

The Roots of American Unitarian Universalism Tradition

Our liberal religious tradition has many roots. There was no one founder or personality. The values we espouse and try to live today come from several sources. One author cites two major sources, or “founts of reverence for human dignity and ethical imperatives: ancient Athens and ancient Israel.” (Mendelsohn) Our tradition comes out of the humanistic ideals of classical Greek philosophy, and the Hebrew tradition, and evolved into its present forms primarily as a result of the Protestant reformation within 14th-15th century European Christianity.

Unitarianism, an idea of the oneness of God, is related to monotheism, which was the defining aspect of the religion of the ancient Hebrews. Universalism, or the idea that all souls will finally enjoy union with God, goes back at least as far as the early Christian Gnostics and the great Alexandrian philosopher/theologian Origen. Throughout the history of the development of the Christian church, both unitarian and universalist ideas were often espoused, and often condemned.

Modern Unitarianism can be traced to changes within European Christianity beginning in the 14th and 15th centuries. British historian George Chryssides says that “Perhaps the best way to understand the Unitarians is to view them as products of the Protestant Reformation.” Those who called for reform within the Catholic Church addressed three main theological issues, according to Chryssides: the role of the Bible in the life of individuals and the Church, the nature and number of sacraments, and the source of authority in the Church. The Reformation was hardly a unified movement--there were many personalities, many different (and often conflicting) agendas. Still, the result of the calls for reform was several new Christian movements and organizations in Europe, plus actual changes within the Catholic church itself.

Modern Universalism was the result of later movements within the Protestant Reformation, especially the Dutch and German Christians called “Anabaptists” who rejected the practice of baptizing infants (they advocated baptism and church membership for adults only; they also worked for the separation of church and state), and the 17th and 18th century pietistic (Pietists - advocated a religion of devotion rather than creeds) movements which gave rise to renewed interest in direct experience of God (mysticism). To some extent, universalism grew as a rejection of the ideas of divine judgment, damnation, and hell, which were central to Calvinist theology. Jack Mendelsohn says “to their everlasting credit, our Universalist forebears were lifting their voices against the cruel myth of hell... and preaching that a good and perfect God created humans to grow eternally in the goodness of their creator.”

Liberal religion was an important part of the formation and founding of the United States of America. Thomas Jefferson, John and Abigail Adams, and Benjamin Franklin were very liberal in their approaches to Christianity and the Bible. Jefferson edited his own version of the New Testament, in which he literally cut out the passages which he thought represented the ideas of later authors. He retained only what he considered to be the “heart” of the Gospels - the teachings of Jesus. This version of the New Testament is still available today, and is appropriately called “The Jefferson Bible.” Jefferson also

remarked on at least one occasion that he imagined that all thinking persons would eventually become Unitarians! The influence of these American leaders helped to create the American ideal of the separation of church and state.

The long process of religious thought and practice which led to Unitarian and Universalist ideas was indeed a process of ongoing struggle by many men and women, for the freedom to believe what made sense to them and the right to live peacefully among those with different beliefs. The bulk of this struggle took place within the confines and the context of European Christianity, and centered around liberal ideas about the Christian scriptures. These liberal ideas were most often centered in a high regard for human life and dignity, and they often focused on the ethical teachings of Jesus - that is, the call to live out of love, and with compassion. Today this same impulse of religious liberalism has led us to consider our place in a world of many faith traditions, and to seek like-minded ideals and wisdom from many sources.