

Unitarian Universalist History in a Nutshell

By

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Today sociologists classify Unitarian Universalism as an NRM, a new religious movement, a friendlier term for what they formally called “a cult.” I presume this is so because the Unitarian Universalist Association didn’t form until 1961, but our faith has been around a lot longer than that. As we shall see, there’s a good case for tracing its origins back to at least the 16th century, but I like to begin even further back to this fellow, Jesus of Nazareth. Being Jewish, Jesus and his original followers were Unitarian in their theology, meaning they believed in only one god, which is the original meaning of Unitarianism. As such, they saw Jesus as a human being and followed him because of his humanitarian, communitarian teachings to love one another, share our wealth, seek only enough for today—our daily bread, heal the sick, feed the hungry, practice nonviolent noncooperation with oppressive authorities, inclusion of those who’ve been left out, and forgiving one another, even our own enemies. Though we may no longer describe ours as a Christian religion, these values remain at the heart of who we are and what we do.

Not only were Jesus and his first followers Unitarian in their theology, the very first systematic Christian theologian, Origen of Alexandria, born in the 2nd century, was a Universalist, meaning he did not believe in eternal damnation, which was the original meaning of the term. He thought that everyone, including demons, would eventually be held in the eternal embrace of his all-loving god. Interestingly, he also believed in reincarnation, in the preexistence of our souls before we are born on Earth to redeem ourselves. So, the very first Christian theologian was both Unitarian and a Reincarnationist in his thinking. Unfortunately, he was declared a heretic, tortured to death, and his writings destroyed, though the Church has had an on-again, off-again appreciation for him to this day.

Upon his execution, another controversial Christian thinker was born, Arius, a Unitarian theologian who did not equate Jesus with God. Emperor Constantine, having made Christianity the official Roman religion, wanted an end to the growing Arian debate and convened the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE, instructing Church leaders to settle the dispute once and for all by declaring the Father and the Son *homoousios*, “of one substance,” making Jesus the same as God. 56 years later the 1st Council of Constantinople added the Holy Spirit to the mix, inventing the Doctrine of the Trinity and making Arius’ Unitarian beliefs illegal. So, as you can see, between Origen’s Universalism and Arius’ Unitarianism, which both preceded the Trinity, it’s fair to say, we were here first.

After our ideas were outlawed, the Dark Ages fell upon us, lasting about 800 years. Then came... the Enlightenment... thanks, largely to the invention of the Printing Press in 1439, its first book being the Gutenberg Bible, making it possible for people to read and interpret the Bible for themselves, including a young Spanish theology student named Michael Servetus. Upon reading it, he was surprised to discover there was no mention of the Trinity in it. “I can’t wait to tell everyone,” he thought, which he did through his publication, *On the Errors*

of the Trinity, for which he was declared a heretic and had to go into hiding for many years. (While away, as a man of science, he happened to discover the pulmonary vascular system.) Eventually, however, he was captured, tried, and prosecuted by Reformer, John Calvin who ordered him burned alive along with his books. Whether people agreed with Servetus or not, many considered it a harsh punishment for a figure who was popular and well liked. So, along with his revised belief in just one God, a belief that necessarily humanized Jesus, came the belief that we shouldn't burn each other over our ideas, a value that has since come to define Unitarianism as much as anything has.

Despite his martyrdom, or, perhaps, because of it, Servetus' ideas went on to influence many, including good King John Sigismund, who, during his rule of Hungary in the mid-16th century, grew weary of all the arguing amongst different religious sects going on in his kingdom. So, he held the Torda Religious Debate in 1568, an assembly of the area religious leaders, so he could listen to them all and determine which he most agreed with. It turns out, he liked the ideas of Unitarian, David Francis, or, Ferenc Dávid. So, Sigismund became the first Unitarian King and appointed Dávid as his Bishop. Together they passed the first religious freedom law in human history, the Edict of Torda, in 1568, something we can all be proud of. The Edict reads as follows:

...in every place the preachers shall preach and explain the Gospel each according to his understanding of it, and if the congregation like it, well. If not, no one shall compel them for their souls would not be satisfied, but they shall be permitted to keep a preacher whose teaching they approve. Therefore none of the superintendents or others shall abuse the preachers, no one shall be reviled for his religion by anyone, according to the previous statutes, and it is not permitted that anyone should threaten anyone else by imprisonment or by removal from his post for his teaching.

Unfortunately, Sigismund died unexpectedly a short time later, the edict was rescinded by those who took his place, and Ferenc Dávid was imprisoned where he languished and died. Meanwhile, another antitrinitarian thinker, Faustus Socinus, who had been influenced by the Unitarian theology of his uncle, and had gone to Hungary to help defend Dávid, embraced Transylvanian Unitarianism. From there, he traveled to Poland, which was known as the "Heretics Asylum," due to its rejection of Calvinism. Socinus taught that there is no Trinity, no hell, that Jesus was a human being and salvation comes not through some mystical atonement, but by actually putting his teachings into practice.

So, Unitarianism spread through Eastern Europe through Hungary, then Poland, on into Germany, England, and eventually made its way to what became known as America. Historic King's Chapel, the first Anglican Church in Colonial America, established in Boston in 1686, installed Unitarian Minister, James Freeman in 1782, making it the oldest Unitarian Church in the nation. The American Unitarian Association was founded there 43 years later. So, clearly, Unitarianism has been around a longer than just since 1961.

Now, what about Universalism? In addition to Origen's disbelief in eternal damnation, Universalism was formalized in response to this guy. Remember John Calvin, Servetus' executioner? You may also recall his unforgiving Doctrine of Predestination by which Calvin

asserted that only a few people, the Elect, were chosen for salvation before creation itself. The rest, he said, will suffer the torments of Hell for all eternity, the decision is final, so there's nothing anyone can do to change it. This extremist ideology prompted a Universalist response, which assumes the exact opposite, that everyone can be saved, that people have free will, that God only knows what they will choose, but the decision is theirs.

A couple of centuries past Calvin, an English Universalist minister, John Murray, who had been excommunicated by the Presbyterians because of his beliefs, became despondent and gave up the ministry after the death of his spouse and child, then headed for the New World to begin a new life. While in route, his ship, the Hand-in-Hand ran aground off the Jersey shore, where he met a farmer named Charles Potter. The incident is often called the first and only Universalist miracle, for it so happened that Potter was himself a Universalist, had built a chapel nearby, and had been praying for God to deliver a Universalist minister. Although reluctant, under the circumstances, Murray couldn't refuse and delivered the first Universalism sermon in Colonial America on September 30th, 1770. He may have escaped England, but he could not escape the ministry, and went on to help spread Universalism with an evangelical fervor. It is Murray who famously said;

Go out into the highways and by-ways of America... Give the people, blanketed with a decaying and crumbling religion, something of your new vision. You may possess only a small light but uncover it, let it shine, use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of men and women. Give them, not Hell, but hope and courage.

He eventually settled in Gloucester (Glaw-ster), Massachusetts, and became founder and pastor of the First Universalist Society in America, where he gave his first sermon in 1774. Twenty years later the Universalist Church of America was founded and headquartered in Pennsylvania. When his church was formally established in 1779, its 61 members claimed independence from the Church of Christ in Gloucester. As the official church there, it began persecuting the Universalists for heresy, including having the authorities confiscate their church belongings to help cover their mandatory tithe. So they did what any good Universalists would do, they sued, and, in 1786, won their case, which made it illegal for churches to be publicly funded anywhere in the country. Separation of church and state, brought to you by the Universalists.

Some of our greatest causes and accomplishments since then include support of nonsectarian education. In fact, educational reformer, Horace Mann himself, the founder of Public Education who went on to become a Massachusetts Congressman, was a member of First Parish Unitarian Church in Dedham, Massachusetts.

In 1840, years before the Civil War, some of our most prominent leaders participated in the World Anti-Slavery Convention calling for an end to slavery everywhere. Three years later, during the Universalist's Annual Convention, they passed a resolution stating slavery is;

Contrary to the plainest dictates of natural justice and Christian love... [and to] that doctrine of Universal Grace and Love which we cherish as the most important of revealed truth.

Not long afterward, a former slave and his entire family were allowed to join the Mount Olympus Universalist Society in, get this, Mt. Olympus, Alabama! In 1845!

In 1880 the Universalists ordained Joseph Jordan as our first African American minister. He started a Universalist Church in Norfolk, Virginia, which included a Freedman School for African American kids staffed mostly by Quakers, Unitarians, and Universalists.

In 1863, the Universalists also became the first religious denomination to officially ordain a woman minister, Reverend Olympia Brown. Born in 1835, she was also the first woman in the country who graduated from a Theological School, was among the first generation of women suffragists, and lived until 1926, long enough to see the ratification of the 19th amendment granting women the right to vote.

Other famous suffragists within our ranks include Mary Wollstonecraft, best known as the author of *Frankenstein*, but she also wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, and is considered the 18th century's foremother of feminism.

Dorothy Dix chose to become a Unitarian as an adult, and is remembered for her work establishing hospitals and improving conditions and treatment for the mentally ill.

Margaret Fuller, born a Unitarian, America's first female book reporter and herself the author of the first major feminist book, *Woman in the 19th Century*, fought for women's suffrage, women's education, prison reform, ending poverty and homelessness, and advocated for racial equality for blacks and Native Americans.

According to her daughter, Elizabeth Cady Stanton attended a Unitarian Church. Stanton was an abolitionist, and voting rights activist who also struggled for birth control and property rights for women, and served as the President of the National Woman Suffrage Association.

Julia Ward Howe, who wrote *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, was another woman's suffragist, abolitionist, and social activist, who left her Calvinistic upbringing to become a Unitarian.

In addition, Unitarians and Universalists have long stood for abolishing the death penalty and in 1974 passed a general resolution stating as much at a time when most States were passing legislation to reestablish its practice.

We get to claim many great thinkers, like the transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau who liberated us from our traditional Christian frame to become more theologically inclusive near the turn of the 20th century.

A few years later, some Unitarian ministers challenged us to go further still, by asking why we need to use religious language at all. Why can't we just be good for goodness sake. Taking our historical emphasis upon the humanity of Jesus and his humanistic teachings to the next level, six of the thirteen signers of the *Humanist Manifesto* in 1933 were Unitarian ministers, including John H. Dietrich, the father of religious humanism, who was our minister here in Spokane from 1911 to 1916, where he first identified himself as a Humanist.

It was a Universalist minister, Adin Ballou, whose book on nonviolence, *Christian Non-Resistance*, influenced Leo Tolstoy, who influenced Gandhi, who influenced Martin Luther King, Jr.

As you can see from all this history, the Unitarians and the Universalists share a lot in common. The running joke is that the Universalists believe God is too good to damn them, and the Unitarians believe they are too good to be damned. So, in 1961 we got together and formed the Unitarian Universalist Association, or the UUA, as we like to call it.

Since then we have, together, been among the first religions to protest the Vietnam war, passing a resolution stating as much in 1964.

That same year, one of our young ministers, James Reeb, was among those murdered in Selma, Alabama advocating for Civil Rights. His sacrifice inspired Dr. King himself to speak during our General Assembly a short time later.

In 1971, the UUA became the original Wikileaks by publishing the Pentagon Papers, resulting in Federal retaliation and the seizing of our financial records. The case was headed for the Supreme Court, but was dropped in the wake of the Watergate scandal.

As in the past, we're still making history, like we did in 2013 when our church, in particular, worked to pass Marriage Equality here in Washington, which started a cascade of similar decisions around the nation, until the Supreme Court itself agreed with us just two years later.

These are just a few of the historical highlights that impress me, though the history of our faith is so rich, there are many events and persons I've left out. Perhaps you will be inspired to discover some of them for yourself, or, even better, become one of our religion's history makers.