

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF BIBLICAL UNITARIANISM In Europe, England and America

*By Allon Maxwell*

### RECOGNISING UNITARIANS TODAY

We use the term "Unitarians" to describe those who reject the doctrine of the Trinity, in favour of belief in God as a one person only. However, to avoid confusion we also need to define the difference between two sorts of Unitarianism.

In this paper we are mainly concerned with Biblical Unitarianism, and we use that term to avoid confusion with the other stream, which we will call Rationalist Unitarianism.

Historically, they both began as virtually almost identical in theology and practice.

In past times all Unitarians appealed to the Scriptures, interpreted by reason. However, in the 19th century, the Rationalist Unitarians began to lay rather more emphasis on human "reason" and personal experience, than on belief based on an inspired Bible.

Most contemporary Rationalist Unitarians now follow this line. They can usually be identified by the use of the word "Unitarian", in naming their churches.

Today, amongst the Rationalists it is no longer essential to believe in a personal God, the Virgin Birth, miracles, or the inspiration of the Bible. For some, absolute standards of morality are rejected and left to individual "conscience". Many are "Universalist" in their expectation of salvation. What began as a Christian movement, is no longer entitled to that description.

Biblical Unitarians, on the other hand, have survived as Bible centred groups, maintaining a determined stand for faith in the One True God, His Virgin born Son, and the truth of the Bible.

The Biblical Unitarians do not reject reason, but they do accept the authority of the Scriptures as the sole source of revelation about God.

Although their theology is Unitarian, in the older sense of the word, many are careful about using the word at all, lest they be confused with the Rationalists and Universalists.

In this article we shall concentrate our attention on the Biblical Unitarians.

### DEFINING BIBLICAL UNITARIAN THEOLOGY

Biblical Unitarian belief can be briefly summarised as follows:-

- \* That the Father alone is the One True God.
- \* That Jesus Christ is the human son of The One True God, (but NOT God the Son)
- \* That Jesus was miraculously begotten of a virgin mother by the power of the One True God.
- \* That before His begettal Jesus did not exist in personal form, either as part of the Trinitarian God, or as the Arian spirit being.
- \* Rather, He was planned by God from the beginning and spoken of by the prophetic Word of God, as the future MAN who would become the saviour of sinners and inherit the world.

- \* That Jesus began his existence, (as all other men do), at his birth, when the Word spoken by God was fulfilled.
- \* That Jesus was not the two natured "God-Man" of the Trinitarian creeds, but was born with only one nature, (human).
- \* That as a man, Jesus was made (created) exactly like all other men, mortal, subject to temptation, capable of sin, and needing to learn obedience.
- \* That the source of His perfect obedience was not in some inherent "hybrid divinity", but in His perfect love for the one true God, His Father.
- \* That the Holy Spirit is not the third person of the Trinitarian Creeds, but the divine presence and power of God, through which He works to achieve His purpose in His creation.

This theology is almost always accompanied by the doctrine of "Conditional Immortality". A proper understanding of human mortality is highly relevant to our appreciation of the complete humanity of Jesus and the meaning of salvation. This doctrine is also stated briefly below :-

- \* That God (the Father) alone has immortality.
- \* That mankind does not possess inherent immortality, or an "immortal soul".
- \* That the human race is mortal, and that death is a sleep in which no part of the human personality survives the death of the body.
- \* That for all men, (including Jesus), immortality is a conditional gift, imparted at the resurrection of the body, and reserved only for those who believe and obey God.

All reject infant baptism and most, (but not all), practise Believer's Baptism.

## ORIGIN

Unitarian theology is not new. It dates back to the beginning of time.

The God who created the world is defined by Moses as ONE. There is no other. [\(Deuteronomy 6:4\)](#)

The writers of the New Testament were also Unitarians. Jesus Himself confirmed the Unitarian theology of Moses, when he directed attention to the worship of the same ONE LORD. [\(Mark 12:29-30\)](#).

Belief in Jesus as a subordinate being, distinct from God, continued to be the majority opinion until well into the third century. The doctrine of the Trinity, as we know it, did not exist.

## SUPPRESSION

Belief in a Jesus who had no real humanity but was a pre-existent spirit who merely assumed the appearance of a man, surfaced towards the end of the first century. It was this heresy which motivated the Apostle John to write his Gospel and his three epistles, repudiating the teachers as "antichrists" and labelling the doctrine itself as "the spirit of antichrist". [\(1 John 2:18 & 1 John 4:3\)](#)

However, despite John's rejection, the doctrine of a pre-existent Jesus continued to invade the Church, gradually changing its form, until eventually, in the 4th century, Jesus was elevated to a place in a "Tri-une" Godhead. In the theological jargon of the "scholars", this new Jesus is said to have "impersonal human nature", without actually being a human person!

Attended by political intrigue and much bloodshed, the doctrine of the Trinity became the compulsory majority opinion. By Imperial decree it was enforced under threat of death.

Although the initial suppression was primarily directed against Arians, other "heretics", including Unitarians, also found themselves under threat. For more than a thousand years, evil men in the Trinitarian mainstream used this evil law to justify the murder of "heretics". Both Arianism and Unitarianism were effectively suppressed.

It is doubtful whether Unitarian teaching was ever quenched totally, for the true light is never overcome by darkness, ([John 1:5](#)). And darkness is certainly the proper Biblical label for the murderous hatred in which the majority sought to destroy all opposition, ([1 John 2:8-11 & 1 John 3:13](#)) , thinking that they did God service! ([John 16:2](#)) (20th century "Cult Busters" beware!)

However Unitarianism does not surface again to any major degree in the visible history of the church, until the 16th century. This is perhaps understandable. In the face of potential martyrdom, most Unitarian believers would have kept a fairly low profile! Possibly also, the relatively few who might have existed, were lost sight of in the broader general persecutions by the mainstream church against other "heretics". It was the custom to burn the writings of "heretics" and to erase their memory from the record, as far as possible. Whatever the facts, this writer does not have access to enough of the history to do more than speculate, (perhaps a little wishfully), about this period.

## **MODERN DEVELOPMENT - THE ROOTS**

Modern Unitarianism has its roots amongst the some of the early Anabaptists, in Holland, Poland and Transylvania, in the 16th century.

### **Michael Servetus. (1511?-1553)**

The Spaniard, Michael Servetus appears to have been the first well documented Unitarian of the 16th century. After attending the coronation of Emperor Charles V at Bologna in 1530, he became distressed by Papal ostentation and the Emperor's deference to the worldly Pope. Contact with reformation leaders in France and Switzerland, led him further away from Catholicism. Following personal study of the Scriptures, he rejected the doctrine of the Trinity and published his book, "Errors of the Trinity", in 1531, attracting the condemnation of Catholics and Protestants alike.

After about 1546 he fell out with Calvin, incurring the latter's determined and open animosity.

In 1553, in Lyon, he published another major work against the Trinity. He was taken by the Inquisition, but escaped to Geneva, where he was arrested by the Reformers. At Calvin's instigation he was burnt, a martyred victim of the darkness of spirit in which Calvin and his followers walked. ([1 John 4:20](#))

### **Adam Pastor (born c.1511)**

Rudolph Martens was a former Flemish Catholic priest who changed his name to Adam Pastor when he became an Anabaptist in 1533.

A contemporary with Menno Simmons, he was ordained by Simmons and Dirk Phillips, as an evangelist, in 1542. He worked closely with Simmons until 1547, when they fell out over Pastor's teaching that Jesus did not exist in any personal form before his conception and was to be considered divine only in the sense that God dwelt in Him. In 1548, after a couple of unsuccessful attempts at reconciliation, he was finally excommunicated by Simmons, for his Unitarian belief.

Pastor is thought by some reputable historians to be the Flemish Anabaptist visitor to Poland, who went by the name Spiritus.

Whether or not this identification is accurate, Spiritus is the one who is credited with the introduction of Unitarian theology to Poland, in 1546.

### **Lalius Socinus (1525-1562)**

Socinus was an Italian. He was studying Greek and Hebrew in Zurich, when Servetus was burnt. The circumstances attracted his attention to the doctrine of the Trinity, which, after study, he came to reject.

He was disinherited by his father for his views, and following his father's death, his share of his father's estate was seized by the Inquisition. He spent the rest of his life in exile, in Zurich.

After his death, his theological views survived and his papers were inherited by his nephew, Faustus Socinus, who became perhaps the most famous of the Unitarian pioneers.

### **Faustus Socinus (1539-1604)**

Faustus Socinus was the nephew of Lalius Socinus. By 1559 he had been denounced by the Inquisition and forced to flee into exile. In Zurich, in 1562, he acquired his uncle's papers.

Shortly afterwards, in Lyon, he wrote his first work, in which Christ is described as "divine by office rather than by nature".

In 1563, by giving outward submission to the Catholic Church, he managed to return to Italy, where he remained for 12 years.

Forced to leave Italy again, he eventually settled in Cracow, Poland, in 1579, where he became a leading figure amongst the already established Polish Brethren. There he commenced the work of revising the Racovian Catechism, but died before it was completed.

### **The Polish Brethren**

In the 16th and 17th centuries, Unitarian Theology flourished in Poland, where for a time it gained some degree of political ascendancy. A university was established, from which graduates carried the Unitarian teaching throughout Europe, (though not with highly visible success).

However, in a resurgence of Catholicism, fierce persecution resulted in virtual extinction of the Polish Unitarian movement. Somewhere around 1638, the university was destroyed. By 1660 a decree was passed by which Unitarians were required to dispose of all property and leave the Kingdom within three years. Many capitulated to the Roman Church. However many thousands left their homes and sought asylum in exile. They were scattered far and wide throughout Europe, taking their radical theology with them.

Many travelled to Hungary, Transylvania, Prussia, Silesia and Moravia. In Prussia especially, they were received and permitted to establish churches for Unitarian worship.

Others found refuge in Holland where, prevented by the authorities from obtaining separate places of worship, they were eventually absorbed amongst the officially tolerated Trinitarian Anabaptist groups.

Others fled to England, where the seeds of Unitarianism had been growing, at times, quietly, and at others, under fierce persecution, for a century or more. Here they found a

haven, though less than secure. They were helped by the congregations formed through the influence of John Biddle. (see below).

### **The Transylvanian Church**

The parallel development of Unitarianism in Poland's close neighbour, Transylvania, did not experience anything like the same persecutions. It was protected by the State, by legislation enacted in 1571. In Romania and Hungary this Church has survived to the present time, without succumbing to the rationalist influences experienced in other lands.

### **The Influence of the Racovian Catechism**

The Racovian Catechism is the Confession of Faith of the Polish Brethren. It was first published in Poland, around 1575, and is one of their best known writings.

A revision was published in the Polish language, in 1605. This enlarged and annotated edition was begun by Faustus Socinus and Peter Statorius Junior, who both died before finishing the work. It was completed by others after their deaths.

Over the following couple of centuries, the 1609 Latin version and other subsequent Latin editions were widely circulated and read by scholars in other countries. It was also translated into many other languages, including Dutch, German and English, making it available to the common people of those countries.

Without doubt, this document has been, either directly, or indirectly, one of the major influences in the re-emergence of Unitarian theology as a significant movement.

## **DEVELOPMENT IN ENGLAND**

### **The 16th Century**

In England there are vague, but less than certain, references to denial of the Trinity, as far back as 1327, and 1401, when two were burned under this accusation. There are other pointers in the 15th century, which are also less than certain.

However, it was in the 16th century England, that Anti-Trinitarian teaching made a definite appearance, in parallel with developments on the Continent.

Amongst the Dutch Anabaptists who fled to England in 1535, many came under suspicion. Some were found who denied the Trinity, and forced to recant.

An English priest, John Assheton, was tried before the king in 1548, admitting denial of the Trinity. However he also recanted, for fear of the stake.

Around the same time a number of others were also tried and forced to recant under threat of death.

Other Anti-Trinitarians who refused to renounce their faith were burnt or imprisoned.

It is not easy to be certain just how much of this Anti-Trinitarian sentiment was Arian, and how much was Unitarian.

The Authorities who persecuted them were not always aware of the differences and tended to be indiscriminate in grouping all "heretics" who denied the Trinity, as either Arian or Anabaptist.

### **The 17th Century**

It was in the 17th century, that Unitarianism made a clearly identifiable appearance in England. The Racovian Catechism and the writings of Faustus Socinus penetrated the

religious world of England to such an extent that "Socinianism" began to be used as an epithet to label those "heretics" who agreed with them. Socinianism came to a painful birth in England in the face of determined animosity.

In 1648, official opposition reached its worst expression when the Presbyterian majority in Parliament passed the notorious "Ordinance for Punishing Heresies and Blasphemies".

This evil law was directed principally against Anti-Trinitarians, practitioners of Believer's Baptism, (and rejectors of Infant Baptism), Pacifists, and Arminian. Seven specific "heresies" were punishable by death, "without benefit of Clergy". Sixteen less serious "errors" were to be punished by imprisonment.

However the law was not popular with the Parliamentary minority. It caused much controversy, and in the midst of other political unrest of the Cromwellian era, it became dormant. In 1651-2 Cromwell, who favoured religious tolerance, secured the passage of his "Act of Oblivion", which set free many accused of various crimes, including heresy. In 1653, when Cromwell became Protector, he pledged himself to guarantee religious freedom to all. However, Cromwell was not really either diligent or successful in fulfilling this pledge, and the "defenders of the Faith" still managed to prosecute "heretics" for some time afterwards.

In 1662, the bigoted anti-Puritan Parliament passed the "Act of Uniformity", which was aimed against non-conformists of all kinds.

However public opinion gradually forced change. Eventually, in 1689, the "Religious Toleration Act" gave relief to dissenters of all kinds, and the worst religious persecutions began to abate.

(It should be noted here, in fairness, that not all religious persecution in England, was directed solely against Anti-Trinitarians. Other non-conformists of all kinds suffered in parallel.

It was the same 17th century religious intolerance which drove the Pilgrim Fathers to seek freedom from persecution in a new land.

In the 25 year period before the Religious Toleration Act, some 8000 non-conformists are said to have died in prison and 60,000 suffered in other ways through fines and loss of property.

(Such was the "love" inspired by the "Christ" of the Established Church!)

The Unitarians quickly took advantage of any increasing freedom. By 1672 a member of Parliament was complaining that Socinian books were selling as openly as the Bible.

However, it is one thing to pass laws about toleration. It is quite a different thing to change men's hearts to practise it.

In 1693 the author of a small anti-Trinitarian tract was fined £500 by Parliament and the pamphlet burned by the hangman.

In 1697 an eighteen year old medical student at Edinburgh University was tried for blasphemy and heresy under a long dormant Scottish law, after making some unguarded remarks about the Trinity, in the hearing of fellow students. At the trial he was denied the right to legal representation. He admitted the offence, professed a deep and sincere repentance, and pleaded for mercy. They hanged him anyway.

This case was the last execution for heresy in Great Britain.

Around this time the name "Unitarian" began to be used by its adherents, in an endeavour to escape the stigma associated with "Socinianism".

### **John Biddle (1615-1662)**

John Biddle is not the only name deserving of mention. There were many others who stood with him in the struggle against the opposition of the established Church, who cannot be mentioned in the space of this article.

However, Biddle is probably the best known amongst the pioneers, as the one who laboured long and hard and patiently, in the face of severe persecution from the bigots who would tolerate no divergence from the Trinitarian position, and who sought by all possible means to destroy him.

Biddle was a scholar of no mean ability. At the age of 26 he became Headmaster of Crypt Grammar School which was attached to the Cathedral at Gloucester. In pursuance of his duties of teaching his students the Catechism of the Church of England, he immersed himself in study of the Bible.

A few years later he knew the whole English New Testament by heart, and most of it in Greek. (although he did confess to being a little shaky in the Greek after the early chapters of the Revelation!)

He also came to reject the doctrine of the Trinity. However it would seem that Biddle never managed to become completely Biblical Unitarian in the terms defined on page 1 of this article.

#### **Note (Updated 19/12/2001):**

According to the historian, Earl Morse Wilbur, Biddle's tract of 1647 - "12 Arguments Drawn Out of Scripture" - refuted the doctrine of the Trinity but claimed that the Holy Spirit is an intelligent person, distinct from God. This point is not reflected specifically in Biddle's "Twofold Catechism", which is a later work. (1654) I do not personally have access to a full copy of the 1647 tract. However Ruth McHaffie, a sister in the faith from Scotland, recently sent me a photocopy of a page from the preface to this tract, which contains part of a letter written by Biddle to a Member of Parliament, from whom he hoped to win support. It reads as follows:

*"As for my opinion touching the Holy Spirit, it is thus: I believe the holy Spirit to be the chief of all ministering spirits, peculiarly sent out from heaven to minister on their behalf that shall inherit salvation; and I do place him, both according to the Scripture, and the Primitive Christians, and by name Justin Martyr in his Apologie, in the third rank after God and Christ, giving him a pre-eminence above all the rest of the heavenly host. So that as there is one principal spirit amongst the evil angels, known in the Scripture by the name of Satan, or the (a) Adversary, or (b) the unclean spirit, or (c) the evil spirit of God, or (d) the Spirit of God, or (e) the Spirit by way of eminence: even so is there one principal Spirit...there is, I say, one principal spirit amongst the good Angels, called by the name of the (a) Advocate [sic], or (b) the holy Spirit, or (c) the good Spirit of God, or (d) the Spirit of God, or (e) the Spirit, by way of eminence. This opinion of mine is attested by the whole tenour of the Scripture ....*

By his own testimony he reached this conclusion without having read any of the literature of the Socinians. He did however become well acquainted with it in later years.

By 1644 he was sharing his new faith with others and was promptly called before the magistrates to answer charges of heresy.

He escaped on this occasion by writing a confession of faith under pressure, which at the second attempt, was allowed to pass, (and left him with an uneasy conscience).

He subsequently wrote a much more explicit article in which there could be no mistake about his beliefs. This article was intended for use by friends, but one of them betrayed him to the Magistrate. He was again briefly imprisoned but was released on the security of a friend pending a hearing before Parliament.

Six months later in 1646, he was called to London where the Parliament referred his case to an Assembly of Divines for consideration. The case dragged on without resolution and he spent the next 5 years confined to the Gatehouse at Westminster. He continued to write in prison. While there he actually put into print, for public consumption, the private article which had brought him before the Parliament!

Naturally this caused an uproar, and the pamphlet was seized and burnt by the hangman. However demand for it was so great that it was reprinted before the end of the year.

These events led to a call for Biddle's death, and this was one of the major factors which led to the hurried enactment of the 1648 "Ordinance for Punishing Heresies and Blasphemies" mentioned above. However Cromwell's "Act of Oblivion", (also mentioned above), worked to his advantage, and in 1652 he was released from prison.

That same year an English translation of the Racovian Catechism appeared, which has been ascribed by some, to Biddle.

Over the next two years Biddle wrote prolifically, as well as translating several works by Polish Socinian authors.

In 1654 he produced his own "Twofold Catechism". When this book was drawn to the attention of Parliament, he was again imprisoned, this time in Newgate, and his book was burnt by the hangman. However Parliament was dissolved before his case was resolved.

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Only two copies of the catechism are known to have survived. A retype made from a photocopy of one of the two surviving copies, is available on the Internet at::

<https://allonmaxwell.com/biddle/000start.htm>

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Six months after his arrest the charges were abandoned, and he was again released.

Freedom was short-lived. Less than a month later he was again arrested on the capital charge of Blasphemy and Heresy. The 1648 Ordinance against Heresies, which had been thought to be dormant and replaced by Cromwell's pledge of religious freedom, was used against him.

This time he again escaped the death sentence but was banished to St Mary's Castle in the Scilly Isles, where he remained in prison until 1658.

After his release he returned to London, where he remained free for a further four years, though in ill health for much of the time.

In 1662, he and several friends were arrested while holding a Bible Class at his home and imprisoned without bail. At first no suitable charges could be found, but eventually a way was found to impose a fine which Biddle could not pay. Five weeks later he fell ill with "prison fever", and was released, but died two days later at the age of 47.

Biddle left no denomination to bear his name. The small band of immediate followers disappears from history shortly after his death.

However there can be little doubt that all of us today, who hold Abrahamic faith in the One God, owe this man a great debt. The influence of his teachings has long survived his death.

Biddle did not aim to be merely a reformer of Christian doctrine. For Biddle, religion without a moral dimension was no religion at all. He was not concerned with doctrine as an end in itself, but as a foundation for the holiness of character to which it should lead.

Unlike many others engaged in controversy, he was not by nature quarrelsome or opinionated, but modest and self-effacing. He was tolerant of others who differed. His personal character was beyond reproach. His reputation indicates that he lived what he preached.

In the 20th century also, this remains the principal goal of true Biblical Unitarianism, for all who follow Jesus in worshipping His Father as the ONLY TRUE GOD.

## **The 18th Century**

The early part of the 18th century is notable as a time when Arian teaching invaded the English Churches, leading to much debate and upheaval. Leading Quakers also argued against the Trinity as unscriptural and confusing.

These controversies probably gave helpful cover for the rise of Unitarianism. Indeed for many Unitarians, Arian doctrine was an initial stepping stone by which they arrived at their final belief.

By the end of the century many Unitarians had seceded from the Church of England and established independent congregations.

In the 17th century, Baptists had gradually increased in numbers. By the later years of the 18th century they included a significant number of congregations who adopted Unitarian theology but retained the Baptist name. In 1770 the orthodox Trinitarian Baptists withdrew from the Unitarians and formed a separate association. The Baptist Unitarians continued to retain their Baptist identity, retaining both the name and other Baptist distinctives.

## **The 19th Century**

The Baptist Unitarians mentioned in the previous paragraph, persisted well into the 19th century, maintaining an identity separate from the Unitarians.

The Unitarian historian, Wilbur, mentions some fifty congregations who existed in 1826.

Gradually, however, many of them began to merge with the other Unitarians, forsaking their Baptist identity.

The final step in releasing Anti-Trinitarians from all threat of legal consequences came in 1813 when the "Trinity Act" was passed. This Act officially repealed long dormant laws and their associated severe penalties, aimed against Anti-Trinitarians.

However, although persecution was now reduced to the social level rather than the physical, Unitarians continued to face vilification and decidedly unfriendly opposition. (Familiar story! Even in the 1990s this can still be the case.)

The publicity afforded by those who attacked them openly, the liberty to engage in public debate and the freedom to publish and distribute their writings, all worked to advance their

cause. A vast body of supporting literature developed. Thus the Unitarians continued to grow in numbers, at first as independent churches

During the course of the century the many different independent streams in the movement gradually coalesced and formed a Unitarian association.

The secession of Unitarians and the formation of independent congregations brought other problems with it, of a less worthy kind.

When churches divide or secede, there are inevitable questions about who owns the real estate and the money in the bank! Covetousness rears its head.

There were, at times protracted bitter legal battles to resolve these disputes, in which neither party was distinguished for willingness to suffer themselves to be defrauded.

(1 Corinthians 6:7)

For both parties doctrinal correctness about God was certainly on the agenda. Sadly, it seems that radical obedience to the Sermon on the Mount was another matter, when put to the test! Covetousness won the day.

In the 19th century there were also other regrettable developments. For many, increasing freedom of religion was accompanied by an increasing tendency to wander from their Racovian heritage. The results have not always been Biblical Christianity.

The Rationalist Unitarians began to adopt liberal and humanist views, rejecting the Bible where it did not fit with their own human "reason" and human "experience".

For Biblical Unitarians the differences are irreconcilable and cooperation impossible. Biblical Unitarians began to emerge in new ways, under different names, and walking a separate road.

However, much of this new growth of Biblical Unitarianism in England, just mentioned, actually has its origin in America.

After the following short discussion of the influence of the Racovian Catechism on the developments in England, just described above, the scene must now shift from England, across the ocean to America.

## **THE RACOVIAN CATECHISM IN ENGLAND**

The Racovian Catechism edition of 1609 was dedicated to the English King, James the First. The 1651 edition was actually printed in London.

Both of these Latin editions must have been widely distributed in England, since they aroused concern and fierce opposition from the authorities of their respective times. Both were ordered collected and burnt, the first by the King, and the second by Parliament.

The English translation of 1652, (which has been attributed by some historians to John Biddle), made it available to a much wider audience amongst those who could not read Latin. There was clearly much interest by the English public of the time, in Racovian anti-Trinitarian teaching about the nature of God.

The 1818 English Translation, by Thomas Rees, was well known in its day, both in England and America.

Its doctrines are reflected in an abundance of Unitarian writings of the 18th and 19th centuries, in England and America.

It would scarcely seem possible in the religious climate of the time, for serious students of religion not to hear about Unitarians and their radical theology. Whether directly through the Racovian Catechism itself, or indirectly through other related influences, many, on both sides of the Atlantic, did come to hear about the One True God, re-evaluate their faith and as a result, reject the Doctrine of the Trinity.

## **UNITARIANISM IN AMERICA**

In America, the development of Unitarian theology does not seem to have experienced the same degree of direct Socinian influence from Europe, as that found in England. Nevertheless developments in England were closely followed in America. Communication flowed both ways between serious students of religion. It was inevitable that what was happening in England would also find its way across the Atlantic.

Thus the Arian controversy which began in England at the beginning of the 18th century, also found its way to America at around the same time. And, just as in England, many found their way to Unitarian theology after beginning with Arianism. There were complaints from Orthodox Trinitarian ministers of Arian influences at work, as early as 1654.

By 1750 sermons were being preached and articles written against Arian teaching. By the last decade of the century, independent Unitarian congregations were coming into existence.

Early in the 19th century, between 40 and 50 Presbyterian ministers were dismissed for denying the Trinity. In 1815, the first Unitarian theological college was established. In 1840, a survey established that 135 out of 544 Congregational churches in Massachusetts were Unitarian.

There is no doubt, from some of their writings, that much of this Unitarian stream began with complete dependence on the Bible as the source of their anti-Trinitarian theology.

However, just as in England, 19th century Unitarians began to follow the same Rationalist path to humanism and liberalism. Thus they earned for themselves the distinction drawn at the start of this article, between themselves and the BIBLICAL Unitarians.

Now we must turn the clock back a little, to consider another interesting development at the end of the 18th century.

## **OUTSIDE THE UNITARIAN MAINSTREAM**

The few incidents recorded above, have been selected from a much wider historical record, to illustrate the steady infiltration of Unitarian teaching in the American religious scene.

Eventually this movement began to organise and assume the status of a denomination with the name, "Unitarian". However, Unitarianism was only one of a number of the highly visible elements in the general religious ferment of the times.

In parallel with the development of Unitarianism, others also were becoming dissatisfied with the strict Calvinism imported from England by the Pilgrim Fathers.

In 18th century America, amongst those who had fled to America to escape religious persecution, it was still possible to be publicly whipped to death for opposing Calvinistic orthodoxy.

So much for "freedom"!

The general religious upheaval of the times was not confined to Arians and Unitarians.

The awful Calvinistic doctrine of unconditional election and predestination was being challenged by Arminian teaching of freewill. Infant baptism was being rejected in favour of believer's baptism. Events in Europe triggered wide interest in end-time prophecy and the coming Kingdom of God on earth. Sabbath keepers were making their mark, rejecting conventional Sunday worship. "Weird" and extreme heretical fringe groups were appearing.

In some areas the Revival fires were burning, causing deep concern amongst others who could not accept the accompanying emotional excesses.

There were also many who were simply searching for a religious freedom denied them by conventional orthodoxy.

In their search for a faith more suited to the needs of the common people, these were rejecting the creeds and the divided state of organised religion, in favour of a simpler Biblical, non-creedal, New Testament faith and practice.

Out of this melting pot came a number of new groups who although their theology was Unitarian, went by other names and remained apart from the main Unitarian movement.

### **James O'Kelly**

In 1793 James O'Kelly, of North Carolina, and some other ministers withdrew from the "Wesleyite" Episcopal Methodist Church. At first they called themselves Republican Methodists. In the following year, (1794), they dropped the denominational name and began to call themselves "Christians only, with no head but Christ and no creed but the Bible".

This movement was especially strong in Virginia and North Carolina, but also spread to other Southern and Western States.

I have not found much direct information about the beliefs of this group. They are mentioned here because of their later loose association with the other Unitarian groups mentioned below. Presumably, at the very least, they saw no problems about such association. More likely, they probably agreed in some measure.

### **Elias Smith (1769-1849)**

Elias Smith was originally a Particular Baptist, but at the beginning of the 19th century, he became upset with the rigid Calvinism of that group. This led ultimately to rejection of the entire system, and a resolution to follow the Bible only.

Together with Abner Jones, a Particular Baptist physician from Hartland, Vermont, he began to establish independent "Christian" Churches, mainly in New England.

Although Smith himself was an Arian, the movement came to be largely Unitarian, also adopting the doctrine of Conditional Immortality.

### **Barton W. Stone (1772-1844)**

Stone was originally a Kentucky Presbyterian Preacher. In 1803, affected by the Kentucky Revival, he and five other ministers left the Kentucky Synod. At first they formed an association under the name of "The Springfield Presbytery". In 1804 they abandoned that denominational name and became simply "Christians".

Under the leadership of Stone and the "success" of his Revivalist methods the movement grew rapidly, mainly in Kentucky, Ohio, Indiana, and Tennessee.

As well as turning away from Calvinism, the churches under Stone's leadership had also rejected the doctrine of the Trinity and were largely Unitarian. Their communion table was "open". After a short time they also adopted the practice of believer's baptism.

### **The Christian Connection**

In 1815, representatives of the Stone movement travelled East, where they met with leaders of the O'Kelly and Smith groups.

There, after discussions, they joined hands and agreed to work together in a loose relationship. Although not an official body, this informal alliance of the three groups came to be known as the "Christian Connection".

### **Alexander Campbell and the Disciples .**

In 1807 Thomas Campbell, a Presbyterian minister, migrated to America, where he began to initiate a program for Christian unity.

In 1809 his son Alexander and the rest of the family followed him from England. Alexander was soon the undisputed leader of the movement.

In 1812 the movement accepted Believer's Baptism as a key doctrine and shortly afterwards joined temporarily with the Baptist association. However this was apparently a fairly precarious union and eventually, following a number of disagreements, the connection was severed in 1830.

Shortly afterwards they began to call themselves Disciples.

It seems unlikely that there was any significant Unitarian presence amongst the Disciples at first. However that was soon to change.

### **The Campbellites and the Christian Connection**

Barton Stone and Alexander Campbell first met in 1824, but it was not until 1832 that the two groups formally agreed to unite. It was, on the face of it, an unlikely development!

Stone was a Revivalist, given to use of the emotional techniques that characterised Revivalism. Campbell rejected emotionalism, favouring a much more disciplined and rational approach.

Stone rejected the Trinity. Campbell, although at times given to the use of "unorthodox language" about the Trinity, seems to have been in other respects a "normal" Trinitarian.

These differences between them were certainly recognised by both and discussed between them. Somehow, they managed to satisfy each other, ..... although just how they did that is not at all clear. It does seem likely, from Stone's remarks several years later, that in the interests of "unity", he and Campbell simply agreed not to ask each other awkward questions! The aim of both was tolerance, not doctrinal argument.

The end result was that some 7000 largely Unitarian Stonites joined with about half that number of mainly Trinitarian Campbellites.

Two years later in 1834, a young English migrant, Dr. John Thomas, was converted and baptised by the Campbellites. It seems almost certain that it was amongst them that he learned his Unitarian theology. More about this later.

This strong Unitarian presence amongst the early Disciples, seems to be an aspect of Campbellite history which is perhaps just a little embarrassing to his Trinitarian spiritual

descendants. It has been mainly ignored, or else glossed over, in the "official" histories to which I have been able to gain access.

However the several contemporary sources quoted by the Unitarian historian, Earl Morse Wilbur, indicate that it was a fact well known at the time.

For the Stonites, the merger seems to have resulted, eventually, in the complete submergence of their Unitarian theology.

Today, amongst the Churches of Christ who are the spiritual descendants of the Disciples, it would not be tolerated at all!

### **The Christian Church**

The Smith-O'Kelly Eastern section of Christian Connection did not join with the Stonites in the merger with the Campbellites, to any great extent. In the main, they held back.

For a time they maintained their separate Unitarian presence. Then about 1837, there were suggestions of merger between the Unitarian association and what remained of the Christian Connection, in order to establish a new liberal theological school. It was discussed but never consummated.

Ultimately they again adopted a denominational identity, calling themselves the Christian Church. Still later, in 1931, they merged with the part of the Congregational Church, adopting the name Congregational Christian Church. Another merger followed in 1957, this time with the Evangelical and Reformed Church, to produce the United Church of Christ.

Just like the Stonites, the final result seems to have been the extinction of their Unitarian theology.

At the same time, their once powerful witness to simple nondenominational Christianity without formal creeds, has also been lost.

### **THE SPIRITUAL "SPIN-OFF"**

Although those who followed the path of merger were eventually completely absorbed, losing all distinctive theological identity in the process, there were other developments which are of interest to many of us who clearly owe our 20th century theological heritage to the developments reported in this paper.

Out of the Campbellite movement came Dr. John Thomas, founder of the Christadelphians.

Out of the same movement came Benjamin Wilson, translator of the Emphatic Diaglott, who was originally baptised by John Thomas, but who was a leader amongst those who became the Church of God of the Abrahamic Faith.

Out of the Christian Connection came Joseph Marsh, another forefather of the Church of God of the Abrahamic Faith.

There is no doubt of the commonality of origin of the Christadelphians and the Church of God. The three men just named above, knew each other well. (and between John Thomas and the other two, divisive warfare developed much too well!) Without attempting to apportion blame or record the details of the disagreements which led them to walk separate paths, we simply note the role they played in the parallel development of the two remarkably similar Churches to which many of us now owe our own Spiritual heritage.

However it is perhaps much too simplistic to attribute to any of these three, the sole responsibility for the developments associated with their names. There were certainly others whose names are less well known.

In the U.S.A. there seem to have been a number of individuals, as well as independent and isolated groups, who were probably never part of either the Christian Connection, or the Campbellites. Some may have held back from association from the beginning. Others may have been dissatisfied and left afterwards. For some it may have been the constraint of geography.

The fact is that from amongst all of the religious turmoil of the times, men of like minds about their faith in the One True God, did gravitate to one another and these two Churches did emerge, complete with their unique doctrine.

## **BIBLICAL UNITARIANISM IN THE 1990S**

This paper is NOT intended as a record of "*Apostolic Succession*"!

Nor is it a claim that the Polish Brethren would have accepted us all (or we them) without at least some questions. There are important differences on other matters.

It is, however, the product of several years of searching for the "Spiritual Roots" from which came my own faith in the ONE LORD of Moses ..... who is also the God and Father of Jesus.

In particular, it answers to some degree at least, my long held question about where the early founders of the Christadelphians and the Church of God, learnt their unique Unitarian theology.

Of course they did find it in the Bible, but whether directly or indirectly, it also seems to stem from the influence of the Polish Brethren and their Racovian Catechism.

It may be that these 19th century men in America never heard of the document itself.

However, it would have been virtually impossible for any of them not to have encountered the Unitarian controversy of their day. That can certainly be traced, at least indirectly, to Racovian influences. There is a similarity of language in their writings which seems beyond the limits of mere coincidence. Instead of rejecting it they have searched the scriptures and believed.

Their spiritual descendants exist today. I count myself amongst the many who owe their spiritual heritage to the work of these men, from the 16th century, down to our own time.

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## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

This supplement to Bible Digest Number 49 lists the various sources in which I found the condensed history contained in that paper. Much of it is now out of print and probably hard to locate, especially the sources mentioned for the history of the Disciples of Christ. In particular, I express my thanks to Don Prout, who kindly lent me most of those references which deal specifically with the history of the Disciples, from his own personal collection.

### **Update November 2001**

A supplementary list has been appended which includes new sources found since the original paper was written in 1994.

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(This section added November/December 2001)

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176 Granton Road, Edinburgh, EH5 1AH, Scotland
3. McHaffie, Ruth *Finding Founders and Facing Facts*  
Published by the Author, 2001  
176 Granton Road, Edinburgh, EH5 1AH, Scotland
4. Servetus, Michael *The Two Treatises of Servetus on the Trinity*  
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Harvard Theological Studies Number XVI  
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Note -- this is long out of print and was prohibitively expensive second hand -- but the local Public Library was able to arrange an Inter-library loan from the State Public Library of Victoria.

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## Footnote

1. The two books by Ruth McHaffie contain a devastating exposure of a very large number of serious inaccuracies in Alan Eyre's two books. Ruth's conclusions indicate the need for great care about using Alan's works as source material for serious history study.

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## Note - September 2002

This is a slightly revised copy of the original paper written in August 1994.

A note has been added on page 5 to reflect some updated information about the belief of John Biddle regarding the Holy Spirit. Another note has been added to point to the URL for Biddle's Catechism on the Internet.

There have been a few relatively minor changes to editorial detail which do not affect the history.

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