and graduated with a B.D. from Union Theological Seminary in 1926. She became one of the first women faculty

members at Union in 1927 as Instructor in Religious Education. During her time at Union, Sophia was also the principal of the Union School of Religion and a Sunday school teacher at a nearby church.

Sophia was embroiled in controversy concerning her teaching methods and views about religious education for young children. She worked to teach students about the humanity of Jesus and to place the Bible in its context – to be critical and thoughtful about the biblical texts. Most controversial during her time at Union was the fact that **Sophia encouraged young children to think for themselves about what religion or spirituality might mean to them.**

She finally departed from Union in 1944 and took a post as editor of *Parents* magazine. She also began to edit children's material for the American Unitarian Association and became editor of the Beacon Series of educational books.

There were two major themes in her work. As she put it, "We cannot give our children a growing and creative religious life. A fine religion is a personal achievement." Secondly, she said, "the building blocks of such a religion are a sense of wonder and a questioning mind."

During her work at Beacon, Sophia Lyon Fahs published some 40+ books, mostly focused on inter-cultural dialogue and experiential learning. As a religious educator, she continued to ask the same pressing questions. **"What if today's children were allowed to express freely their reactions to primary phenomena -- birth and death, sun and moon and stars, dreams, shadows, wind and rain? Should not children's inescapable confrontations with and reflection on these realities be the beginning of their religious education rather than Bible stories about people of long ago and far away?"**

Not only did she suggest delaying children's exposure to the Bible until they were ready for history generally, but she was even suggesting that children not be introduced to other people's idea of God until they had an opportunity to begin to develop their own.

In February 1959, at the age of 82, Sophia was ordained as a Unitarian Minister. She used the occasion of her ordination (in Bethesda, MD) to press for more reforms. She was by no means satisfied with what she had so far accomplished. In the ordination sermon, which she delivered herself, she shared her dreams with the congregation.

She had always dreamed of church schools with at least three hour sessions: time for dance, for art, for dramatics, and for meaningful spiritual growth. She dreamed of ministers who had been educated not only in liberal theology, but also trained as progressive educators in laboratory schools sponsored by the seminaries. She dreamed of seminaries that would graduate men and women who had been exposed "to the latest findings" in psychology, and all the natural sciences.

On April 17<sup>th</sup> in 1978, Sophia Lyon Fahs died at the age of 101 in Hamilton, Ohio. Many of the reforms she'd worked effortlessly toward have been adopted and live on in UU churches across the nation. Yet, to me, her most lasting legacy may be the simple sounding notion that Yes, it matters what we believe. In a responsive reading of this name (#657 in the grey hymnal), we can hear her voice as we read the words, **"beliefs are like gateways opening wide vistas for exploration."**