

UU History in 40 Minutes
Katie Miller
Aiken Unitarian Universalist Church
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Well, let me start by saying that trying to summarize everything that has led us to the Unitarian Universalists as we exist today is virtually impossible. We have a long history, much longer than I think many of us realize. There are some people that will get left out of my presentation today because of time. I am going to try to cover the main points that I think we all need to be aware of.

There are some general themes that emerge in looking at UU history. First is that our history is very much intertwined with Christianity from our earliest days, but particularly in Poland, England, and Transylvania. You will see that as I go on. The second theme is that Unitarians attracted what you might call religious misfits, those who were uncomfortable with the Doctrine of the Trinity (Father, Son, & Holy Ghost). Many people who join UU churches today do so because they do not feel comfortable in traditional Christian churches. Third, they believed that reason, tolerance, and freedom to debate should be a part of the religious experience. These ideas are fundamental to the Unitarian Universalist faith today.

That said, let's start with our earliest ancestors. Arius was a Christian bishop in the 3rd & 4th centuries. He was involved at the Council at Nicaea where the Nicene Creed was adopted. He argued that Jesus was separate from God and very much human. He was anti-Trinitarian and his followers were condemned as heretics. Arian bishops were persecuted and the church became more orthodox in their views as a result of the debate. Arius and his followers put the Arian in Unitarian and is considered to be the first Christian Unitarian.

At the same time, there was Origen. He argued with the church over the idea that there was only one path to salvation, which was through Jesus. He was also declared a heretic and is considered to be the first Christian Universalist.

Now we skip forward a bit to the 16th century, which was the time of the Reformation. This was shortly after the introduction of the printing press by Guttenberg. The Bible was now available to more people because they were able to print it in people's own languages. Because of that availability, people were able to interpret it for themselves and people started to question what they were being told by the church. Probably the most famous for speaking up during this time was Martin Luther, but that's a different denomination. The radicals of this time period were known as Anabaptists. Most of them became Baptists and Mennonites but they are also the ancestors of UUs. Their primary point of contention with the church was the idea of infant baptism but they also had issues with the doctrine of the Trinity. Many of them died because of their challenges to the church, in fact many during this time period were burned at the stake for heresy. Others found places in Holland and Switzerland where they could live safely and freely.

There are several people of particular interest to UUs from this time period that are considered to be our religious ancestors.

The first of these people is Michael Servetus. Servetus was born into a noble Catholic family in Spain. He discovered the Bible at a young age and the absence of the Trinity in the Bible. He wrote and published "On the Errors of the Trinity," a Unitarian publication that got him into all sorts of trouble. He tended to be direct and outspoken and tactless. Because of this way of communication, Servetus didn't make a lot of friends in the Protestant reformation, especially John Calvin. He continued to communicate with John Calvin and was convinced that he could persuade Calvin to his point of view. That was his biggest mistake. It is because of John Calvin supplying the Spanish Inquisition with information that Servetus was burned at the stake on October 27, 1553, with his books for heresy.

The second person of note from this time period is Faustus Socinus, who was heavily involved with Polish Unitarianism. His Uncle was also involved in reforming the Polish church and it was through reading his uncle's papers that Socinus became interested in Unitarianism. He wrote a great deal on the subject and because of these writings he was accused of heresy. He headed east. By 1558 the church in Poland was suffering because so many anti-trinitarian ministers and congregations were popping up and challenging the church's ideas of the trinity and infant

baptism. The Polish churches became known as the Minor Reform church or Arians and later became known as Socinians. Early on they adopted principles of religious toleration and freedom of conscience. Socinus eventually became leader of this movement, although he never formally became a member of the Minor Reform church before he died in 1604.

Socinus is also responsible for the Racovian catechism. The city of Rakow was founded in 1569 on the idea that it would be a city of religious toleration. The anti-trinitarians soon arrived and the city was considered to be the capital of Polish Unitarianism for 60 years. The catechism was published by the Minor Reform church in Rakow was a text that presented the positions of the church in a teaching form. It was used for 200 years after its publication, despite being burned in 1614 in England because of the positions it included – mainly that scripture, reason, and humanist thought were all equally important in one's religious experience. In 1638, Rakow was lost because many of the town's leaders were arrested and some executed after the Jesuits moved into Poland.

The third person of note from this time period is Francis David and Transylvania. Transylvania is a very exciting place for UUs several reasons:

1. Because many of the traditions that were started in the 16th century in Transylvania are still in existence today in that area.
2. Transylvania is responsible for the longest continuous practice of Unitarianism in the world. It is also home to the only Unitarian King in history, King John Sigismund.
3. It is the only place where Unitarianism was one of four established and politically recognized religions of the state – the others were Catholics, Lutherans, and Calvinists.

What is interesting about David is that he was involved, at some point, with all four of these religions. He was a rector at a Catholic school, a minister in the Lutheran and Reformed churches, and a Unitarian minister to the King.

David was frequently called upon to debate the Trinitarians during his life and he frequently won those debates. In 1568 the King issued the Act of Tolerance and Freedom of Conscience which stated that preachers could explain the Gospel as they understood it as long as their congregation was happy. Unitarianism became the leading religion in Transylvania, but not for long. Our

good king was childless and when he died he was replaced by a King who was Catholic and friendly with the Protestants, but not the Unitarians. He took away the freedoms given by the previous king. David objected strongly and was sentenced to life in prison and died shortly thereafter.

After David's death in 1579, the Transylvania Unitarians struggled to survive. In 1686 Transylvania became part of Hungary. They continued to lose churches and schools and eventually their printing press during this time. They went through ups and downs depending on who was in charge at the time but through it all they have managed to survive and at the end of the 19th century there were 75,000 Unitarians in 160 congregations in Hungary.

During this same time period, England was going through great upheaval which got going because of Henry the 8th's creation of the Church of England and separation from the Catholic church in Rome. Arians were not welcomed in England, many of them were declared heretics and were burned at the stake. In 1647 John Biddle rejected the idea of the trinity and was arrested for his ideas. He spent most of the rest of his life for his views and for publishing them but he is considered to be the father of English Unitarians. Because alternative points of view were not welcome in England, it did not take long before Unitarians headed for the New World. They could live a life of religious toleration and live peacefully when they were an ocean away from the repressive Church of England. So, now we move onto the development of the Unitarian church in America...

The 1700s in New England were very formative for Unitarians. The Congregational churches in Massachusetts were in a real struggle for control between the orthodox conservatives and the liberal independent churches. Sound familiar? Harvard became a training ground for ministers who wanted to preach in the more liberal Congregational churches. Their library began collecting the works of Socinus and other well known Unitarians in Europe.

This was a time when America was beginning to define itself as a land of freedom, hope, and opportunity. There were some major political figures on the scene during this time that Unitarians lay claim to because they were outspoken in their liberal religious beliefs. They

include John & Abigail Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and South Carolina's own John C. Calhoun. They never formally declared themselves Unitarians but their writings lead us to claim them as our own.

At the end of the 18th & beginning of the 19th centuries we begin to see the first UU churches pop up. King's Chapel in Boston embraced Unitarianism in 1785. Upon his arrival in America, Joseph Priestly, an English Unitarian minister, started two Pennsylvania Unitarian churches, one of which still exists today. And a preacher from Holland who we believe was Socinian founded a church in Barneveld, New York, which is still in existence and is currently a member of the UUA. Also of note from the 19th century, when the westward expansion began, many that went were Unitarians. In fact, the first church in Kansas was a Unitarian church.

There are three major players in Unitarianism during the 19th century. The first of these is William Ellery Channing. He was minister of Federal Street Church in Boston and was the leader of the liberal churches in Boston. He is very well known for an ordination sermon that he gave at First Independent Church for the ordination of Jared Sparks. His sermon, which lasted an hour and a half, is considered one of the most significant sermons ever preached in the United States. Why? Channing used the opportunity to talk about the ongoing debate between the Orthodox and the Unitarians about Christianity and the scriptures. It is said that this is the most widely read sermons in history.

The second major player was Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson was a minister in Boston but left the church because of his discomfort with the rite of communion. He decided to concentrate on literature. He gave an address at Harvard in 1838 where he criticized Unitarian ministers for being dry and boring. He argued that ministers should focus on their personal experiences more and that spirituality and God are not stagnant.

The third major player of this time was Theodore Parker, who is one of our more heroic figures in UU history. A Boston minister, he was heavily involved in the Underground Railroad that freed slaves. He was also a Transcendentalist. He suggested that the forms and doctrines of Christianity are transient. Here's a quote regarding Parker from David Bumbaugh's book on UU

History: “What is permanent is the word of God expressed in each human heart, the word of God spoken through Conscience, Reason, and Faith and that truth existed before Jesus and after him and in all times and places.” While he was very influential to our faith, Parker was shunned at the time for these statements and was considered a radical within the Unitarian faith.

While we are discussing the 19th century, I also want to point out here that Unitarians during this time could be found all over the place, including the south. It remained this way until the Civil War. Few southern Unitarian churches survived the Civil War, mainly Charleston and New Orleans. Unitarianism wouldn't really come back to the south until after World War II.

At the turn of the century, Unitarians became more humanist in their traditions, which marked the final break with Christianity for many of the Unitarians. Humanism puts a strong emphasis on science and reason. It strongly discounted belief in God in any form or the idea of the religious experience.

Now I want to jump over to the Universalists and the Iowa Sisterhood for a few minutes. The Universalists were particularly interested in social justice, including abolition of slavery, prison reform, protection of child workers, and women's rights. Prominent Universalist social reformers from this time period include Clara Barton, Dorothea Dix, Clarence Skinner, and Quillen Shinn. Thomas Starr King was also a part of this movement, although he was also a Unitarian minister.

Women are largely responsible for spreading Unitarianism and Universalism to the Midwest during this time period because the Universalists were ordaining women ministers during this time. Unfortunately, their role became increasingly diminished over time and only recently have women ministers become more prominent in our faith.

Universalists were more spread out geographically than Unitarians during this time period, largely because of the missionary efforts of Quillen Shinn in the south. Some of the Universalist churches that got started in the south during this time are still around today and are members of the UUA.

There are about 300 Unitarian and Universalist congregations today that were around at the turn of the century. More than two-thirds of those exist in the 11 northeastern states. There are only 3 old southern Unitarian churches (Charleston, Richmond, & New Orleans) and about 10 old Universalist churches that still exist today.

Now we'll fast forward to the post-World War II era. From 1948 to 1975 was a time of tremendous growth for UUs. During this time a large number of lay-led fellowships were started all over the United States. The Augusta and Clemson UU churches are both products of this time period. And it is why you see so many churches currently celebrating their 50th anniversaries. It grew out of the Church of the Larger Fellowship program, that still exists today to serve isolated UUs and got started in Boulder, Colorado in 1948. Many of these churches grew into large congregations while others have remained small. This growth strategy was abandoned in the 1970s and emphasis was put on establishing more urban congregations.

Meanwhile, in 1961 the Unitarians and Universalists officially merged and formed the UUA. This was not an easy process for either side. The Unitarians saw the Universalists as too Christian and conservative. The Universalists were afraid of the looseness of the Unitarians and were afraid of losing their identity.

There are a few 20th century people and events I need to mention and then I'll be done:

1. James Luther Adams. He was one of the few great UU scholars that is known outside of Unitarian Universalism. Adams taught at Harvard and the University of Chicago. He was a Unitarian Christian and influenced two generations of students.
2. 1968 Cleveland massacre. In 1968 in Cleveland there were 2 black identity groups within UUism competing for funding. One took an integrationist stand and the other wanted to address issues apart from integration. They tried to reach a compromise at General Assembly in Boston, which caused a walk out. The situation was not handled very well and a lot of members left because of what happened. It became a learning situation for the Association and they have worked very hard to address diversity and anti-racism issues.

3. Principles and sources. The Unitarians were famous for and proud of not having a creed. Universalists struggled for many years to come up with statements that they were happy with without success. In the 1980s the UU women's movement led the way to come up /with our Principles and Sources. In 1985 a set of 7 principles and 5 sources were officially adopted and a 6th source was added in the 1990s. These statements now define who we are and how we introduce ourselves to those new to our churches. If you are unfamiliar with them, I would encourage you to look at the publications we have near the front door that will give you an introduction.

If you find that this topic interests you and you want to go into it deeper, I do want to mention that we are hoping to offer a longer UU History course in the fall, I believe.