

Unitarian Universalist Origins

Our Historic Faith

by Mark W. Harris

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Unitarians and Universalists have always been heretics. We are heretics because we want to choose our faith, not because we desire to be rebellious. “Heresy” in Greek means “choice.” During the first three centuries of the Christian church, believers could choose from a variety of tenets about Jesus. Among these was a belief that Jesus was an entity sent by God on a divine mission. Thus the word “Unitarian” developed, meaning the oneness of God. Another religious choice in the first three centuries of the Common Era (CE) was universal salvation. This was the belief that no person would be condemned by God to eternal damnation in a fiery pit. Thus a Universalist believed that all people will be saved. Christianity lost its element of choice in 325 CE when the Nicene Creed established the Trinity as dogma. For centuries thereafter, people who professed Unitarian or Universalist beliefs were persecuted.

This was true until the sixteenth century when the Protestant Reformation took hold in the remote mountains of Transylvania in eastern Europe. Here the first edict of religious toleration in history was declared in 1568 during the reign of the first and only Unitarian king, John Sigismund. Sigismund’s court preacher, Frances David, had successively converted from Catholicism to Lutheranism to Calvinism and finally to Unitarianism because he could find no biblical basis for the doctrine of the Trinity. Arguing that people should be allowed to choose among these faiths, he said, “We need not think alike to love alike.”

In sixteenth-century Transylvania, Unitarian congregations were established for the first time in history. These churches continue to preach the Unitarian message in present-day Romania. Like their heretic forebears from ancient times, these liberals could not see how the deification of a human being or the simple recitation of creeds could help them to live better lives. They said that we must follow Jesus, not worship him.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Unitarianism appeared briefly in scattered locations. A Unitarian community in Rakow, Poland, flourished for a time, and a book called *On the Errors of the Trinity* by a Spaniard, Michael Servetus, was circulated throughout Europe. But persecution frequently followed these believers. The Polish Unitarians were completely suppressed, and Michael Servetus was burned at the stake.

Even where the harassment was not so extreme, people still opposed the idea of choice in matters of religious faith. In 1791, scientist and Unitarian minister Joseph Priestley had his laboratory burned and was hounded out of England. He fled to America where he established American Unitarian churches in the Philadelphia area.

Despite these European connections, Unitarianism as we know it in North America is not a foreign import. In fact, the origins of our faith began with some of the most historic congregations in Puritan New England where each town was required to establish a congregationally independent church that followed Calvinist doctrines. Initially these congregational churches offered no religious choice for their parishioners, but over time the strict doctrines of original sin and predestination began to mellow.

By the mid-1700s a group of evangelicals were calling for the revival of Puritan orthodoxy. They asserted their belief in humanity's eternal bondage to sin. People who opposed the revival, believing in free human will and the loving benevolence of God, eventually became Unitarian. During the first four decades of the nineteenth century, hundreds of these original congregational churches fought over ideas about sin and salvation, and especially over the doctrine of the Trinity. Most of the churches split over these issues. In 1819, Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing delivered a sermon called "Unitarian Christianity" and helped to give the Unitarians a strong platform. Six years later the American Unitarian Association was organized in Boston, Massachusetts.

Universalism developed in America in at least three distinct geographical locations. The earliest preachers of the gospel of universal salvation appeared in what were later the Middle Atlantic and Southern states. By 1781, Elhanan Winchester had organized a Philadelphia congregation of Universal Baptists. among its members was Benjamin Rush, the famous physician and signer of the Declaration of Independence.

At about the same time, in the rural, interior sections of New England, a small number of itinerant preachers, among them Caleb Rich, began to disbelieve the strict Calvinist doctrines of eternal punishment. They discovered from their biblical studies the new revelation of God's loving redemption of all. John Murray, an English preacher who immigrated in 1770, helped lead the first Universalist church in Gloucester, Massachusetts, in the battle to separate church and state.

From its beginnings, Universalism challenged its members to reach out and embrace people whom society often marginalized. The Gloucester church included a freed slave among its charter members, and the Universalists became the first denomination to ordain women to the ministry, beginning in 1863 with Olympia Brown.

Universalism was a more evangelical faith than Unitarianism. After officially organizing in 1793, the Universalists spread their faith across the eastern United States and Canada. Hosea Ballou became the denomination's greatest leader during the nineteenth century, and he and his followers, including Nathaniel Stacy, led the way in spreading their faith.

Other preachers followed the advice of Universalist publisher Horace Greeley and went West. One such person was Thomas Starr King, who is credited with defining the difference between Unitarians and Universalists: "Universalists believe that God is too good to damn people, and the Unitarians believe that people are too good to be damned by God." The Universalists believed in a God who embraced everyone, and this eventually became central to their belief that lasting truth is found in all religions, and that dignity and worth is innate to all people regardless of sex, color, race, or class.

Growing out of this inclusive theology was a lasting impetus in both denominations to create a more just society. Both Unitarians and Universalists became active participants in many social justice movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Unitarian preacher Theodore Parker was a prominent abolitionist, defending fugitive slaves and offering support to American abolitionist John Brown.

Other reformers included Universalists such as Charles Spear who called for prison reform, and Clara Barton who went from Civil War “angel of the battlefield” to become the founder of the American Red Cross. Unitarians such as Dorothea Dix fought to “break the chains” of people incarcerated in mental hospitals, and Samuel Gridley Howe started schools for the blind. For the last two centuries, Unitarians and Universalists have been at the forefront of movements working to free people from whatever bonds may oppress them.

Two thousand years ago liberals were persecuted for seeking the freedom to make religious choices, but such freedom has become central to both Unitarianism and Universalism. As early as the 1830s, both groups were studying and promulgating texts from world religions other than Christianity. By the beginning of the twentieth century, humanists within both traditions advocated that people could be religious without believing in God. No one person, no one religion, can embrace all religious truths.

By the middle of the twentieth century it became clear that Unitarians and Universalists could have a stronger liberal religious voice if they merged their efforts, and they did so in 1961, forming the Unitarian Universalist Association. Many Unitarian Universalists became active in the civil rights movement. James Reeb, a Unitarian Universalist minister, was murdered in Selma, Alabama, after he and twenty percent of the denomination’s ministers responded to Martin Luther King, Jr.’s call to march for justice.

Today we are determined to continue to work for greater racial and cultural diversity. In 1977, a women and religion resolution was passed by the Association, and since then the denomination has responded to the feminist challenge to change sexist structures and language, especially with the publication of an inclusive hymnal. The denomination has affirmed the rights of bisexuals, gays, lesbians, and transgendered persons, including ordaining and settling gay and lesbian clergy in our congregations, and in 1996, affirmed same-sex marriage.

All these efforts reflect a modern under-standing of universal salvation. Unitarian Universalism welcomes all to an expanding circle of understanding and choice in religious faith.

Our history has carried us from liberal Christian views about Jesus and human nature to a rich pluralism that includes theist and atheist, agnostic and humanist, pagan, Christian, Jew, and Buddhist. As our history continues to evolve and unfold, we invite you to join us by choosing our free faith.

About the Author

Mark W. Harris is minister of the First Parish Unitarian Universalist in Watertown, Massachusetts, one of the five oldest Unitarian Universalist congregations. Previously he served congregations in Palmer and Milton, Massachusetts, and was Information Director for the Unitarian Universalist Association from 1985 through 1989.