

UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST ROOTS AND HISTORY!

Where did we come from and Where are we going?

Unitarian Universalists and perhaps Americans in general have a tendency to forget their history. Not that living in the now and looking to the future is a bad thing per se, but there has been a noted likelihood of repeating history for those who do not remember. There are a few things worth remembering in our history that might help us more effectively face the future. Particularly in times when certain interests would like to see America become a Christian Theocracy, it might be good to remember some of our religious ancestors who were literally burned or drowned by Christians. We also might find ourselves more open to others when we remember the lessons we have learned from wise women and men among our Living Traditions. We could even find ourselves more welcoming to those of various beliefs if we remember how often our theological forebears had to find new places to practice their beliefs! And perhaps most important of all, as we face the changes of coming days, we might learn a few things about how to more graciously explore and accept new and different perspectives on faith, religion, and spirituality!

As we take a look back in order to move forward, we might offer a word of appreciation to those who built this church, congregation, and movement, the boat in which we now journey! Without their efforts and commitment, we might be at sea with neither boat nor paddle, nor sense of purpose or direction. We have much we owe those who built this vessel, including our efforts to better fit it for the journey ahead!

There are some UU historical names we ought to know: Origen of Alexandria, Bishop Arius, 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, Hosea Ballou, and Benjamin Rush were Universalists. The list goes on and on with Unitarians and Universalists who shaped our nation. The influence of members of our religious tradition is significantly greater than our numbers would suggest.

During the 2nd and 3rd Centuries of Christianity, leading theologians Origen and Bishop Arius put forth respectively the theological ideas later voted to be heresies, the Universalist heresy that all souls would return to a loving God after this life, and the Unitarian heresy that there is but one God and Jesus is less than, not equal to God. These heretical ideas continued to appear throughout Christian history.

The modern history of Unitarianism begins with Servetus, theologian, discoverer of pulmonary circulation and editor. He felt the injustice of Muslims and others being killed 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 under Calvin in Geneva. His 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 King John Sigismund welcomed not only Unitarians but promoted tolerance of other faiths.

In England, anti-Trinitarian and Unitarian views continued to grow even in the face of persecution. In 1774, Theophilus Lindsey opened the Essex Street Chapel in London as the first congregation dedicated to a Unitarian perspective

in the England. 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 his most famous sermon, "Unitarian Christianity," delivered at the ordination of Jared Sparks May 5, 1819, William Ellery Channing set the stage for the split between liberal and conservative Christians in Boston. The conservatives had been attacking the liberals, and Channing took up the gauntlet. In his sermon, he said:

Our leading principle in interpreting Scripture is this, that the Bible is a book written for men, in the language of men, and that its meaning it to be sought in the same manner as that of other books... (Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism by Conrad Wright, p. 49)

Channing went on to explain that: *We believe in the doctrine of God's UNITY, or that there is one God, and one only... We understand by it, that there is one being, one mind, one person, one intelligent agent, and one only, to whom underived and infinite perfection and dominion belong... We object to the doctrine of the Trinity, that, whilst acknowledging in words, in subverts in effect, the unity of God. (Three Prophets p. 57)*

Channing also addressed the question of the humanity and divinity of Christ, declaring that: *We believe in the unity of Jesus Christ. We believe that Jesus is one mind, one soul, one being, as truly one as we are, and equally distinct from the one God. We complain of the doctrine of the Trinity, that, not satisfied with making God three beings, it makes Jesus Christ two beings, and thus introduces infinite confusion into our conceptions of his character. (Three Prophets p. 62f)*

Channing established the theological center of American Unitarianism with this and other sermons, shaping a rational religious movement that was aware of German higher criticism of the Bible and quite willing to see the Bible and religion as objects of discussion, discovery, and exploration, with revelation continuing.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, also an ordained Unitarian minister, who served the parish briefly before devoting his time and energy completely to the lecture circuit is probably the most famous of the Transcendentalists, who found truths of religion and morality in immediate intuitions of the divine (*Three Prophets...p. 23*) Emerson's address to the graduating class at Harvard Divinity School in 1838 illustrated well the break he was making with the formalism of churches, including Unitarian ones of his day. In that address he said:

The intuition of the moral sentiment is an insight of the perfection of the laws of the soul. These laws execute themselves. They are out of time, out of space, and not subject to circumstance. Thus; in the soul of man there is a justice whose retributions are instant and entire. He who does a good deed, is instantly ennobled. He who does a mean deed, is by the action itself contracted. He who puts off impurity, thereby puts on purity. If a man is at heart just, then in so far is he God; the safety of God, the immortality of God, the majesty of God do enter into that man with justice.(Three Prophets...p.92)

That Emerson's religion was based more in every individual than in the revelatory aspect of scripture was perhaps also related to the opening of religious awareness beyond the Judeo-Christian experience. Whereas Channing remained a Unitarian Christian, Emerson grew more interested in morals, ethics, and natural religion.

Theodore Parker, also influenced strongly by Transcendentalism, remained an active Unitarian minister, if often an outcast among his colleagues. Parker, like Channing, considered himself clearly a Christian Unitarian, though his ideas, too, helped expand the worldview of the movement. In his classic sermon, *The Transient and Permanent in Christianity*, at the Ordination of Charles C. Shackford in South Boston in May 1841, Parker laid out his views.

Try it by Reason, Conscience, and Faith—things highest in man’s nature—we see no redundancy, we feel no deficiency. Examine the particular duties it enjoins; humility, reverence, sobriety, gentleness, charity, forgiveness, fortitude, resignation, faith, and active love; try the whole extent of Christianity so well summed up in the command, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind—thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself;” and is there anything therein that can perish? No, the very opponents of Christianity have rarely found fault with the teachings of Jesus. (Three Prophets...p. 140)

Parker believed that the core message of Christianity, which we might expand to include all true religion, is too often obscured by its particular transient manifestations. Parker wrote of the call to forgiveness, humility, reverence, and charity coming from the core of the tradition. Though few of us claim Christianity, would we expect less from a true expression of Unitarian Universalist principles?

Channing, Emerson, and Parker all considered themselves to be Christians, as had the Unitarians and Deists who shaped the founding documents of our nation. These are the roots from whence we came. To this day, Unitarian Universalist ministers are trained in Christian Biblical and theological studies, as well as in more recently acknowledged sources of our Living Tradition. This is who we have been and are.

And lest we ignore the Universalist side of our tradition, I should mention that Universalism, too had a significant message for the United States. An English Methodist lay preacher, John Murray, had become convinced of the Universalist position after visiting James Rely who had influenced one of Murray’s parishioners toward Universalism. Murray, suffering the death of his wife and a child and being cast into debtor’s prison, determined in 1770 to come to the New World. Though having decided never again to preach, he was

convinced to offer one sermon in Thomas Potter's chapel after the ship was becalmed off Barnegat's Light, New Jersey. Miraculously the wind returned after Murray preached, and he became the great evangelist of Universalism on the East Coast.

Hosea Ballou, a self-educated Universalist preacher, published *A TREATISE ON ATONEMENT*, which laid out the Universalist theology but also denied the Trinity. Over the following decade, as Ballou's ideas spread, American Universalism became Unitarian in view.

The Universalists were also the first to ordain women, ordaining Olympia Brown and Augusta Chapin in 1863.

Unitarians and Universalists have been involved in every progressive social movement in this country from the Revolutionary period on, especially including the abolition of slavery, and the establishment of voting and property ownership rights for blacks and women.

Unitarian Humanists, who dominated this movement through more than half of the twentieth century also provoked changes within and outside our movement, especially through the publication of the Humanist Manifesto of 1933 and also through more recent statements of humanist principles.

Unitarians and Universalists have held many different positions on social matters, but many have opposed wars, and most have supported healthcare and education for all, and more recently have called for ecological sustainability. Though typically white, well-educated and of the middle to upper classes, UUs have been concerned about the growing divide between rich and poor and the disappearing middle classes in our society. Throughout our history as a movement, we have been engaged in the struggles of the day, battling for justice and compassion. Many UUs were actively involved in the Civil Rights movement and many are now seeking an end to oil wars and a greater effort to conserve resources while seeking new and clean sources of energy. I think we are on the right side of just about every difference of opinion in our nation today, though we haven't always done enough about it.

As we embark this day on our pledge campaign, let us remember the commitment of those who have journeyed these waters before us. They marched, demonstrated, humbly served, struggled against the religious establishment of their day, and worked for justice, peace, compassion, and a rational religion. We are the heirs of all they accomplished. The present and future are now in our hands. The commitments we make to serve this church, this movement, and the world are sacred. May we be generous with our time, our energy, and our financial support! May this congregation grow stronger and healthier as it continues its mission of love and justice in the 21st Century!

Shalom, Salaam, Blessed Be, and Amen!