

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM

By Patrick Murfin

EARLY ROOTS

Unitarianism and Universalism both trace their history to the formative years of the Christian church before the Council of Nicea codified Catholic orthodoxy. Some early church leaders rejected the Greek notion of the Trinity and believed Jesus was a fully human messenger of God. Others rejected Paul's notion of original sin and argued Jesus's sacrifice redeemed all humans. Both of these tendencies were declared heresies and ruthlessly suppressed by the Church wherever they emerged over the next centuries.

The development of the Reformation unleashed new speculation along those lines. Spaniard Miguel Servantis published a dissertation arguing for the unity of God. He was hunted by the Inquisition and later burned as a heretic by John Calvin in Geneva. Italian Faustus Socinus brought anti-Trinitarianism to Poland, where it flourished in the 16th Century before being suppressed by the Catholic Church. Francis David took Socinian ideas to Transylvania where they thrived and where history's only Unitarian King promulgated the first European declaration of religious liberty. The Transylvanian church endured through unimaginable persecution and remains today the oldest Unitarian religious body in the world.

Socinism also spread to Holland and England where leading intellectuals like John Milton and Issac Newton secretly adopted unitarian theology despite laws banning it on pain of death. Illegal churches or chapels sprang up only to be suppressed. In the late 18th Century the great chemist and preacher Joseph Priestly had his lab and church burned by a mob. He relocated to Pennsylvania with the encouragement of Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin and Dr. Benjamin Rush where he opened the first American church to call itself Unitarian in 1794.

At the same time dissenters emerging from the Baptist and Methodist traditions were preaching the doctrine of Universal Salvation.

UNIVERSALISM COMES TO AMERICA

As early as the 1750's Dr. George de Benneville, a physician and lay preacher, was propagating Universal Salvation among the German immigrants of Bucks County, Pennsylvania and later around Philadelphia and New Jersey. De Benneville continued to preach until his death in 1793.

Meanwhile from the late the 1760's and all through the Revolutionary period Caleb Rich and his extended family abandoned primitive Baptism and preached universal salvation throughout Western Massachusetts and in the frontier territories of Vermont, New Hampshire and later up state New York.

In 1770 a failed disciple of English Universalist John Reily preached his first sermon on the Gospel of Universalism in a Chapel built by a native Universalist who was waiting for a preacher to fill its pulpit. Thus John Murray began his ministry in Barnegat Bay, New Jersey. He then spread the message as an itinerant preacher up and down the eastern seaboard with time out to serve as a chaplain in George Washington's army. He found Massachusetts exceptionally fertile territory. On January 1, 1780, the first Universalist Church in America was founded with Murray as its minister in Gloucester.

By 1785 there were enough congregations to form the New England Universalist Conference under the leadership of Murray and the Western Massachusetts preachers. About the same time a Philadelphia convention was established. Other regional and state conventions followed. These conventions would eventually come together as the Universalist General Convention and finally as the Universalist Church in America.

A second generation of Universalist leadership, notably Hosea Ballou, launched a vigorous press and helped the new denomination spread rapidly. Ballou adopted a unitarian vision in addition to his universalism

and afterward Trinitarianism virtually disappeared among Universalist congregations. Universalism spread throughout the Midwest and upper South. By the mid-19th Century Universalism was the sixth largest denomination in the United States and growing rapidly.

Encouraged to model God's love on earth, Universalists became leaders in many social causes including prison reform, mental health, abolition, and women's rights. The church became among the first to ordain women and was the first to charter a national women's organization within its ranks. Clara Barton, battlefield nurse and founder of the American Red Cross, exemplifies the loving spirit of Universalism.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF UNITARIANISM

The old Puritan churches of Massachusetts were the surprising cradles of Unitarianism in America. Reacting to the hellfire and damnation preaching of the Great Awakening of the 1730's and 40's many ministers and congregations of the New England Standing Order (the Congregational Churches) began to quietly explore alternatives to rigid Calvinism. Influenced by the rationalism of the Enlightenment they began to adopt Arian or non-Trinitarian theologies. The political atmosphere of the American Revolution accelerated the movement. By the late Eighteenth Century many of the oldest of the "First Parishes" including the Pilgrim Church at Plymouth, the Salem Church where a century earlier witches had been burned, John Adams's home church in Braintree (now Quincy), and important Boston churches were unitarian in theology although remaining in fellowship with the Standing Order.

There were other independent sparks of Unitarianism. As mentioned, Joseph Priestly had established a congregation in Philadelphia and was influencing religious thought in the Middle States. Thomas Jefferson, the champion of religious liberty, became unitarian in theology though a member of no sect. In 1785 the Anglican King's Chapel in Boston revised its Book of Common Prayer deleting all references to the Trinity and thus became the first openly unitarian church in New England.

By the early 19th Century the strain between liberals and Calvinists in the Standing Order became too great to sustain. In 1819 William Ellery Channing, a beloved Boston minister, laid out his explicit challenge to orthodoxy in an ordination address in Baltimore. He boldly asserted unitarian doctrine, elevated the role of reason in religious inquiry, and maintained that revelation was not sealed, but ongoing. Thus began the "Unitarian Controversy" that led to the formal break with Congregationalism and the establishment of a new denomination. Sometimes this entailed bitter law suits over the property of a parish between its unitarian and Calvinist members, but the right of parish to retain its property if the membership decided to become unitarian was established by the court.

In 1820 the first efforts at organizing the independent unitarian congregations began with the Berry Street Conference in Boston. In 1821 Channing and associates began publication of *The Christian Register*, an important national voice for unitarianism. Finally, in 1825 the American Unitarian Association (AUA) was established and the break with Congregationalism was complete and formal.

By the 1840's younger ministers were restive at the vestiges of orthodoxy in Unitarianism. Influenced by eastern religions, particularly Hinduism, they looked beyond Christianity and the Bible. The Transcendentalists, as they were called, believed in the direct experience with the divine in each individual, unity with nature, and a duty for religious individuals to provide prophetic witness to the social issues of the day. Ralph Waldo Emerson articulated these beliefs in his Harvard Divinity School address in 1839. Although fiercely opposed by more traditionalist ministers, Transcendentalism spread through the denomination. Its most eloquent spokesman was Boston preacher Theodore Parker. After Civil War Transcendentalism successfully synthesized itself with Channing style liberal Christianity and become the dominant strain in what was called the Broad Church Movement.

Unitarians during this period emerged as among the nation's most advanced advocates for social reform. Of notable interest were Horace

Mann, father of public education; mental health reformer Dorthy Dix; abolitionists like John Quincy Adams, Samuel May, and Julia Ward Howe; and women's rights leaders Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Olympia Brown, the first ordained woman minister with a regular parish in America.

Many of the great writers and thinkers of the era were Unitarians including Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Oliver Wendel Holmes, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and his cousin Samuel Longfellow, William Cullen Bryant, Louisa May Alcott, George Bancroft and Francis Parkman. Walt Whitman and Emily Dickenson, while never members, were influenced heavily by Unitarian thought.

TWO FAITHS ENTER THE MODERN AGE

In the years after the Civil War the rapid advancement of science brought many changes to the thinking of both Unitarians and Universalists. The tradition of free inquiry left them better able to adjust to faith threatening shifts in understanding that modern science presented than other denominations. The theory of evolution, propagated by English Unitarian Charles Darwin, challenged the orthodoxy of traditional Bible teachings undermining the faith of many traditional Christians. But Unitarians were able to embrace the advances as part of Channing's ongoing and unfolding revelation. Even the Universalists, who adhered to a more traditionally Christian form, were able to adjust. In 1880 they became the first to decree that Darwinism was not in conflict with religious faith.

The avalanche of new scientific learning seemed to confirm for both denominations the steady progress of humanity and its moral and ethical as well as material perfectibility. Faced with the grinding poverty and exploitation of rapid industrialization, many Unitarians and Universalists came to the foreground of the Social Gospel movement of social reform. Some ministers and congregations began drifting away from remaining orthodoxy and began to advocate a new post-Christian theology. In the late 19th Century the Free Religious Association developed as a quasi-independent variant of Unitarianism rejecting

traditional Theism. Latter re-absorbed into the main body of Unitarianism they, along with the Chicago based Western Conference of Unitarians under the visionary leadership of Jenkin Lloyd Jones, pioneered daring new frontiers synthesizing scientific rationalism, non-western world religious traditions, and social activism.

Disillusioned by the mass violence of World War I and the rise of totalitarianism, early Twentieth Century Unitarians began increasingly to doubt the existence or relevance of a traditional God. Increasingly they proclaimed rationalism above all and placed the ultimate responsibility for human welfare and progress solely in human, not paranormal hands. In 1933 Unitarians and a couple of Universalists provided over half of the signatures on the landmark Humanist Manifesto. By the 1950's Humanism was the dominant strain in Unitarianism, although as a non-creedal religion earlier forms of liberal Christianity, Transcendentalism, and Free Thought continued to both be practiced and to thrive.

The Fifties were an era of tremendous growth for Unitarianism. The dominant Humanist strain attracted many members faced with the rigid conformity of the post war years and the threat of nuclear annihilation. The Fellowship movement encouraged the establishment of hundreds of small, lay led societies in areas that previously could not sustain a full church with professional leadership, spreading Unitarianism far from its traditional bases in New England, the upper Mid-West and the West Coast. The Church of the Larger Fellowship allowed isolated Unitarians to band together and receive congregational services including worship materials and pastoral care through the mail.

Unitarians worked hard to confront the dangers and injustices of the world. The Unitarian Service Committee began in World War II to aid refugees from Nazi Europe. It developed the flaming chalice symbol which was latter adopted by Unitarians the world over. After the war the Service Committee expanded its activities throughout the world. Universalists modeled their own Service Committee on the Unitarian model and frequently cooperated on projects. Both denominations also became strong advocates of the United Nations, which Unitarian Adlai E.

Stevenson played a leading role in founding. Congregations around the country supported the UN through the work of the Unitarian United Nations Office, a credentialized non-governmental representative body. Unitarians were strong advocates for disarmament. On the domestic front Unitarian Churches in California stood up to that state's loyalty oath requirement.

UNITARIANISM AND UNIVERSALISM COME TOGETHER

While the American Unitarian Association and its member congregations were thriving, the Universalist Church in America was struggling. With a slightly more traditionally Christian worship style than the Unitarians and based mostly on small town congregations, the Universalists had been declining in membership since the turn of the Century. On one hand most mainline Protestant denominations had long abandoned Calvinism and many had tacitly embraced variants of either universal salvation or universally available salvation thus robbing the Universalists of some of their uniqueness. On the other hand newly resurgent fundamentalist and Pentecostal churches were successfully competing with the denomination's evangelical style of outreach especially among rural and working class people. The Church's loose structure based on state conventions and lack of resources for ministerial training contributed to the decline.

Through most of the twentieth century cooperation between the two liberal religious bodies had been increasing. Dissuasions about improved relationships between them or out right affiliation had been sporadic since 1869. In 1939 a joint committee explored the possibilities of union and recommended the formation of The Free Church Fellowship which would connect the still independent denominations. Although adopted among some controversy the Free Church Fellowship failed as an effective tool and withered away.

Meanwhile cooperation did continue. A joint hymnal was published and widely used by both denominations. Cooperation was extended in the development of religious education curricula and materials. Ordained ministers of both denominations frequently were called to serve each

other's congregations. The two youth departments were especially involved in cooperative activities and eventually merged into the Liberal Religious Youth.

Beginning in 1947 discussion intensified culminating the creation of the Council of Liberal Churches (Universalist-Unitarian) by a joint assembly in 1953. The Council merged each denomination's departments of education, publication and public relations. Meanwhile a Joint Interim Commission explored the possibility of further union. A Merger Commission was recommended which began work in 1957.

On May 23, 1960 delegates of the AUA and the UCA met simultaneously but separately to consider merger. Both bodies voted overwhelmingly to create the new Unitarian Universalist Association, which officially came into being the following May.

UUA-GROWTH OF A NEW RELIGIOUS VOICE

Re-energized by union, the UUA emerged in the turbulent Sixties as a vibrant voice for liberal religion. The developing Civil Rights movement and its aftermath challenged the movement like nothing since pre-Civil War abolitionism. Through the 50's Unitarians and Universalists alike were deeply engaged in support for Civil Rights. Scattered and small churches of both denominations throughout the South were often lonely outposts of toleration and inclusion. Both denominations and the new Association reached out to Blacks. Outstanding among Black U.U. voices was Dr. Whitney Young, Jr., long time leader of the Urban League.

Unitarian Universalists rose to their greatest challenge in Selma, Alabama in 1965. Responding to the brutal repression of voter rights demonstrators and the murder of Jimmy Lee Jackson, the Rev. James Reeb was among UU ministers responding to a call from Dr. Martin Luther King to bear witness in Selma. On the evening of his arrival he and two other UU ministers were attacked with baseball bats. Reeb died two days later. Upon hearing word of the attack the Board of Trustees meeting in Boston adjourned their meeting and reconvened the next day in Selma. A call went out to all clergy to join Dr. King in a giant protest

march. Led by UUA President Dana Greeley over half of all active UU clergy responded and joined on the march at the Raymond Petis Bridge. A few days later on a march from Selma to the state capitol of Montgomery Viola Liuzzo, a UU lay woman from Detroit, was shot and killed while driving black volunteers.

The UUA commitment to Civil Rights drew increasing Black membership and participation to the denomination. But as a minority in a predominately white denomination they sometimes felt marginalized. By the end of the decade some Blacks and their allies were pressing a list of non-negotiable demands. In the ensuing struggle many Blacks left the denomination.

The Vietnam War also caused internal dissention. Anti-War sentiment was strong among many UU's. In 1965 a giant anti-war banner was unfurled from the Beacon Street headquarters of the UUA. General Assembly resolutions opposed the war and many congregations were intensely active. Others however were opposed to the anti-war movement or its perceived excesses. Some congregations and many individuals left amid acrimonious charges and counter charges.

By the early 1970's the UUA was declining in both congregations and individuals. Finances were so shaky that many of the organization's international relations and outreach programs had to be cut. Some saw the ultimate demise of organized liberal religion in America. Two developments in the '70's and '80' would revitalize Unitarian Universalism and usher in a new period of excitement and growth.

The first of these developments was the transformative power of women. Both Unitarianism and Universalism had been early leaders in support of women's rights. Both denominations were among the first to ordain and settle women ministers. Members of both took leading role in the movement for Women's suffrage. Conservative Unitarian leadership by early Twentieth Century, however, opposed the ordination of women and erected every obstacle to their success. By 1970 less than 2% of active UU ministers were women and most of them were confined to

roles in religious education. But women had always played an important part as lay leaders. Now they mobilized that power at annual General Assemblies and at District Meetings to demand change. They pressed successfully for gender inclusive language in hymns, worship materials, and educational curricula. They formed study and action groups in congregations across North America. They pressed for equal opportunities in seminaries and in ministerial settlement. Slowly, not without struggle, they transformed the denomination. Their input was critical to the adoption in 1985 of the new UUA 7 Principles, which have been so successful in uniting diverse UU's around a few basic understandings. A succession of strong women in the position of UUA Moderator transformed that office to an active lay leadership post in close cooperation with the UUA President. Finally, in 2000 the UUA became the first denomination in the United States with more than 50% women clergy.

The other development was rising ecological awareness. Facing increased evidence of impending ecological disaster, many UU's resurrected Transcendentalism's traditional reverence for nature. Reverence for "the interdependent web of existence of which we are all a part" became enshrined in the UUA Principles. This new understanding not only engendered action on the part of UU's like support for recycling and active stewardship of earth, water and air, but also fostered a renewed sense of spirituality, long dormant during the ascension of Humanism. Drawing on eastern religious traditions, particularly Buddhism and Taoism, as well as European earth centered traditions, and Native American spirituality, UU worship has deepened. Earth centered spirituality, including Wicca and other forms of pantheism and paganism have become acknowledged sources of inspiration along side Jewish and Christian teachings, transcendental awareness, humanism and other world religions.

Energized by these new developments the UUA reversed its decline and began a period of solid growth in the Nineties. Not only was the decline in participating congregations reversed as new societies opened

regularly often in areas previously undeserved by UU churches in the South and West, but average membership in congregations and church school enrollment all have climbed. What had been a graying movement with average age in the 50's was successfully attracting young families eager to find a satisfying but non-dogmatic spiritual home.

Recent years have also brought UUA churches to the forefront of struggles for diversity and inclusiveness. Stressing the First Principle of the "dignity and worth of each individual" the UUA has reached out in affirming ways toward Gays, lesbians, and transgender people who are often excluded from other religious communities. Gay clergy have long been welcomed to ordination and same sex commitment or wedding services are routinely performed in UU churches. The UUA has even confronted the Boy Scouts over their anti-homosexual exclusiveness. The Welcoming Congregation has become a popular program certifying congregations for meeting the needs of Gay and lesbian people.

The UUA has also begun again to address the difficult issues of race. UUA General Assemblies have affirmed the goal of becoming explicitly anti-racist. Although sometimes controversial in its methods, the Journey Toward Wholeness is a program designed to help congregations come to grips with racial issues. Lately the UUA, long dominated by upper middle class and professional people, has begun to explore issues around social class and economic justice that promise to further broaden its appeal.

As in the past Unitarians and Universalists in the Twentieth Century have contributed widely to the arts, literature, science, and public service. A few of the notables include poets T.S. Elliot, Carl Sandburg, E.E. Cummings, Sylvia Plath, Kenneth Patton, and Marge Piercy; statesmen William Howard Taft, Senator Paul Douglas, Adlai E. Stevenson, Elliot Richardson, and Defense Secretaries William Perry and William Cohn; architect Frank Lloyd Wright; scientists Luther Burbank, Linus Pauling and Buckmaster Fuller; musicians Robert Shaw, Malvina Reynolds and Pete Seeger, actors Paul Newman and Michael Learned;

and writers Ray Bradbury, Norman Cousins, Robert Fulghum, Rod Sterling, Kurt Vonnegut, and Dan Wakefield.

Unitarian Universalism enters the Twenty-first century with a history that reaches back to the dawning years of Christianity, yet is only 40 years old as an organization. Its story is constantly changing, evolving and unfolding as it is driven by the human need for connectedness to the divine and for greater understanding. Its future lies in the limitless possibilities created by that same quest.