

## UU History: The Beginnings in America




As we are learning, the Unitarian Universalist faith we cherish has been unfolding for almost 500 years, passed down from one person to another. Would you please join me in our chalice lighting that speaks to this miracle?

At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame before us and within us.

- Jesus of Nazareth – Although we are not considered even a denomination of the Christian Church now, the Unitarian Universalist movement came out of Christianity
- Constantine – presided over the Council of Nicaea in 325AD to decide on the divinity of Jesus. By vote of the bishops present, the Doctrine of the Trinity was upheld, and in 383 was made the official religion of the Roman Empire.
- The doctrines of Arius denies that Jesus was of the same substance as God and holds instead that he was only the highest of created beings You'll hear a lot about "Arians" today
- Luther – Luther just wanted to clean up the Catholic practice of selling indulgences as expiation of one's sins. For that, he was excommunicated, and went on to lead the Protestant Reformation
- Servetus – a theologian, physician, cartographer and humanist, he was burned at the stake for his writings against the Trinity.
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- Faustus Socinus was the leader of the movement in Poland and gave his name to the philosophy that evolved into Unitarianism in many places.
- Francis David was the stalwart champion of Unitarianism in Transylvania. One of his most famous quote is "We don't have to think alike to love alike."
- John Biddle is often called the Father of English Unitarianism who wrote "Twelve Arguments Drawn out of Scripture" upholding the One God.
- Theophilus Lindsey established the Essex Street Chapel in London which became the center of Unitarian work and thought
- Joseph Priestly, a brilliant scholar, scientist (he discovered oxygen and

	<p>invented carbonated water), preacher, who came to American in 1794.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• You'd think the two Unitarian churches in the Philadelphia area that Priestly formed would be the seeds from which Emerson eventually evolved.</li> <li>• Wrong! The roots of the American Unitarians and Universalists movement start way back with its early settlers</li> <li>• If you remember, the Socinianism of Poland and the Unitarianism of Transylvania sprang from the Reformed churches, and the English church first developed mainly in the Presbyterian churches, but in New England, American Unitarianism first arose from the Congregational Churches</li> <li>• But we're getting ahead of our story. First we have the Pilgrims arriving at Plymouth in 1620. Have you ever scratched your head and wondered what the difference was between Pilgrims and Puritans? Pilgrims WERE Puritans, that is they wanted to purify the Church of England. After a time, they gave up on that and became separatists who wanted to separate themselves from the Church of England and also from those who were not believers, the damned. Pilgrims believed they were elected by God for salvation and they wanted to worship only with other "saints" who had also been saved by God. They had first fled England to the Netherlands, but after several years, fearful that their children would lose their English roots; they came to the New World and settled in what we know as Plymouth, MA.</li> <li>• The non-separatists Puritans formed the Mass Bay Colony 7 years later. They had a dream that one day the Anglican Church would purge itself of all vestiges of Catholic influence. They believed in strict Calvinism, and were quick to pass laws against heresy, i.e. Baptists, Quakers, Episcopal and Catholics. But they saw their situation as temporary – they planned to return to England as soon as they could, so they failed to establish creeds that would maintain the purity of their beliefs. Rather they had "covenants" that people pledged to live a Christian life in accordance with the scriptures.</li> <li>• Here we need to stop and take a look at Calvinism, as many of the tenants were specifically what the later Unitarians rebelled against. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<p>Five Points of Calvinism</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Total depravity – Each of us is born with sin</li> <li>• Unconditional election -- God chooses who is saved</li> </ul>



- Limited atonement -- Jesus's death wiped out our sins
- Irresistible grace -- If God says you're saved, you are
- Perseverance of the saints – If you're in, you're in

Notice that the Trinity is NOT one of the precepts mentioned. It was so basic to the thinking of sixteenth century theology that it was assumed. To the Congregationalist, acknowledged Grace was the entry into the local church. No one could be a member and receive communion who could not give "testimony" of Grace." They believed that they had a covenant with God and each other to be perfect. The trouble was, that as the years went by and new generations came on the scene who were no longer fired by the same enthusiasm for purity of doctrine, and gradual and subtle changes crept into worship life. The dream that motivated Puritism in England was quickly supplanted by a desire to retain the freedom and independence that life in the wilderness had made familiar and comfortable and right.

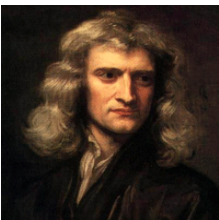
To train clergy




Harvard was established in 1636, just 6 years after the Puritans arrived to form the Mass Bay Colon, as a seminary to train clergy for the Congregational Church. It represents the intellectual thinking of the day:

- Chief tool of learning was Aristotian logic, not experiment
- Source of truth was authority, not reason
- Principle language was Latin
- Emphasized classical learning and included nothing practical or vocational

Harbingers of the Enlightenment



After sending off the Mass Bay Colony, the crown was quite content to let them find their own way. No money was expended to support the colonies, and consequently, they were somewhat isolated from the Enlightenment movement that was sweeping Europe. By 1691, however, England had a reverse balance of trade issue with the colonies as well as proxy wars with France on the continent. England moved to take control by voiding the Colony's charter and making it a crown colony. With this opening of exchanges between the American colonies and Europe came the ideas of such liberal writers as John Locke, John Milton, and Isaac Newton. Arians on both sides of the Atlantic became aware of each other's existence and correspondence sprang up between them. The effect was to speed the process by which the Calvinist constitution of the colony was undermined.

<p>Galileo: 1610 public support of Cop 1592-1610 at Un of Padua</p>	<p>Let's stop a minute and take a look at what the Enlightenment was all about. Usually it is thought of as an 18<sup>th</sup> century event, but its beginning can be traced back as early as 1543 to Copernicus, first <a href="#">astronomer</a> to formulate a comprehensive <a href="#">heliocentric cosmology</a>, which displaced the <a href="#">Earth</a> from the center of the <a href="#">universe</a>. It's often thought of as an antireligious event, but the Enlightenment challenged only automatic authority, not religion itself. Its two principles were the primacy of reason and the testimony on nature. For instance, John Locke taught that we can only know what we can see, taste, touch, feel or smell, and Newton's discovery of the laws of gravity and other physical laws called into question the direct hand of God in men's lives. Newton was a strong Unitarian, by the way, and actually wrote more about religion than he did about science.</p> <p>Harvard began to switch from authority based to experiment based teaching.</p> <p>Are you beginning to get a gut feel for how Calvinism could be eroded by the combination of the freedom of the New World and the emphasis on reason and thinking of the Enlightenment?</p>
<p>The Great Awakening</p> 	<p>But at the moment when it seemed that there was no hope for stopping the slide into religious laxity and indifference, the churches of Mass were gripped by a revival known as The Great Awakening. In 1754 The Rev. Jonathan Edwards began preaching powerfully passionate sermons to his congregation in Northampton, stirring his listeners to an emotional and deeply felt repentance. From that point the revival spread through the colony and up and down the Atlantic coast.</p> <p>The contrast between the revival preachers – and George Whitefield was an example of those completely over the top with the dramatics – and the more sedate, thoughtful liberal clerics were stark. While many spoke out against the emotional parlor tricks of the evangelists, most just refused the use of their churches and banded closer together. Consequently, the gulf between the liberal and conservative churches widened</p> <p>The process of liberalization of the New England Churches was gradual, almost imperceptible. Preachers did not challenge doctrines with which they had difficulty. Rather they simply ceased to emphasize those doctrines, and</p>

then they left them out of their sermons completely. Since most preachers were “settled” for life, they could shape a congregation’s expectation, customs and beliefs over several generations.

James Freeman



So far we’ve been talking about Congregational Churches. In 1782, James Freeman, a recent Harvard graduate (think Congregational background) was hired by the Anglican King’s Chapel Church in Boston. By 1785, he declared he could no longer uphold the Trinity, so he and his congregation revised the Book of Common Prayer to omit all references. King’s Chapel also ordained Freeman, a practice that was not allowed in the Anglican Church. The Anglican bishop expelled King’s Chapel which was promptly welcomed into the fellowship by the Congregational ministers of Boston. Freeman began a correspondence with Priestly, Lindsey and other leaders of the English movement, and as a result Harvard received a large collection of books on Unitarianism. In 1792, influenced by the teachings of Priestly and Freeman, the Episcopal church of Portland withdrew from that society to become an Unitarian Society, the first church in the US to bear the name—although it died with its preacher seven years later.

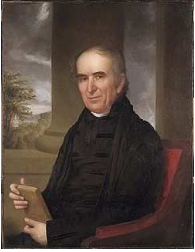
Uus in 1800’s



OK, now we’re back to where we ended last month. Joseph Priestly flees persecution in England and arrive in the US. In 1796, he delivered twelve lectures on Christianity and one sermon on Unitarianism from the pulpit of the Universalist Church in Philadelphia. A year later the First Society of Unitarian Christians was established in Philadelphia, The Society still exists today, claiming to be the first permanent Unitarian Church in the United States.

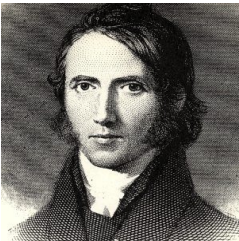
During the American Revolution, there had been little doctrinal debate among the churches. When the war ended, there was no way to return to the status quo ante bellum. The Revolution had not only realigned political realities, it had also initiated a religious realignment. The Universalists, the Hicksite Quakers and the churches of the Christian Connection all emerged in this period. And part of this religious realignment was an ever-widening gulf between liberals and conservatives within the Congregation Churches of Mass. The conservatives began to demand that their members subscribe to creeds and candidates for ordination be examined as to their theology. The liberals looked to England and to each other for support. Harvard, which trained all the ministers, was considered a hot bed of heresy.

## The Harvard Incident



We've been calling them "Unitarians", but they wouldn't recognize us today. For many Priestly was far too radical. Some were still largely Arian in their thinking, while others had progressed to Unitarianism of a more conservative sort. They were distinguished by a strong dislike of controversy, and they refused to be drawn into doctrinal debate. By quietly ignoring doctrines they found troublesome, they presided over a slowly emerging liberalism which remained difficult to pin down and challenge. Matters came to a head when Henry Ware, a liberal was elected to fill the Hollis Professor of Divinity Chair at Harvard in 1805 after a year-long tough battle. The conservative members of the Board of Overseers resigned, only to be replaced by liberal members. It was clear that the liberals would be in charge of educating new preachers for all the Congregational Churches of New England. In response, the Conservatives opened Andover Theological Seminary and required a creed for students and teachers alike. In many ways this marked the final and definitive moment in the schism that had split the churches of the Standing Order in Mass.

## William Ellery Channing



Entering our story now is one of the most illustrious Unitarian ministers of any age: William Ellery Channing. He served as minister of the Federal Street Church in Boston, Massachusetts, 1803-42, and was the recognized leader of the liberal wing of the Congregational Church. In 1815 he was called upon the answer charges of a deliberate conspiracy aimed to seduce the church into heresy. His vehicle was a public letter in which he argued that they were actually Arian in their beliefs, granting Jesus an exalted place above men. Further he argued that their views on the Trinity were well known and that they didn't preach on it because it was disruptive and not conducive to right living.

In 1819, Channing gave the ordination sermon for Jared Sparks at the newly form First Independent Church of Baltimore. Having been silent in face of orthodox criticism since his open letter, he was determined to use this occasion to respond to his critics and to define and defend this faith. This is the famous "Unitarian Christianity" speech, which **concluded:**

Do not, brethren, shrink from the duty of searching God's Word for yourselves through fear of human censure and denunciation. Do not think that you may innocently follow the opinions which prevail around you, without investigation on the ground that Christianity is now so purified from errors as it need no laborious research. Much stubble is

yet to be burned; much rubbish to be removed; many gaudy decorations, which a false taste has hung around Christianity, must be swept away; and the earth-born fogs which have shrouded it must be scattered before this divine fabric will rise before us in its native and awful majesty, in its harmonious proportions, in its mild and celestial splendors.

The sermon was rushed to press and went through eight editions in four months.

Channing has been described as an exemplar of Christian piety and a champion of human rights and dignity, he effectively fostered social reform in areas of free speech, education, peace, relief for the poor, and anti-slavery. His pulpit orations made him, according to [Emerson](#), "a kind of public Conscience." There are a few copies of his bio from the web on the back table if you would like to learn more about him

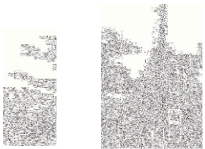
#### The "Unitarian" Label





Channing's letter was answered by a conservative minister of Salem. Thus began a printed debate that would soon shift from the question of whether the liberals were Unitarians to a debate about Unitarianism itself. In the process the liberals and the orthodox were confirmed more strongly than ever in their respective positions. The controversy played out in the churches with several congregations splitting, especially when they had to call a new minister. Conservatives resurrected old creeds or drafted new ones, and examined candidates with great care as to their orthodoxy. Should new candidates be from Harvard or Andover? Should the annual Convention sermon be from the liberals or the conservatives? Should there be, in fact, a doctrinal test for membership in the Mass Ministers Convention?

Meanwhile, Jared Sparks founded *The Unitarian Miscellany* to spread the message. He became Chaplin of the US House of Representatives and preached at the new church in Washington. Henry Ware founded a church in New York City. Inquiries came in from the urban cities of the East Coast and the small towns on the frontier.

Channing's Sermon on "Unitarian Christianity" received so much attention that the conservatives were forced to answer and another protracted debate was carried on in print. The argument that had begun in a discussion of scripture soon moved to a focus on reason and conscience and human

	<p>experience as religious authority. As a result, the Arianism that had been the consensus among the liberals of Channing's generation had begun to evolve into a far more clearly Unitarian position. The ministers who had been reluctant to wear the Unitarian label were more comfortable with the idea. The door to a compromise had been closed.</p> <p>By the way, one of the strongest and most persistent leaders of the conservative opposition was Dr. Jedediah Morse of Cambridge, who in 1816 saw a group of his congregation withdraw and form a Unitarian Church. Three years later, those that remained forced his resignation, and his son, Samuel F. B. Morse, inventor of the telegraph, became a supporter of a radical Unitarianism in his later years.</p>
<p>The Dedham Case</p> 	<p>Theology was paramount in the debate, of course, but property rights were also in question. Complicating the decision process was the fact that in Mass towns there were two distinct, but inter-related religious organizations. The Parish consisted of all the male voters of the town who supported the church with their taxes. The church, usually a small minority of the Parish, consisted of those who had made a public profession of faith and who had chosen to join the church. The practice was that the church would recommend the minister, and the Parish would pro forma hire him, since the minister was paid from the taxes. The problem came up when one was liberal and the other conservative. Who had the right to the property?</p> <p>The legal battle came to head in 1818 in what's been called the Communion Set Controversy. The church at Dedham, MA voted against a Harvard graduate who, defying custom, had already been chosen by 2/3 of the Parish. The majority of the church withdrew from the parish, taking the Communion Set, and formed a new church. The minority remained with the parish, reorganized and sued for recover of the property.</p> <p>The court ruled for the minority. Over the next few years, at least 81 exiled churches would give up their property. The Unitarians were the beneficiaries in most of these cases.</p>
<p>The Movement Spreads</p>	<p>It should be noted however that in other places churches became Unitarian without controversy, some so quietly and insensibly that it becomes impossible to attribute a date to the conversion. Of the 544 Congregational</p>

	<p>Churches in Mass, 135 became Unitarian. 20 of the 25 oldest and all but one of the Boston churches. More important for the future of the movement, the Unitarians were well educated, financially well off, theologically liberal, but politically and socially conservative. As a class, they dominated the Supreme Court and the State Government of Mass.</p>
<p>A New Denomination</p> 	<p>The question confronting the liberals, after the Baltimore Sermon and the Dedham Case, concerned whether they ought to organize a new denomination. Now, they were a group of ministers and congregations largely defined by their opponents. The older minister, including Channing, argued for the status quo: keep your head down and do your own thing. Younger minister, sensing an opportunity, were eager to organize in order to spread their faith more effectively.</p> <p>The first step toward organizing as a new denomination was in 1820 when a group of ministers meeting in Channing's Federal Street Church organized the Berry Street Conference. This meeting is still celebrated at GA today. Five years later, on May 25, 1825, the very day that the British and Foreign Unitarian Association was found in England, the American Unitarian Association came into being.</p>