

## **The Unitarians by Leonard Smith: a brief synopsis** **by Rev. Dr. Graham Loudon**

1. The roots of Unitarianism can be traced back to the controversy within the early church over the divinity of Jesus. Arius, an Egyptian priest who denied the complete divinity of Jesus, built up a substantial following but was vigorously opposed by St. Athanasius of Alexandria. The Emperor Constantine was sufficiently concerned to call a council at Nicaea in 325 where Arianism was declared to be heretical and Arius and his adherents were banished. Later, the council's decision was enshrined in the creed named after Athanasius, although by that time, he had been dead for many years. Adopting this complex doctrine and labyrinthine doctrine enabled the church to persecute dissidents over the coming centuries, in the name of religious orthodoxy and political dominance.

2. By the sixteenth century, however, the failings of the Roman Catholic church were becoming the subject of intense criticism due to the impact of the Renaissance, technological advances such as the printing press, whose importance as a catalyst for change is difficult to overstate, and scientific discoveries which the church was finding it ever more difficult to suppress. The Lutheran dictum of sola scriptura, coupled with the ready availability of the printed bible in the vernacular, brought issues such as the doctrine of the Trinity and the rite of baptism under close scrutiny. Michael Servetus became convinced that the Trinity was not scriptural and in 1531, he wrote *De Trinitatibus Erroribus* and corresponded with many reformers, including Calvin, to interest them in his views. His *Christianismi Restitutio*, published anonymously in 1553, argued in favour of a return to a pure form of Christianity, shorn of convoluted manmade doctrine that had been grafted on to it over the centuries. Sadly, later that year, he visited **Geneva**, was recognised, tried for heresy on Calvin's orders and burnt at the stake.

3 Servetus' death did not dampen down doubts about the Trinity, rather it engendered more. Supporters such as Castellio, Blandrata and Gentile continued to write in support of anti-trinitarian views and there were outbreaks of support in various cities such as Zurich, Heidelberg and Basel, usually suppressed by persecution. Farther east, in Poland and Transylvania, however, it gained a stronger foothold and began to develop into proto-Unitarianism. In **Poland**, where there was a complicated political situation and a weak monarchy, the Minor Reformed Church was established in 1565 to promote anti-trinitarian views. The leadership of Faustinus Socinus between 1588 and 1604 helped to consolidate the MRC and led to the Rakovian Catechism of 1605 which demonstrated a free and rational approach to scripture and a great emphasis on life and conduct. Although persecuted and expelled from Poland during times of Jesuit dominance, they maintained a presence until the Diet of Warsaw in 1658 which ordered them to go into exile in 1660. The resulting diaspora helped to spread the message into other more receptive states and to reinforce the existing Unitarian community in **Transylvania** where it has taken root during the reign of John Sigismund who feared religious division and allowed religious freedom at the Diet of Kolozsvár (1556).

Especially influential in Transylvania were Francis David who became bishop of the reformed church and championed the Unitarian cause, gaining significant concessions in 1568. After the unexpected death of the king, however, David was opposed by Blandrata who was a powerful figure at court. Blandrata feared persecution if the Unitarians pressed for too much reform and he and David disagreed violently resulting in the imprisonment and death of David in 1579. Subsequently, the church survived despite some episodic persecution and David's form of Unitarianism was largely practised only in secret. In 1638, the Accord of Des imposed conservative practices on Unitarians and they continued in this uneasy state until the Austro-Hungarian Edict of Toleration of 1781. After that date, they were able to worship freely, build new churches and travel abroad. Fertile contacts were made with both Britain and the USA which drew the different churches together for a time. The twentieth century, however, presented difficulties; assimilation into Romania after WWI caused much internal tension and there was renewed persecution during the communist era. Only since the fall of Ceausescu in 1989, has the Unitarian church in Romania been able to regroup; in Hungary, the church suffered less, but at the expense of 'agreeing' to work closely with the communist state.

4. There is much debate as to the origins of Unitarianism in **Britain** but John Biddle certainly represents an independent strand in the mid-sixteenth century. Controversy over the Trinity continued to divide nonconformist groups despite the Toleration Act of 1689 and there was also a developing Arian movement among Anglicans during the eighteenth century causing some congregations to secede and establish independent chapels. Dissenting Academies succumbed increasingly to 'liberal' opinion during the century and many followed the same route as Joseph Priestley moving from orthodoxy to Unitarianism via Arianism and Socinianism. He styled himself a 'determinist, necessarian and materialist' and this scientific, logical approach remained a characteristic of Unitarians until James Martineau advocated a more intuitive style of faith in the later nineteenth century. In the early years, Thomas Belsham presided over a rapid expansion of the movement and also lent his support to Robert Wright who carried out exemplary missionary journeys for the Unitarian Fund for Promoting Unitarianism by means of Popular Preaching between 1806 and 1827. The founding of the British and Foreign Unitarian Association in 1825 was also important as it enabled Unitarians to take advantage of the growing emigration to countries such as the USA, Canada and Australia. Their ranks were also swollen by smaller Baptist and Methodist groups who decided to switch their allegiance to Unitarianism. Such changes caused problems with regards to church buildings and trust funds (the Lady Hewley case) which were not settled until 1844 when rules were laid down for settling disputes over ownership when worship practices altered.

Much of the nineteenth century was dominated by James Martineau who was at the forefront of the shift from determinism to freedom of the spirit and free faith. Despite this, he did not leave a great legacy behind him as his attempts to replace the name Unitarian by Free Christian Union, his emphasis on the catholicity of the English Presbyterian, his many service books and his lack of interest in international and interfaith developments did not survive him. Instead, in the new century (Martineau died in 1900), Unitarianism retained its denominational identity, the first woman minister (Gertrud von Petzold) was admitted to the ministry in 1904 and the

General Assembly was established in 1928 with its Headquarters at Essex Hall. The church settled down to be Liberal Christian or Theistic with an increasing measure of humanist outlook and growing interest in world religions and the multicultural outreach.

5 The origins of Unitarianism in **America** seem to stem from a similar amalgam of American conditions with only modest influence from overseas influences. The original New England settlers were rigidly Calvinist but soon succumbed to liberal thought due to the congregational system which made it difficult to address heresy. Non-dogmatic covenants began to appear and intolerance and persecution were rejected by many and this was reflected in the Great Awakening of 1734 which cast off Calvinist orthodoxy in favour of a more open doctrine of human nature and salvation. Events at King's Chapel, Boston in 1783 provided a pattern for the adoption of Unitarian ideas (especially those of Priestley) and some other churches followed suit to move to effective Unitarianism. In 1803, a struggle began at Harvard College to fill two vacant posts, that of Hollis professor of Divinity and, in 1804, college president. Eventually, the liberal wing prevailed and this both established the liberal tradition at Harvard and also initiated the controversy that led to the separation of the evangelical and liberal wings of the Congregational churches. Jedediah Morse resigned as an overseer of the college and branded the liberals 'unitarians'. This led William Ellery Channing to reply in support of the liberals and, in 1819, to endorse Unitarianism in his 'Baltimore' sermon. The Dedham judgement in 1820 provided a precedent for the settlement of disputes within church and parish with a formula to settle controversy over ministerial appointments. The American Unitarian Association was established in 1825 and shortly afterwards, the Transcendentalist movement, promoted by Ralph Waldo Emerson, began to contribute to the evolution of the church and to modify its sectarian limitations.

The Civil War concentrated Unitarian minds powerfully and led Henry W Bellows to call a National Conference in 1865. Two years later, radicals broke away to form the Free Religious Association to represent those who wished to adopt a more humanist stance. After some decades of debate, the 'Issue in the West' resulted in a preamble devised by the National Conference to satisfy both radicals and liberals and this body eventually became the General Conference of the American Unitarian Association, finally joining the UUA in 1961. American Universalism had emerged from the same roots, especially aversion to Calvinism but moved away from explicit adherence to Christian principles, influenced by preachers such as Hosea Ballou and Clarence Skinner. The merger helped to satisfy the humanist wing that grew in strength during the twentieth century and was characterised by a change from Christian to 'universalised Universalism'.

6 This period also saw much outreach to foreign countries such as Czechoslovakia, the Philippines, India, South Africa and Nigeria as well as increased contacts with countries where 'old' Unitarianism was still a force. In India, for example, a succession of Unitarians such as William Roberts, William Adam, Charles Timothy Brooks and Jabez Sunderland established Unitarian missions in various Indian cities over the course of the nineteenth century. In the 21<sup>st</sup>. century, Unitarianism continues to gain ground, assisted by new technology, in countries such as Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Congo, Cuba, Mexico and Indonesia.

