

UU Saints I

There are some names in Unitarian Universalist history that we ought to know: Origen and Arius of Alexandria, , Michael Servetus, Faustus and Laelius Socinus, Francis David, King John Sigismund, William Ellergy Channing, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Theodore Parker. Some of them won't be mentioned anywhere but a Unitarian Universalist congregation, but all of them were important agents of change.

US Presidents John Adams, John Quincy Adams, Millard Fillmore, and William Howard Taft were Unitarians. Thomas Jefferson was clearly in sympathy with the Unitarians, though he was not formally a member of a Unitarian congregation. Florence Nightingale, Julia Ward Howe, Louisa May Alcott, Dorothea Dix, and Susan B. Anthony were all Unitarians. Joseph Priestly and Horace Mann were Unitarians, while Olympia Brown, Augusta Chapin, Clara Barton and Benjamin Rush were Universalists. The list goes on and on with Unitarians and Universalists who shaped our nation.

During the 2nd and 3rd Centuries of Christianity, theologians Origen and Arius put forth respectively the key ideas later voted to be heresies, the Universalist heresy that all souls would return to God after this life, and the Unitarian heresy that there is but one God and Jesus is less than, not equal to God.

The modern history of Unitarianism begins with Servetus. He felt the injustice of Muslims and others being killed by the Inquisition because they did not accept the doctrine of the Trinity. His efforts to understand the doctrine led him to a study of scriptures which convinced him that Trinitarianism has no base in scripture. Servetus wrote on "The Errors of the Trinity," challenging Catholic views. He was condemned by the inquisition, and then after hiding for many years and beginning a correspondence with Calvin, was actually burned by Calvin's order in Geneva. Servetus' quest to reopen the question of the Trinity helped to inspire Laelius and Faustus Socinus, Georgio Biandrata, and Francis David, who explored and helped promote a Unitarian perspective in the 16th Century in Poland and Transylvania. Under the influence of Biandrata and David, Unitarian convert King John Sigismund welcomed not only Unitarians but promoted tolerance of other faiths.

In England, Unitarian views grew within the dissenters churches, though practitioners were persecuted for decades. In 1774, Theophilus Lindsey opened the Essex Street Chapel in London as the first congregation dedicated to a Unitarian perspective in the English speaking world. Ben Franklin often visited Essex Street Chapel when he was in London.

Later Joseph Priestly, discoverer of Oxygen, became the most prominent Unitarian minister in England, before his laboratory, house, and church were torched in 1791. Three years later, Priestly decided to move to America and settled near Philadelphia where he founded a Unitarian church.

In the United States, Unitarianism was growing amidst the congregational churches in Boston. The first Unitarian Church in the U.S. was the formerly Anglican, King's Chapel, which followed their minister, James Freeman, in revising the Book of Common Prayer after he offered to resign due to his increasing discomfort with the doctrine of the Trinity. After the congregation ordained Freeman in 1787, it was expelled from the Anglican convention and became a Unitarian church.

The intellectual integrity of early Unitarians helped shape a movement which highly valued learning and the toleration of individual's religious thought. During the 1800's Unitarians grappled with matters of slavery, war, and various moral and ethical issues. The movement also began to establish itself as a religious institution.

In both England and the United States, Associations of Unitarians formed officially in 1825. The Universalist ministers and congregations had begun to connect by 1790, and they had become mostly Unitarian in viewpoint by about 1820 under the influence of Hosea Ballou's writings. Together, the Unitarians and Universalists comprised the radically liberal wing of American Christianity.

My thanks to those who have helped to bring some of our UU saints to life this morning. Come back and here about more of our UU saints next week!

Shalom, Salaam, Blessed Be, and Amen!