

Liberal Religion in America before 1900: Quakers, Unitarians, Universalists, Transcendentalists, and Free Religion.

The Society of Friends

The Society of Friends, or 'Quakers', began as an advanced form of pietism, an emphasis on personal devotion instead of church authority. Although originally quite biblical, the Quakers developed a tradition of individual freedom of thought, which inevitably led to a liberalism approaching that of Unitarians and Universalists. Quakers are also characterized by an unbending personal morality, putting them at the forefront of reform movements such as abolition and pacifism.

Influenced by pietists such as Mennonites in Holland, the first Friends held meetings in England around 1650, and expanded into the American colonies soon after.

The Quakers rejected all church authority and ordained ministers. Members could be expelled for even using a minister to get married. All members were equal, and also recognized no class distinctions in society. They doffed not their hats to nobility, and used the familiar 'thou' with all, eschewing the formal 'you'.

Quaker worshippers sat in a silent circle, speaking only when inspired by an 'Inner Light', or God speaking when our own mind is quiet. Anyone could speak, even women, an egalitarian attitude which placed Quakers among the first democrats and feminists. Although the 'Inner Light' was the primary source of truth, messages were examined critically to be sure they conformed to previous insights and to Quaker readings of the Bible.

Quakers were expected to conform to strict rules of the meeting, including simplicity of dress and moral purity. Their scrupulous honesty earned them a trust that gave them a business advantage, helping some to become wealthy.

The most famous of the early Quakers was George Fox (1624-1691), who spent his life organizing the Society. In between many imprisonments, he travelled widely, including a trip to America with his wife, Margaret Fell, and other Quaker leaders.

Quaker resistance to military service, their rejection of church hierarchy, and their tendency to disrupt church services led to persecution by the government, the Church of England, and by Puritans and other nonconformists. They were banned from several new American colonies, and a few were executed when they defied repeated banishments.

The Quakers gained political power in America under the leadership of William

Penn (1644-1718), who acquired a large grant from King Charles II in payment for a debt, and used it to found Pennsylvania. Quakers were also influential in Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and North Carolina.

Penn tried to be fair to the native Americans, resulting in relative peace for his colony. But other colonists resented the Quaker refusal to serve in militias or pay taxes to support wars against the Indians and the French. The Indians held Quakers in such high regard that Quakers could remain safely on their farms when their neighbors fled from war parties. Often, Indians would not sign treaties unless witnessed by Quakers, a trust the Quakers earned by standing up for Indian rights before colonial governments and the United States congress right up to modern times.

When the non-Quaker sons of William Penn became proprietors of Pennsylvania, the colony legislature formed two parties. The 'Quaker' party favored home rule and religious freedom, while the 'proprietor' party wanted establishment of the Church of England, and control from England. After many Quakers decided that politics was too worldly and quit the legislature, leadership of the 'Quaker' party fell to Benjamin Franklin, who was not a Quaker but sympathized with many of their ideas.

In the years leading up to the Revolution, many Quakers supported the colonial causes and promoted democracy. Quaker merchants in Philadelphia joined in the protest against the Stamp Act by sending a shipment of tea back to England, but they paid for the return voyage rather than dumping the tea in the harbor.

But when the Americans declared Independence, the Quaker principles of obedience to government and opposition to war led the Philadelphia meeting to pledge loyalty to the King. Quakers suffered persecution during the war as suspected Tories. However, the majority of Quakers outside of Philadelphia and New York supported independence, and several hundred served in the army in spite of disowning by their Meetings.

After the war most Quakers withdrew even more from public life. Quaker Meetings became stricter, with elders enforcing plain dress and speech and forbidding mixing with non-Quakers. "Ministers", although not appointed, were respected as having special insights. In a movement known as "Quietism", Friends in Meetings avoided "creaturely" talk that might not be from the "inner light". Meetings became nearly silent.

The Quakers were leaders in the struggle against slavery. In 1688 Germantown Quakers, led by Daniel Pastorius, presented the world's first

declaration against Slavery to the Philadelphia Meeting. In 1700 the Quaker dominated Pennsylvania Assembly tried to outlaw importation of slaves, but were overruled by the British government. The Quakers began by disowning those who purchased slaves, and later those who would not free their slaves. Speakers such as Sarah Harrison and John Woolman traveled in the South to persuade Friends to free their slaves. This was a major sacrifice, reducing many families to poverty. But by 1784 all Quaker Meetings had agreed to forbid slaveholding. Quakers such as Anthony Benezet also set up schools and other aid for freedmen.

Although many Quakers were at the forefront of the Abolitionist movement, the majority disapproved of any activity that was political, illegal, or likely to lead to violence. Lucretia Mott was nearly disowned by her Meeting for abolitionist activity. But many safe houses on the Underground Railroad were owned by Quakers. Levi Coffin, called the President of the Underground railroad, helped hundreds of slaves escape every year for twenty years.

In addition to leading the struggles for abolition of slavery and later equal rights for the freedmen, Quakers were at the forefront in many other social issues, including prison reform, treatment of mental illness, poverty, women's rights, and peace.

During the Nineteenth Century, the Quakers suffered a series of painful schisms over innovations. The first resulted from the influence of the religious revivalism led by the Methodists and Baptists. Some "Evangelical" Quakers thought that meetings should enforce at least some basic orthodox beliefs such as the divinity of Jesus and the authenticity of the Scriptures. When leaders in Philadelphia tried to silence one Elias Hicks, a respected elder who said the Scriptures had no authority over the Inner Light, supporters of Hicks left the meeting. Soon Quakers across the nation were divided between Hicksites, forming the majority, and Orthodox, who included many elders and ministers and retained much Meeting property.

Not long after, a dispute between Joseph Gurney, an evangelical missionary from England, and John Wilbur, a quietist guarding the "old inheritance", led to a further split in the Orthodox camp into "Gurneyites" and "Wilburites". Gurneyites in the Midwest began hiring full-time pastors. Other splinter groups formed over the question of abolitionist activity.

In the Twentieth Century, the trend has been reversed, with several groups uniting. In general, freedom of thought has prevailed. Most Quakers take a liberal view of the Bible, but there is an organization of Evangelical Friends with a fundamentalist Bible view.

Anti-Calvinists

Unitarianism and Universalism both had roots in pre-Revolutionary America with ministers who could not reconcile their belief in a benevolent God with the repulsive Calvinist doctrines of original sin, predestination, and human depravity. Up to the middle of the century, Calvinism had dominated religion in New England. But the Congregational structure of the churches, with each independent parish free to determine its own doctrine, provided an opening for liberalism to creep in.

In the 1740's, a period of religious revival known as the Great Awakening shook the authority of the established Congregational Churches. Itinerant Baptists and other preachers of "enthusiasm" threatened the positions of better educated parish ministers, who favored "Biblical rationalism". The upheaval shook off two liberal movements. The one, within the established Congregational ministry, led to the Unitarians. The other, stemming from the populist itinerant preachers, led to the Universalists.

Unitarians

Several Congregational ministers, shocked by the excesses of the Great Awakening and disgusted with the dark Calvinist dogma, began introducing "Arminian" views into their sermons. Named for the liberal Dutch theologian Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609), Arminianism supported free will, a nicer opinion of human nature, and a greater emphasis on ethics alongside dogma in defining Christianity. The American Arminians, such as Charles Chauncy (1705-1787) and Jonathan Mayhew (1720-1766), also favored individual religious freedom and opposed creeds. Chauncy wrote a book showing how punishment in hell could not be eternal; all souls would eventually be returned to communion with God. This book influenced the early Universalist movement. Mayhew and Chauncy both supported the movement for American political independence.

In spite of denunciation from their Calvinist colleagues, who refused to exchange pulpits with them, the Arminian ministers were able to garner congregational support and continue preaching. Gradually, a large segment of the New England population came to support their views.

Meanwhile, Unitarians were organizing in England. A century earlier, influential thinkers such as John Locke, John Milton and Isaac Newton promoted anti-Trinitarian views derived in part from Dutch Socinians. In 1774, Rev. Theophilus Lindsey opened the first Unitarian chapel, in London. Both Joseph Priestly and Benjamin Franklin attended the first service.

Unitarian ideas soon began to disseminate across the Atlantic. In 1787 Rev. James Freeman (1759-1835), a friend by correspondence with Joseph Priestly, persuaded his congregation at King's Chapel Episcopal Church in Boston to convert to Unitarianism. Seven years later Priestly himself came to America and helped organize congregations in Pennsylvania, including the first named "Unitarian", in Philadelphia in 1796.

At first, the Congregational Arminians avoided association with Priestly's Unitarians, who were more advanced along deistic lines. It was their Calvinist opponents who first stuck them with the "Unitarian" label. But as a new generation began to question the equality of Jesus with God in the Trinity, they also began to call themselves Unitarian.

In 1805 the Calvinists were enraged by the election of Henry Ware (1764-1845), an Arminian, to Professor of Divinity at Harvard. Harvard was the school where most Congregational ministers received their training. The Calvinists withdrew and founded a new seminary at Andover. In response, Ware and other Arminians created the Harvard Divinity School, dominated by Unitarians ever since.

At about the same time, a dispute arose over ownership of Church buildings. As the established denomination in Massachusetts, the Congregational Church was supported by taxes in each parish. In many cases, Calvinists controlled church membership, but Arminians formed the majority of parish citizens. When a Massachusetts court ruled that the parish owned the church, many Calvinist ministers were replaced by Arminians.

The rising star of the Arminian wing at this time was Rev. Joseph Stevens Buckminster (1784-1812). A gifted preacher with a brilliant mind, Buckminster introduced German 'scientific' Bible criticism to America. Buckminster's early death was a major blow to the growing Unitarian movement.

Leadership of the movement then passed to another young minister, William Ellery Channing (1780-1842). Channing's

1819 sermon, "Unitarian Christianity", marks the start of denominational Unitarianism in America. Channing attacked trinitarian dogma, but placed more stress on his "one sublime idea", human dignity and potential goodness, which is in practice the central theme of Unitarianism. 125 New England churches sided with Channing and formed the American Unitarian Association in 1825. On the exact same day, the English Unitarian Association also was founded.

Soon after forming in its New England motherland, the Unitarian movement began spreading westward into the Ohio and Mississippi valleys. The Boston

churches lent support to missionaries such as James Freeman Clarke (1810-1888), who edited the Western Messenger. But a tendency of many western Unitarian leaders to take an independent path, more liberal than most Boston ministers, led to a strain in the Association known as the "Western Controversy". The "Unity Men", led by Jenkin Jones (1843-1918), were modernists who wished to emphasize ethics over theology and christology, with no required creed. Jones was leader of the Western Unitarian Conference. A pacifist, he opposed World War I in his last years.

Thomas Starr King (1824-1864) established a strong Unitarian presence in California. A minister for both the Universalists and the Unitarians, King founded his San Francisco church in 1860. King is given large credit for keeping California in the Union during the Civil War. His exhausting schedule of lectures and fund-raising for the Sanitary Commission, which helped wounded soldiers, contributed to his early death.

The first ordained woman minister in America, Antoinette Brown Blackwell (1825-1921), was a Congregationalist who soon converted to Unitarianism. Educated at Oberlin college, but not allowed to graduate, Blackwell was ordained by her church in 1853. She resigned the next year, and later organized a Unitarian church in New Jersey. Blackwell lectured on woman's rights, abolition and temperance.

Around the turn of the century, Unitarians were leaders in the social gospel movement, which reformed Christianity into a movement to help the poor and struggle against injustice. Francis Greenwood Peabody (1847-1936) defined the movement in his book, Jesus Christ and the Social Question.

Universalists

Universalism, the doctrine that damnation is not eternal and that all souls will eventually be restored to communion with God, had several points of beginning among the independent preachers of New England, and also benefitted from European missionaries.

The first known Universalist preacher in America, George DeBenneville (1703-1793), was born to a Huguenot (French Protestant) family taking refuge in England. After returning to France, where he was almost guillotined, DeBenneville lived in Holland and Germany, and finally moved to America in 1741. He settled in a colony of German pietist universalists, where pietism is the emphasis on personal religious conviction instead of orthodoxy and formal church structure.

Among those converted to Universalism by DeBenneville was Elhanan Winchester (1751-1897), who had been a Baptist minister inspired by the Great Awakening. When he was ousted for heresy by the Baptists in 1781, Winchester founded the Universalist Society of Philadelphia. Winchester preached that the all-powerful and benevolent attributes of God could not possibly allow eternal punishment.

One prominent Universalist in Philadelphia was America's leading physician, Benjamin Rush (1745-1813). Also active with Jefferson and other deists in the American Philosophical Society, Rush is famous for over-advocating bleeding, but also promoted hygiene and temperance, studied yellow fever, reformed treatment of mental illness, and wrote one of the first anti-slavery tracts.

Another independent preacher, Caleb Rich (1750-1821), founded a Universalist church in Massachusetts in 1773, and two more in New Hampshire. Rich had experienced an intense Baptist conversion, but was troubled that his fear of Hell was a "selfish" motive for Christian belief. Further visions convinced him of universal salvation. Not formally trained as a minister, Rich was ordained by his congregations.

John Murray (1741-1815) is considered to be the founder of the Universalist denomination in America. Murray was English, and had converted to Universalism after reading a book written by James Rely. In 1770, during his missionary voyage to America, Murray's ship 'miraculously' ran aground at Cranberry Inlet, New Jersey, where Thomas Potter had built a small church in the faith that a Universalist minister would come. Murray preached throughout the colonies, but settled in Gloucester, Massachusetts. He married the widowed daughter of his chief patron, Winthrop Sargent, a prominent ship captain. Judith Sargent Stevens Murray (1751-1820) edited her husband's sermons for publication. She also had her own distinguished literary career as a pioneer advocate of better education and full political rights for women.

Caleb Rich came once to meet John Murray, but the two disagreed on doctrine. Murray was a "restorationist" who expected a period of punishment for the damned after death, to atone for their sins in preparation for restoring them to God's grace. Rich taught that sin is its own punishment, so that all souls would be saved immediately after death. This doctrine came to be known as "ultra-universalism".

Universalism's greatest preacher was New Hampshire born Hosea Ballou (1771-1852). Ballou's Treatise on Atonement (1805) became the standard text opposing Calvinism. Ballou assumed leadership of the denomination after Murray

died, but he had originally been converted by Caleb Rich, and he was an ultra-universalist. Although controversy continued, most Universalists came to agree with Ballou. Ballou encouraged diversity. "If we agree in brotherly love, there is no disagreement that can do us injury, but if we do not, no other agreement can do us any good."

Universalists were among the first to accept women in their pulpits, though not unanimously at first. The first known to preach was Maria Cook (1779-1835), who enjoyed a brief career at camp meetings about 1810-1812. She spent some time in jail, preaching to her fellow prisoners. A more famous preacher was Olympia Brown (1835-1926), who was prominent in the drive for woman suffrage. Mary Ashton Rice Livermore (1820-1905), a platform speaker on temperance and woman's rights, became famous for her speech, "What Shall We Do With Our Daughters". She married a Universalist minister.

By the early nineteenth century, very little doctrinal difference remained between Unitarians and Universalists. Ballou and most Universalists rejected trinitarianism, and most Unitarians followed Chauncy in accepting universal salvation. The difference was that Unitarians were primarily the educated elite, whereas the Universalists attracted the working class.

Transcendentalism

Repeatedly throughout Unitarian history, liberal Unitarian ministers have spawned new movements, rejected at first by the moderate mainstream, but soon assimilated. The first of these upheavals was Transcendentalism.

The name "Transcendentalism" derives from the proposal that humans "know" certain important ideas, such as the good and the beautiful, by a direct connection with a universal divine presence, which "transcends" or bypasses anything we learn from experience.

Transcendentalism is opposed to "sensationalism", the doctrine that we know only what we experience through our senses. Sensationalism had dominated western thought from the time of John Locke, who proposed it, and David Hume, who demolished any pretense that we can trust pure reason to reach philosophical truths untested by empirical observations.

The father of transcendental philosophy was the German professor, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Distressed by Hume's skepticism, Kant developed a philosophy which allowed for knowledge innate to the mind rather than experienced through the senses. This allowed him to believe in a divinity, although not the Christian God. Kant also promoted an extreme ethics which stressed duty over happiness

or making others happy.

Kant and other German philosophers who followed him laid the foundation for the Romantic movement in art and literature. Romantic writers such as Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) emphasized feelings over the rationalism which characterized the classical period.

One could question whether Transcendentalism, a mystical reaction away from the empirical rationalism of the Enlightenment, can be counted as a step forward in the history of Humanism. But the "Transcendentalist" label, alike to "Unitarian", described only a small part of the movement it covered. American and other Transcendentalists were also concerned with returning to nature, changing standards of literature and art, and reforming society to end such abuses as slavery and the subjugation of women.

The Transcendentalists aimed for an "absolute" or "pure" religion, which would consist of the essential elements common to all religions. This led many Transcendentalists to cast off their exclusively "Christian" label and sacraments, and to deny the miracles of the Bible. This is what most distressed the more traditional Unitarian ministry.

The most famous Transcendentalist was Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882). Although revered by Unitarians today, Emerson actually quit after only three years as a minister, because he would not preside over the Lord's Supper. His fame arose from his career as a platform speaker and essayist. His 1836 essay, "Nature", and his Harvard Divinity School Address of 1838, established American Transcendentalism. Emerson spoke of an intuitional religion and a pantheistic unity of God, nature, and the human soul.

Emerson's opinions provoked a harsh rebuttal led by Andrews Norton (1786-1853), a prominent Unitarian scholar who had just completed a study defending biblical miracles. The Transcendentalists replied with essays and sermons by George Ripley (1802-1880) and Theodore Parker (1810-1860). Parker's sermon, "A Discourse on the Transient and Permanent in Christianity", became a classic in Unitarian liberalism, but at the time it nearly led to his removal as a minister. He refused to resign, and his congregation stood by him, but he was ostracized from visiting most other Unitarian pulpits.

Emerson believed so strongly in individualism that he refused to join any kind of Transcendentalist organization or get involved in the petty world of politics and reform movements. But other Transcendentalists were more active.

George Ripley resigned his pastorate in Boston to found a Transcendentalist commune at Brook Farm. The Farm was also a school, and attempted to follow

the model of the French Socialist, Charles Fourier (1772-1837). Ripley was forced to close Brook Farm because of debts compounded by a fire which destroyed the main building.

Bronson Alcott (1799-1888) opened an experimental "Temple School", with help from Elizabeth Palmer Peabody (1804-1894). Alcott was an impractical man who also attempted a vegetarian communal farm. His daughter Louisa May Alcott wrote about a childhood of intellectual wealth but economic poverty. Peabody had been an assistant to William Ellery Channing and later became a leader in the kindergarten movement.

The Transcendentalists started a literary journal, the *Dial*, and recruited Margaret Fuller (1810-1850) as editor. A highly educated woman, Fuller loved German culture and helped introduce Goethe to Americans. Closely associated with Emerson, Fuller at first practiced individualism and kept away from politics and reform, but she arranged a five-year series of "conversations for women" at Elizabeth Peabody's home. Fuller's feminist book, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, inspired younger leaders such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton. On a journalistic trip to Europe, Fuller got caught up in the Italian independence movement, married one of the freedom fighters, and fought in the defense of Rome. Upon her return to America, she likely would have been a more active reform leader, but she and her husband and child died in a shipwreck.

Transcendentalism was more literary than philosophical- Goethe was more popular than Kant. The century's greatest American poet, Walt Whitman (1819-1892), was a transcendentalist friend of Emerson's. Whitman's collection of poems, *Leaves of Grass*, was too sensuous, even sexual in spots, for American publishers, so he had to use his own funds for the first edition. Nathaniel Hawthorne and many other writers were also influenced by Transcendentalism.

All of the Transcendentalists opposed slavery, and many such as Alcott were active abolitionists. Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) was jailed for refusing to pay taxes to support the Mexican War, widely viewed as a scheme to spread slavery. Thoreau chastised his friend Emerson for not sharing his jail cell. He outlined his doctrine of passive resistance in his famous essay, "Civil Disobedience", a classic which inspired Tolstoi, Gandhi, and other leaders of non-violence. Thoreau spent two years alone in a hut before writing "Walden", which advocated simplifying life to make time for spiritual growth.

Theodore Parker, the most prominent transcendentalist to remain a Unitarian, was also the leading Unitarian abolitionist. "Parkerism" came to mean modernist and reformist Unitarianism. Parker also inspired many younger Unitarian

ministers to move beyond Christianity to a creedless "absolute" religion. Parker died from tuberculosis during a trip to Europe, but his followers gave him credit for the movement which led to the Free Religious Association.

Free Religious Association

In the mid-century a number of congregations dropped the Unitarian label because their members no longer considered Christianity to be sufficient and complete. Their ministers, typically transcendentalists or scientific theists trained at Harvard, stopped performing the Lord's Supper, and the churches assumed new names such as the Independent Liberal Church, in New York, led by Octavius Brooks Frothingham (1822-1895).

During the same years, Unitarian leaders were trying to strengthen the national organization, still a loose organization of individuals in independent congregations. In 1865 Henry Whitney Bellows (1814-1882) called a meeting to organize the National Conference of Unitarian Churches. Bellows, who had learned organizational skills in the U. S. Sanitary Commission during the war, was the leading Unitarian churchman of the century.

Bellows tried to define Unitarianism as a "Broad Church" free enough to please everyone, but he and other traditionalists would not remove prominent reference to Jesus Christ Our Lord in the preamble of the new organization. This was unacceptable to Frothington and other "independents", who saw no need for any creedal statement.

Urged on by William James Potter (1829-1893), a young radical minister, the independents formed the Free Religious Association in 1867. Frothingham was elected president and Potter secretary. Emerson, ever the individualist, did not join but spoke at the first meeting, as did the great woman's rights leader Lucretia Mott.

Alongside the transcendentalist followers of Theodore Parker, the FRA included scientific theists such as Potter, who were exploring the religious implications of Darwin's new theories. There was also a pseudoscientific "Spiritualist" wing led by Robert Dale Owen. After 1872 even non-theists were welcomed, and the young Felix Adler, later to found Ethical Culture, became President after Frothingham retired.

Much of the work of the FRA was published in the Index, a journal edited by Francis Ellingwood Abbott (1836-1903). Abbott, minister of the First Independent Society in Toledo, Ohio, was a leading scientific theist. In the first issues of the Index, Abbott published "Fifty Affirmations", outlining Pure Religion, which he

defined as "the effort of man to perfect himself". Abbott saw the universal element of human nature at the root of all religions. Each religion is fleshed out with its own peculiar historical elements.

In their search for universal religion, FRA members exchanged friendly letters with Chunder Sen, leader of the liberal Brahmoist movement in India. The General Association of German Independent Congregations, a German-American organization, also voted to cooperate with the FRA.

The FRA faded because many leaders were busy with other causes, and because the Unitarian movement caught up with FRA liberalism and re-absorbed its membership. Frothingham and Potter insisted that the FRA should focus on discussion, leaving social and political activism to other organizations. Activists such as Adler resigned.

Many FRA members felt that one major aim had been accomplished by the World's Parliament of Religions, a conference of major religious leaders held at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. Several FRA leaders helped Jenkin Jones organize the Parliament.

In 1882, Minot Savage pushed an amendment through the Unitarian National Conference securing freedom of thought. Gradually, Frothington and most of his fellow FRA ministers returned to Unitarianism. Emerson, Parker, and other rebels were transformed into venerated Unitarian sages. Although the FRA lasted into the next century, it effectively ended with the death of the stalwart Potter in 1893.