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UUFTC, Sonora

How Did We Get Here?

Our story this morning begins in the Third Century of the Common Era, with a man named "Origen." Origen was an early church father, but he was also a scholar and thinker, who would later be condemned by the Church of Rome as a heretic. Our kind of guy, in other words. Origen attempted to address many of the troublesome contradictions that were present in emerging Christian doctrine. Origen rejected the concept of Hell; he emphasized the humanity of Jesus; and he minimized the importance of miracles. Most importantly for our purposes, Origen expressed the conviction that in the fullness of time all of creation would be restored to harmony with God. He believed in the benevolence of a God who would offer salvation to all of humankind. Today we look to Origen as the first Universalist, because of his claim that all people were included in the Christian concept of salvation.

It's interesting to contemplate what this early Christian church must have been like. Remember that Christians were persecuted at this time throughout much of the Mediterranean world. People met in small groups, often in secret, in their members' houses. Women played a prominent role in these early churches. And there was no central church authority, and no fixed doctrine. As we learned from Lloyd Kramer, in his wonderful talk here over the summer, all of this would change when the Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity in the 4th Century and Christianity became the church of the Roman Empire. And from that point on, the diversity of the early Christians was lost. I often marvel at how different the world would have been if Christianity had continued to grow and develop with the diversity of the early years of the movement. Instead, it was subsumed into the hierarchies of two centralized authorities – the Roman Church and the Eastern Church.

But back to our story! At the time of Constantine, early Christianity was beginning to develop the doctrine that would become the Trinity. People had begun to pray to Jesus, and it was important to figure how this could be so, in a monotheistic movement. Arius, of Alexandria, championed the view that God is one, and is unknowable and separate from every created being. Jesus, as the Christ, was a created being and therefore could not be God. He would be worshipped as a secondary being, but not as God. Well, of course, as Lloyd also told us, Arius lost this battle, and starting with the Council of Nicea in 325, the concept of the Trinity began to grow into fixed church doctrine. (The Holy Spirit would be added later). So, we look to Arius as the first Unitarian, although his theology probably differs from that of most modern-day Unitarian Universalists. But, once again, it's interesting to speculate how history would have been different, if Arius hadn't been defeated at Nicea and exiled to live out his days in the desert. Over many centuries, those who dissented from Trinitarian theology were often referred to as Arians, or followers of Arius, and this was usually not meant in a kindly way.

Our story now skips over more than a thousand years to Europe at the time of the Reformation. Unitarian and Universalist thinking were kept alive over all those centuries, but it was the orthodoxies of the Roman Catholic church that predominated.

Whenever church doctrine was examined critically, the concept of the Trinity was where gaps would start to show. And whenever Christians articulated a mystical vision of God, universalism would be rediscovered. Amidst the intellectual and religious ferment of 16th Century Europe, Unitarian and Universalist thinking appeared in different areas of the Continent. Michael Servetus, a Spanish physician, read the Bible in Greek and Hebrew. He became convinced that the doctrine of the Trinity was a stumbling block for many of those persecuted during the Inquisition. Servetus undertook a secret study of scripture, and he discovered that the New Testament does not articulate Trinitarian theology or give it support. He distilled his findings into a book called “On the Errors of the Trinity,” and for this bit of heresy, he was burned at the stake in Calvin’s Geneva, and most copies of his book were destroyed.

Meanwhile, Unitarian thinking was also appearing in Transylvania, in what is now Romania, under the leadership of the gifted cleric, Francis David. For a brief period, John Sigismund, the king of Transylvania, declared tolerance for the leading religious movements, including Unitarianism, and he himself became a Unitarian for a brief period before his untimely death.

A few years later, in Poland, under the reign of another tolerant leader, an Italian named Faustus Socinus began to organize a Unitarian movement in the area around Krakow. Socinus argued that Jesus led people to salvation not by his death on the cross. Rather, Jesus, through his life and teachings, showed men and women the way to salvation by following his example. Thus Socinians went further than Arius had, because they argued Jesus was a man, without a divine nature. At one time, there were an estimated 125 Unitarian congregations in Poland, before they were persecuted and destroyed by the Counter-Reformation.

In England, Unitarian thinking is traced back to a young schoolmaster named John Biddle, who published a tract arguing that the doctrine of the Trinity was both unscriptural and unreasonable. Biddle spent the rest of his life in and out of prison, and his writings were destroyed. In 1774, a young preacher named Theophilus Lindsey organized the first Unitarian congregation in England, at the Essex Street Chapel, which still exists today. Lindsey went farther than either the Arians or the Socinians, denouncing any worship of Jesus as “sheer idolatry.” At this same time, Joseph Priestly, the scientist who is credited with having discovered oxygen, organized a Unitarian congregation in Birmingham. Priestly attracted many of the leading philosophical and scientific figures of his day to his services, including Benjamin Franklin, who was then serving as US ambassador in London. Priestly would later be driven out of England for his heresies. He emigrated to America, where he founded the first American Unitarian church, in Philadelphia.

So, we see these different movements in Europe, drawing on each other’s thinking in many cases, but mostly arising independently. And we can’t leave Europe, without mentioning one more group – the Anabaptists. Along with the more established elements of the Reformation – the Lutherans, the Calvinists, and so on – three were sought to form religious communities of free spirits, with no set standards or beliefs, with little formal organization, and with no prescribed form of worship. These diverse communities came to be known as “Anabaptists,” because of their shared belief that baptism should be reserved adult men and women who had made a decision to be followers of Jesus. Thus, those who had been baptized as infants in the Roman

Catholic church needed to be “re-“ baptized. The Anabaptists need to be recognized for having introduced several innovations that would become important to Unitarians and Universalists in North America. Women were recognized as preachers, and played a prominent role in the movement. The Anabaptists were the first significant religious movement to advocate separation of church and state – this idea was completely new in the Europe of the Reformation. And they believed in what he now call “congregational polity,;” that is, the right of each congregation to govern itself without interference from a church hierarchy.

And so we come to America, where both Unitarianism and Universalism began to grow in the late 18th and early 19th Centuries. These movements, which developed on parallel tracks through the 19th Century, found their philosophical and theological underpinnings in Early Christianity and Reformation Europe. But once again, they were home-grown movements that developed independently to meet the needs of the their time and culture. Both arose, at least in part, in reaction to the harsh doctrines being preached with fire and brimstone by the preachers of what was called “The Great Awakening.” Preachers such as Jonathon Edwards and Cotton Mather who saw little hope of salvation for most of humanity. Unitarian thinking arose out of the early Congregationalist churches of New England. And it arose around the intellectual center of Harvard College and Harvard Divinity School. Its adherents tended to be well-educated and relatively well-to-do. Its leading lights were people like William Ellery Channing, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Theodore Parker.

Universalism was much more a blue-collar religion that arose in rural areas around New England. Its followers tended to come from minority churches, such as Lutherans, Dutch Reformed, and so on. Its leading thinker was Hosea Ballou, who became a preacher at 17, with little formal education. Universalists also tended to be unitarian in their thinking. But Unitarians were not univalerist in theirs. Unitarians adhered strictly to congregational polity and little formal, denominational structure. Universalist formed state governing structures that had the authority to do things such as ordaining ministers.

Universalism grew rapidly through much of the 19th Century, spreading into the South and the Mid-West, largely because of the popularity of its message of universal salvation. By the latter part of the 19th Century, it had become the sixth-largest denomination in America. But then, its numbers began to decline as more and more of the mainstream denominations dropped their doctrine of salvation of the elect, and came around to a much more Universalist way of thinking. By the early 20th Century, Universalism had become something quite different – rather than concentrating on salvation, it focused on the universality of religious experience and began to look to other religions from around the world.

In 1961, Unitarians and Universalists came together to form a united movement. There were many sensitive issues, and a great deal of concern to retain the essential identities of each. Thus, they termed their union a “consolidation” instead of a “merger.” Today, many former Universalists feel that they have largely lost their identity. But -- in my view we gained something of real value from Universalism – a renewed emphasis on the importance of religious experience, and a sense of the importance of the heart as well as the head in our movement.

Well – why in the world am I telling you all this history? Those of you who read your Catalysts will know that in two weeks, on October 19th, we, along with congregations all over North America, will celebrate “Association Sunday.” As UUs, we tend to continue engage primarily in congregational governance, and to pay little attention to our larger institutions. We are, however, part of such an institution – the Unitarian Universalist Association, headquartered in Boston. And this is the time we set aside to recognize that we are part of a larger movement. In two weeks, we will focus more on the institutions of Unitarian Universalism, and talk about our vision for its future. Today, I wanted to talk a bit about we got to where we are now. For some of us, I know that history isn’t all that significant. For others – and I count myself among them – it is important to know something about where we come from and who we are, before we can think about where we are going.

So, let’s look at some common themes that run through the development of the UU movement over the centuries. One of the things that stands out, of course, is how central reason is in our approach to religion. Beginning with Origen and Arius, and continuing through the intellectual turmoil of the Reformation and the growth of religion in the new world, we have been a people for whom blind faith isn’t good enough. When something we are taught doesn’t make sense to us, we question it. How can Jesus be co-equal with God the Creator? How can we worship Jesus and still be monotheistic? How can a loving God be willing to let millions of humans suffer eternal punishment? Throughout 2,000 years, we have been a people who are willing to be dissenters, because of this commitment to reason. It is manifested in one of our Seven Principles – our commitment to “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” Note that we don’t claim to own the truth, but to engage in searching for it. It is this commitment to reason that causes us oppose Proposition 8, which would ban marriage equality for loving gay and lesbian couples. “So just how is it that same-sex marriage threatens heterosexual marriage?” This is what we find ourselves asking.