

# A Liberal Religious Heritage

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Unitarians and religious liberals centre their faith in personal experience, informed to greater or lesser extent by scriptures and traditions. Their religious position arose in two ways:

First, by questioning certain Christian teachings (e.g. that God is a Trinity of three co-equal "persons"; or that God wills to save only a few; or that people are depraved by nature). Some of the names used grew from these questionings (e.g. Unitarian, Universalist and General Baptist).

Secondly, by distinguishing between essential and non-essential Christian teachings. This raised doubts about the use of creeds and statements of faith. This is called 'non-subscribing' (i.e. a refusal to subscribe to formal creed or statement of belief).

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## 1 Beginnings

The historical roots of this religious heritage are deep in Renaissance and Reformation Europe. Centred in northern Italy and reaching its climax in the 15th century, the Renaissance was a remarkable rebirth of culture and learning. Building upon Renaissance insights the Reformation in the 17th century questioned some of the assumptions and practices of the Catholic Church, and in some areas even caused its disruption.

There were in effect three different Reformations:-

1) The Protestant Reformation is sometimes known as the Magisterial Reformation, because of its association with three great teachers (magisterium): Martin Luther (1483-1546) in Germany, Ulrich Zwingli (1485-1531) in Switzerland, and John Calvin (1509-1564) in Geneva. These three reformers all differed in their understandings of the Lord's Supper; but they did agree that infant baptism is necessary and that church and state embraced everyone. Protestantism developed in two directions: Lutheranism and Reformed Protestantism, pioneered by Zwingli and Calvin. John Calvin is mostly remembered today for his teaching that all human souls are predestined either to heaven or to hell. In the liberal tradition, however, he should be remembered for his lofty view of God's supremacy, which became an important element in undermining the doctrine of the Trinity; and for the high value which he placed upon the human intellect.

2) The Catholic, or Counter Reformation attempted to correct many weaknesses highlighted by Protestants and to regain territories lost to Protestant rulers.

3) The Radical Reformation, in sharp contrast to the Magisterial Reformation, completely separated church and state. It wanted radical instead of piecemeal reform. Anabaptism (i.e. rebaptism for adult believers following a personal religious decision) was often its distinguishing mark.

A small group of Radical Reformers from Italy is significant for our story. Its members began asking whether or not the traditional understanding of the Trinity as three co-equal "persons" or personalities was scriptural. They were much encouraged by a discovery made by Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536), a Dutch Catholic, who had shown that the most famous of the traditional Trinitarian proof-texts "These are three that bear record in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit and these three are one" (1 John 5:7 AV) did not appear in the most reliable and ancient New Testament manuscripts.

After 1541, when the Inquisition started routing out heretics in Italy, many Italian heretics fled to Protestant territory further north. Among them was the friar Bernadine Ochino (1487-1564) who lived in England between 1547 and 1553. Another refugee from the Inquisition was the Savoyard (\*) Sebastian Castellio (1515-1563). His book *Concerning Heretics* caused a wave of protest over the cruel death of the Spanish doctor Michael Servetus (1511-1543). Servetus, who was much influenced by the Anabaptists, was burned to death in Protestant Geneva as an Antitrinitarian. (Antitrinitarians are those who question the traditional Christian teaching about the Trinity, but without having reached a developed Unitarian position, where God has one personality only, and Jesus is a supreme human person showing us something of God).

(\*) Savoy was an area south of Geneva

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## 2 Liberal Religion in Switzerland, Poland and Transylvania

Organised liberal churches first arose where Radical Reformers influenced the progress of Reformed Protestantism. This happened in three places. One place was the independent republic of the Grisons in south east Switzerland, a Protestant territory just north of Italy. Refugees from the Italian Inquisition soon found their way there. Many of them were Anabaptists, but some were also Antitrinitarians. They were ordered to leave the Grisons in 1570.

The other two places where Radical Reformers influenced Reformed Protestantism were Poland, particularly the area close to Cracow in the south, and Transylvania, now part of Romania, but then the eastern part of a divided Hungary. Both Poland and Transylvania were semi-republican states, with elected monarchies, which allowed the nobility a large measure of power.

In both countries unease grew from attempts to codify the beliefs of the Reformed Protestant churches into statements of faith. In Poland Antirinitarians first showed themselves in 1546 and were further encouraged by the arrival of an Italian doctor Georgio Biandrata 1515-1588). The result was that in 1565 the Polish Reformed Church divided into Major Reformed Church (Trinitarian) and Minor Reformed Church (Antitrinitarian).

Meanwhile, in 1563 Biandrata had journeyed south from Poland across The Carpathian mountains into Transylvania where he exercised considerable influence upon the Reformed Bishop Francis David (1520-1579). From 1566 David was openly an Antitrinitarian. Then in 1568, following a ten day debate between Trinitarians and Antitrinitarians at Gyulafehervar, the ruler of Transylvania, John Sigismund (1540-1571), himself became an Antitrinitarian. The result was that in *The Declaration of Torda* Sigismund proclaimed the new Antitrinitarian Reformed faith as one of four recognised religions in the country. The others were Catholic, Lutheran and Trinitarian Reformed.

Francis David became even more radical in his views, rejecting both infant baptism and the worship of God through Jesus Christ. When Sigismund was followed by a Catholic ruler, Biandrata lost his nerve and invited to Transylvania a fellow Italian, Faustus Socinus (1539-1604) author of a recent book *Concerning Jesus Christ the Servant*, to try and dissuade David from his advanced views. But David held to his convictions and consequently died in prison a martyr for his faith.

Faustus Socinus, meanwhile, journeyed north to Poland where he was kindly received by the Minor Reformed Church (Antitrinitarian). Since it was Socinus's view that baptism was intended for first generation Christians only, and the Minor Reformed Church required rebaptism, Socinus never became a church member and never received the Lord's Supper among them. But this did not prevent him from becoming the Church's leading theologian.

The principal Antitrinitarian centre in Poland was the small town of Rakow, just north east of Cracow. There, many Minor Reformed Church members in the local community were not only Antitrinitarian and Anabaptist. For a time some were also pacifists and held goods in common. In 1605 the Church published at Rakow *The Racovian Catechism* as an outline of its faith.

From 1590 onwards the Jesuits, instruments of the Catholic and Counter-Reformation, mounted an increasingly ruthless campaign of persecution against the Polish Protestants and in particular the Minor Reformed Church. By 1660 all but a few of its remaining members had been banished from Poland. Thanks, however, to the activities of her many refugees, and to the wide dispersal throughout Europe of its literature, the movement continued to exercise considerable influence.

Usually called Socinians, because of their indebtedness to Faustus Socinus, some of these Polish refugees later began calling themselves Unitarians. They learned the Unitarian name from their Transylvanian brothers and sisters, first called Unitarian in 1569 by their opponents, because they taught that God the Father is superior to the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Transylvanians adopted the name for themselves. Today there are many Unitarian congregations in north west Romania and a few in eastern Hungary which are the direct descendants of these earliest organised Unitarian communities. Those congregations in Hungary, in and around Budapest, were established later.

### 3 Unitarians in England and Wales

The Reformation in England and Wales was less extreme than in other Protestant countries. Those who agitated for further reforms to those initiated in Henry VIII's reign, were known as Puritans. Radical Puritans separated themselves from the Church of England and were called Separatists. Puritans who followed the Magisterial Reformers - usually John Calvin - and wanted additional reforms within the Church of England were called Presbyterians.

In 1648 the Presbyterians achieved a brief moment of ascendancy. As a result of a special treaty between the English Parliamentary party (which was at war with King Charles I) and the Reformed authorities in Scotland, there was an attempt to introduce "the word of God and example of the best reformed Christians" (\*) into England. Apart from local successes in London and Lancashire the attempt failed. Its chief legacy, however, is *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, the principal statement of Reformed Protestantism in the English Language.

\* Words from "The Solemn League and Covenant".

At the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660, following the Commonwealth period, the Presbyterians, led by Richard Baxter (1615-1691) again had high hopes of achieving acceptable changes within the Church of England. But their hopes were dashed, when in 1662 as the result of an *Act of Uniformity*, about 2000 Puritan clergy were 'ejected' because of an obligation to use *The Book of Common Prayer* which they were unable to fulfil. Reluctantly, these nonconformist ministers joined their Separatist colleagues as Dissenters from the Church of England. Twenty-seven years later in 1689 a *Toleration Act* allowed them and their followers freedom of worship but not of doctrine. Specifically excluded from toleration were Catholics and Antitrinitarians. Many congregations which later became Unitarian have their roots in these events.

The main sources of Antitrinitarian thought in England and Wales were the English Bible and Socinian writings imported from the European continent. Early Antitrinitarians were found among the Separatists. Bartholomew Legate and Edward Wightman, both Separatists, were executed in 1612 as Antitrinitarian heretics. Copies of *The Racovian Catechism* were burned in London in 1614.

John Biddle (1615-1662) 'The Father of English Unitarianism', and an English translator of *The Racovian Catechism*, took advantage of a brief relaxation of the laws against heresy (1651-1652) and organised the first Antitrinitarian congregation in England and Wales. Biddle's friend Henry Hedworth (1626-1705) was introduced to a Transylvanian Unitarian by some exiled Polish Socinians, and became the first known person to use the word 'Unitarian' in printed English. "I will therefore present to the reader", he wrote in 1672, "a short account of these men's opinions concerning Christ, who for distinction sake call themselves Unitarians".

Late in the seventeenth century Socinian views began appearing within the Church of England. Thomas Firmin (1632-1697) an Anglican merchant, assisted Socinian refugees and subsidised a series of *Unitarian Tracts*. Samuel Clarke (1675-1729) an Anglican vicar, published *The Scripture Doctrine of the Trinity* (1712) in which he argued that supreme honour should be given only to God the Father.

Clarke's book was widely read among Nonconformists as well, and when in 1719 the Dissenters of Exeter put this disputed point of doctrine to their friends in London, a split occurred among the Dissenters of profound significance. From that date reluctant and deliberate Dissenters, thrown together in 1662, rearranged themselves into Subscribers and Non-subscribers to creeds and statements of faith. The main stream of organised Unitarianism was to grow from among the Non-subscribers.

A similar split happened in Ireland where, in 1725, the Presbyterian General Synod of Ulster reorganised Non-subscribers to *The Westminster Confession of Faith* into a separate Presbytery.

The right of private judgement in religious faith, free from subscription to binding creeds and statements of faith, from this time on became of major importance to the liberal heritage. For Non-subscribers the church was a 'saving' community, not a society for the already 'saved'. Practical Christianity was preferable to doctrinal controversy, and religious faith should above all be reasonable.

Often the Non-subscribers were called Arminians after the views of a Dutch Reformer, Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609) which were popular among them. Arminius, contrary to John Calvin's view that God wills to save only a few, argued that the opportunity of salvation is offered to all. To distinguish them from Evangelical Dissenters these Non-subscribers were also called Rational Dissenters.

Certain academies, serving the education interests of Dissenters barred from Oxford and Cambridge Universities, became identified by the theological party which supported them. Rational Dissenting academies included those at Carmarthen in Wales, close by the Unitarian 'black spot' (\*) in Dyfed; and at Warrington in England.

\* So called by some anti-Unitarian elements of the Christian Churches because of the high preponderance of Unitarian meeting places in the centre of what is now Dyfed, around Llanybyther and Llanbedr Pont Stefani.

Joseph Priestley (1733-1804), the chemist and discoverer of oxygen, was a Dissenting minister who for a while tutored at Warrington Academy. Born into Evangelical Dissent, Priestley was one of several converts to Rational Dissent who provided the stimulus for its transition to Unitarianism. At first he did not call himself Unitarian but learned the name from Theophilus Lindsey (1723-1808). Lindsey was a disaffected Anglican, who having failed in his efforts to obtain relaxed subscription to the Church of England's *39 Articles of Faith*, resigned as vicar of Catterick and in 1774 opened Essex Street Chapel in London for Unitarian worship using a Unitarian revision of *The Book of Common Prayer*.

Meanwhile Priestley, not alone in his support for the radical political trends of the 1780s culminating in the French Revolution, emigrated to the United States of America and settled in Pennsylvania to avoid political oppression in Britain. He was only one of a number of British Unitarians to make important contributions to the growth of the Unitarian movement in the United States.

Other newcomers to Rational Dissent during this period were Thomas Belsham (1750-1829) and two former Baptists and Universalists (\*\*) William Vidler (1758-1816) and Richard Wright (1765-1836) 'the Unitarian missionary'. All three people were involved with the Unitarian Fund (1806), one of several societies working to further the Unitarian cause and to secure civil rights for Unitarians. Civil rights eventually came in 1813.

\*\* Universalism is defined in a later section.

By coincidence the British and Foreign Unitarian Association, into which the earlier societies were merged through the indefatigable efforts of Richard Aspland (1782-1845), was organised on exactly the same day as the American Unitarian Association - 25th May, 1825.

Some Rational Dissenters were not entirely happy with the sectarian implications of such missionary zeal. James Martineau (1805-1900) was chief among them. While it was quite right for individuals to call themselves 'Unitarian', Martineau argued that it was quite wrong to identify congregations with such a distinctly theological position. In 1836 he wrote "reason is the ultimate appeal, the supreme tribunal, to the test of which even Scripture must be brought". So began a process in which the miracle-based Scriptural Unitarian theology of Lindsey and Priestley was replaced with new affirmations based upon reason and intuition.

Manchester New College, the successor to Warrington Academy, where most ministers were trained, moved to London in 1853. Martineau became its principal. In 1896 the College moved again to Oxford and is now called Manchester College.

But the College's removal from Manchester caused consternation among the Unitarians of north west England who in 1854 decided to form the Unitarian Home Missionary Board, now the Unitarian College Manchester. The Board was in part a courageous attempt to meet the challenge of the appalling social conditions which the Industrial Revolution had occasioned in the region. But it also aimed to provide ministerial training for a quite different type of person than elsewhere: a "working class", basically educated person who could address himself directly to a new type of Unitarian congregation then emerging in north west England. The original congregations of this region, during the early years of the nineteenth century, had been much invigorated with the integration into the Unitarian scene of a number of congregations isolated from Methodism by the Unitarian view of its leaders; and by a similar local movement of Christian Brethren.

Manchester College, Oxford and the Unitarian College, Manchester are today the two principal sources of theological education among British Unitarians. Welsh ministers are trained at Aberystwyth. The congregations for whom they train ministers are organised in the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches (1928), a federation of about 250 congregations in most major centres with a headquarters in London at Essex Hall, Essex Street, on the site of Theophilus Lindsey's Essex Street Chapel just off the Strand.

## 4 Non-subscribing Presbyterianism in Scotland & Ireland

In Scotland the Reformation followed the Reformed pattern. While subscription to *The Westminster Confession of Faith* became fairly relaxed during the eighteenth century, and a reaction set in against a theology which, as Robert Burns put it, "sent aye to heaven and ten to hell", no Non-subscribing party emerged. The four Unitarian congregations in Scotland, which are today affiliated to the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches, have different and diverse origins, but Universalism played a significant part of their development.

In Ireland, where particularly in the north many Scots settled from the seventeenth century onwards, the General Synod of Ulster in 1725 reorganised its Non-subscribers to *The Westminster Confession of Faith* into a separate Presbytery of Antrim. John Abernethy (1680-1740) "the Father of Non-subscription" led the movement. He had read Samuel Clarke's *Scripture Doctrine of the Trinity*.

As the eighteenth century moved on subscription to the Confession became less important in Ireland, until the Unitarian Christian thought of the American William Ellery Channing (1780-1842) became popular. Channing's Unitarianism was somewhat less polemical than the Priestleyan variety which never flourished in Ireland.

As a result of growing Unitarianism the General Synod reinforced subscription. Henry Montgomery (1768-1865), the leading Unitarian protagonist, in 1830 led a secession of Non-subscribers from the General Synod which established the Remonstrant Synod of Ulster. The Remonstrant Synod joined with the earlier Presbytery of Antrim in 1910 to form the Non-subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland. Although a separate church in its own right, with traditions distinctly different from the churches in Great Britain, its churches are also part of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches.

## 5 General Baptists and Universalists in Britain Universalists in the United States

In Poland and Transylvania the influence of Radical Reformers made an issue out of infant baptism. Some Antitrinitarians, like Faustus Socinus, rejected baptism altogether except for converts from non-Christian faiths. Others were Anabaptists. In the south of England and in parts of Wales there is a group of Unitarian congregations sometimes called General Baptist. General Baptists hold that God wills salvation for all generally. They are to be distinguished from Particular Baptists who hold that God wills salvation only for particular people. Unlike the Presbyterians in England and Wales, who were reluctant Dissenters, the General Baptists were always Separatists. They were enthusiastic about toleration.

From the 1670s until 1731 the Unitarian heresy of Matthew Caffyn was a continual source of debate in the General Baptist Assembly. But a decisive moment came in 1802 when the Assembly divided. Half joined the Particular Baptists while the remainder moved more and more in a Unitarian direction.

The split occurred because William Vidler (1758-1816) had become an Assembly member. Under the influence of the American Elhanan Winchester (1751-1797), Vidler had adopted Universalism. (Universalism is the teaching that God wills and guarantees salvation for everyone.) Then under the influence of Richard Wright (1764-1836), Vidler became Unitarian as well. Together Vidler and Wright became ardent supporters of the Unitarian Fund (1806). As a result British Universalists as a separate movement became eclipsed by the Unitarians.

Elhanan Winchester's Universalism specified a waiting period, following death, before the guaranteed salvation. The Universalism of John Rely (1722-1778), a former Irish Methodist, did not. It guaranteed immediate salvation at the moment of death. One of Rely's followers was John Murray (1741-1815), who leaving sorrows and debts behind him in the old world, landed in America at Good Luck Bay, New Jersey in 1770. Murray is regarded as the founder of American Universalism. For many years both types of Universalism were found within the denomination. Later Hosea Ballou (1771-1852), author of *A Treatise on the Atonement* introduced the use of reason in religion to the Universalists and influenced them in a Unitarian direction.

Drawn from different social strata than the socially conscious New England Unitarians, the Universalists were an organised liberal religious movement in America several years before the Unitarians with whom, in 1961, they eventually formed the Unitarian Universalist Association.

It was Thomas Starr King (1824-1864), a Universalist serving a Unitarian congregation, and also credited with saving California for the Union (anti-slavery) side during the American Civil War, who caught the difference between the two heritages. "The one (Universalist) thinks God is too good to damn them forever", he said, "the other (Unitarian) thinks they are too good to be damned forever". {Also attributed to Thomas Gold Appleton (1812-1884).}

## 6 Unitarianism in the United States of America

European settlement on the north east coast of America began with the arrival of the Pilgrim Fathers in 1620. Within the Commonwealth of Massachusetts only church members could participate in government. While theologically Calvinist, the settlers' strictly autonomous Congregational churches prevented any statement of faith being imposed upon them.

As in Great Britain and Ireland, the New England Puritans divided into two streams, Evangelical and Rational (often in America called Liberal). One leading Liberal, Charles Chauncy (1705-1787) in 1743 declared "There is a religion understanding and judgement and will as well as of the affection and if little account is made of the former, while great stress is laid upon the latter, it can't be but people should run into disorders".

Chauncy's views were strongly supported in the Boston area where Harvard College had been established at Cambridge in 1721. When in 1805 a liberal, Henry Ware (1764-1845), became Professor of Divinity, the tensions between Evangelicals and Liberals became too great, and the Evangelicals left to open their own seminary at Andover.

King's Chapel, Boston, an Episcopal congregation using a modified liturgy along the same lines as Essex Street Chapel, London, became Unitarian in 1782.

During the 1790s several British Unitarians, including Joseph Priestley, settled further south in Pennsylvania. But the Boston Liberals avoided the Unitarian name. They regarded the British Unitarians as too polemical, and their understanding of Jesus rather too extreme.

In 1815 the orthodox Jedidiah Morse (1761-1826) reprinted a pamphlet by the British Unitarian Thomas Belsham, in which Belsham claimed the Boston Liberals to be in fact, if not in name, Unitarians. Morse declared war. The Liberals, he said, should be exposed and denied Christian fellowship.

Obliged to defend the Liberal position William Ellery Channing (1780-1842) preached on *Unitarian Christianity* at a well publicised ordination at Baltimore, Maryland in 1819. Channing in his sermon finally accepted the Unitarian name and identified the Liberals as a party prepared to defend and publicise their position.

As mentioned previously, the American Unitarian Association was eventually organised, quite by chance as it happened, on exactly the same day as the British and Foreign Unitarian Association, that is, the 25th May, 1825.

Two other significant addresses marked the direction which American Unitarians were to take. One was *The Divinity School Address* (1838) of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) a former Unitarian minister, who became a leader among the Transcendentalist group of writers. Emerson discounted revealed religion and encouraged people to acquaint themselves "at first hand with deity".

The other address was Theodore Parker's (1810-1860) *The Transient and Permanent in Christianity* (1841) in which Parker claimed that the teaching of churches and sects would pass away whilst the teaching of Jesus, being pure religion and morality, would last forever.

The organising genius behind the growth of American Unitarianism was the somewhat more theologically conservative Henry Whitney Bellows (1814-1882). Using organisational experience gained with the United States Sanitary Commission (Red Cross) on the Union (anti-slavery) side in the American Civil War, Bellows set up The National Conference of Unitarian Christians (1865).

For some however the Conference was too conservative and two years later they started their own Free Religious Association (1867). Affirming that a universal spirit underlay all historic faiths, this Association's crowning achievement was the 1893 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago.

In the Chicago area and the middle west, where the Western Unitarian Conference had been organised in 1852, Unitarians frequently moved beyond the Christian Unitarianism favoured in New England.

The radical nature of some mid-western Unitarians showed itself again in 1933 when a group of them produced *A Humanist Manifesto*. This affirmed that men and women have sufficient personal resources without resorting to supernatural aids. Their action initiated a generation long debate over the supernatural content of religion.

By mid-twentieth century it was becoming apparent that Unitarians and Universalists were moving towards merger. When this happened in 1961 the purpose of the Unitarian Universalist Association was defined as "to cherish and spread the universal truths taught by the great prophets and teachers of humanity in every age and tradition, immemorially summarised in the Judaeo-Christian heritage as love to God and love to man".

In recent years new principles were adopted which recognise the plurality of resources upon which Unitarian Universalists draw. Humanist teachings, Earth-centred traditions, wisdom from the world's religions, the words and deeds of prophetic women and men, direct experience and transcending mystery and wonder, as well as Jewish and Christian teachings about loving our neighbours as ourselves as a response to God's love are all acknowledged.

## 7 Liberal Religion Elsewhere

Unitarians first organised congregations in Australia in 1810 and in Canada in 1811 as a result of European settlement. In Canada the Irish Non-subscribing Presbyterians also played a part. The North Eastern India Unitarian Union in Meghalaya (Khasi Hills), India is an indigenous Unitarian movement started by Hajom Kissor Singh against a background of Welsh Calvinist missions. There is also a small Unitarian cause in Madras in Southern India. In 1921 Norbert Capek, who later died in Dachau, founded the Czech Unitarian Brotherhood.

In Germany there are two distinct free religious groups. The older group is made up of the Free Religious Congregations of the south west with roots in Catholic and Protestant dissenting groups which arose from the ferment leading to the 1848 revolution. In the north of Germany The German Unitarians, a twentieth century lay led movement, relate more to the secular pattern of European culture and philosophy than to the liberal Christian backgrounds of Transylvanian, British and American Unitarians.

In other European countries there are Non-subscribing traditions. The Remonstrant Brotherhood in the Netherlands dates from 1619 when Jacobus Arminius and his followers remonstrated against the enforcement of Calvinist doctrines; and in France and Switzerland the Reformed Protestant churches have distinct liberal traditions.

All these liberal religious movements are represented in the *International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF)* either as churches or as religious societies, or as groups of individual liberals within other religious movements. The IARF was founded in 1900 as *The International Council of Unitarians and other Liberal Religious Thinkers and Workers*. Today it is an international and inter-faith forum, embracing both liberal Christians and those with roots in liberal Protestant traditions and more recently liberals from non-Christian backgrounds as well.