

Unitarianism

The Unitarian movement can be defined as a radical tradition that emerged into self-consciousness during the European Reformation in the sixteenth century as an alternative to the authoritarian traditions of Luther and Calvin. Like their Anabaptist cousins, the Unitarians were suspicious of the misuse of ecclesial power to enforce such non-biblical teachings as the eternal trinity, infant baptism, the exclusivity of revelation, and the doctrinal method of establishing worthiness for salvation. On the positive side, Unitarians affirmed a more immanent deity closely bound to nature, universal salvation, and the necessity of religious tolerance and freedom of the pulpit. Because of these beliefs, many Unitarians lived under religious persecution from both the Protestant and the Roman Catholic authorities until well into the eighteenth century. The most infamous case of this occurred when the Spanish Unitarian theologian Michael Servetus was burned at the stake by Calvinist forces in 1553. Servetus' crime was to have published a treatise, *Christianismi Restitutio* in 1552 in which he attacked the trinity, orthodox Christology as it was determined by the Council of Nicaea in 325 C.E.—which affirmed the co-equality of Christ and God while rejecting the proto-Unitarian view of Bishop Arius who denied this equality—and the doctrine of infant baptism. Implicit in his views was a pantheism that found God to be-coextensive with nature. This early Unitarian laid the groundwork for a universalist pantheism, which rejected a transcendent, sovereign, deterministic and punitive God.

Unitarianism's most readily identifiable form emerged in 1805, when radical professors at Harvard won the Hollis Chair of Divinity for their Unitarian candidate Henry Ware, thus marking the end of Congregational power at that institution. Soon

Unitarianism was rocked by the even more radical religious movement of Transcendentalism initiated by the former Unitarian minister Ralph Waldo Emerson when he threw down the gauntlet to the church establishment in his 1838 *Divinity School Address*, in which he went so far as to divinize the self, deny the centrality of Jesus, make nature holy, and posit a form of purely personal revelation that was self-validating outside of any form of ecclesial community. Three years later the Unitarian minister Theodore Parker delivered an equally controversial ordination address, *The Transient and Permanent in Christianity*. While more Christian in tone than Emerson's address, it rejected the importance of dogma, liturgy, and anything other than ethics and a gospel of love.

Theologically, contemporary Unitarianism is diverse in expression and often even questions the need for theological reflection insofar as there is no agreement as to the real or alleged object of such reflection. However, there are identifiable philosophical commitments that mark Unitarianism as a decidedly nature-oriented perspective. Historically the distinction between liberal and conservative Protestant traditions was expressed by the difference between positive and natural religion. In the context of the post-Kantian milieu in which this distinction came to the fore, positive religion stressed a unique historical revelation, a unique textual record of that revelation, the centrality of a founder whose eternal word was embodied in a spirit-guided church, and the superiority of Christianity to any other religion. Natural religion denied any special revelation while placing a great deal of value on universalizable reason. It rejected the importance of texts in favor of a renewed understanding of the book of nature. The power of autonomous natural and atemporal reason replaced the role of the historical founder. Reason operated

within the framework of a radically open experience of the whole or the infinite. Further, Christianity was often seen as a religion that had begun to exhaust its resources, thus paving the way for an honest exploration of other religions. Unitarianism has long embraced the basic commitments of natural religion, but has moved them more directly into a post-mechanistic view of a growing, infinitely complex, and fecund nature.

Insofar as Unitarianism would affirm a metaphysics it would deny the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, while asserting that nature has neither beginning nor end, with the stipulation that the world of astrophysics, which affirms the Big Bang creation, is but one world within the infinity of nature which has its own subaltern conception of creation, perhaps out of imaginary time. Transforming the eighteenth and nineteenth century distinction between positive and natural religions, it is perhaps preferable to speak of anti-naturalist and naturalist religions. The anti-naturalist forms embrace supernaturalism, miracles, a sovereign and external creator, and a devaluation of creation over its creator. Naturalist religions, which can be either panentheistic or pantheist, but not theistic or personalistic, are not only immanentist, but also affirm that nature is the genus of which the object of religion is the species. Nature is the all-encompassing category, and actually transcends the genera (classes) of all orders that occur within and as nature. Hence the term “nature” functions as both the highest category and a precategory, that is, there is no opposition term to nature precisely because nature is all that there is, both actual and potential. For many Unitarians all-encompassing nature is itself holy while for others nature is neither holy nor unholy per se; it simply obtains in its infinite unfolding.

Panentheist naturalism retains some remnants of the Christian traditions insofar as it affirms that a dimension of the divine is discontinuous with the orders of nature (the dimension of *nature natured*), even though fully relevant to them. Pantheist naturalism is more radical in that it decisively moves beyond the Christian traditions by asserting that the dimension of the divine in nature can in no way be discontinuous from any or all orders of *nature natured*. This deeper dimension of the one nature is often denoted by the term “*nature naturing*,” a term used by Emerson in this sense.

Within the Unitarian movement this tension is expressed as the difference between a more optimistic somewhat Christian progressivism tied to the evolutionary advance of the divine (panentheism) and a more quietist post-Christian meliorism correlated to a less optimistic view of human prospects within infinite nature (pantheism). In either case, Unitarianism affirms that supernaturalist religion remains a destructive force in culture insofar as it masks our deeper relationship to the eternal self-creating nature.

This underlying, and not always self-conscious, naturalism is manifest in both the liturgy and practice of the contemporary Unitarian Universalist Church. In 1961 the then separate but theological similar movements of Unitarianism and Universalism joined to form a common Fellowship that is now called the Unitarian Universalist Association. Since 1961 the liturgy of the Fellowship has been shaped in ways that mark the transition to a more nature-centered world-view. Services are now dedicated to solar and lunar events as well as to the inner rhythm of the seasons. Generally the liturgy celebrates cyclical rather than historically unique events, although traditional world religious holidays are

often celebrated as well, and the services use texts from all of the major religious and secular traditions.

Native American and pagan traditions are often used to transform religious consciousness by returning to the pre-monotheistic world, a world held to be friendlier to nature than that of the supernatural monotheisms. Among the more important yearly events is the Flower Communion in which each member of the congregation is asked to bring a flower that is placed in a common vase at the front of the meeting room or sanctuary. At the end of the service, each member takes a different flower home. The Czech Unitarian minister Norbert Capek created this service before the Second World War. Capek also created the symbol of the flaming chalice, which combines the naturalistic symbols of enlightening fire and the wisdom-holding cup, which is now the central liturgical object in the Unitarian Universalist movement. Capek was executed in a Nazi concentration camp in 1942 for his resistance work in which the symbol of the flaming chalice was used as a code to help escaping Jews.

Along with a strong social gospel tradition, Unitarian Universalists today fully participate in the worldwide movement of the greening of the church. There is a direct involvement in local issues of justice and the use of resources in a way that distributes them equitably and does minimal harm to the environment. Each member of the congregation is asked to use ecologically friendly practices in all dimensions of personal and social life. In the national realm, the Association works to create laws that will bring these practices into being. On the international level, the Association has long fought for forms of just trade and reduced First World consumption. One particular focus of this concern is with critiquing the growing power of international corporations as they control

the yearly sale and distribution of hybrid seeds for which they have the patents. Given that Unitarian Universalism denies the reality of a potentially salvific deity who could create an apocalypse that would rescue a few of us from our abuse of nature, congregation members feel compelled by conscience to work toward the reversal of the natural degradation partially caused by the monotheisms.

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