

WHY? | DR. RANDY WHITE
SESSION 6 | WHY ARE SOME PEOPLE UNITARIAN?

Unitarianism is a distinct theological movement that challenges traditional Christian doctrines while promoting individual conscience and reason. This chapter examines Unitarianism's appeal, history, core beliefs, and contemporary relevance. We explore why people are drawn to Unitarian thought, its unique approach to faith, progressive values, and comparisons with other theological perspectives. Understanding Unitarianism provides insight into a significant liberal religious movement that influences modern spiritual discourse.

WHY UNITARIANISM APPEALS TO SOME

Unitarianism appeals to individuals for several core reasons in today's diverse and rapidly changing world. The emphasis on reason and individual conscience attracts those who value critical thinking and personal interpretation of religious texts and doctrines. Unitarian congregations often welcome a wide range of beliefs, including atheism, humanism, and various spiritual traditions, making them attractive to those seeking an open and inclusive religious community. Many Unitarians are deeply committed to progressive causes and social activism, which resonates with individuals passionate about making positive changes in society.

For those who struggle with orthodox Christian doctrines like the Trinity, Unitarianism offers an alternative theological perspective. The movement encourages questioning and exploration of beliefs, attracting those who value intellectual freedom in their spiritual journey. These aspects of Unitarianism create a more liberal and open approach to religion that appeals to many people in contemporary society.

UNITARIANISM: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Unitarianism is a theological movement that emphasizes the oneness of God and rejects the doctrine of the Trinity. The key theological stance of Unitarianism can be defined as follows:

- **Belief in One God:** Unitarians affirm the absolute unity of God, viewing Him as a single, indivisible being. This stands in contrast to the Trinitarian concept of God as three persons in one essence.
- **Rejection of the Trinity:** Unitarians do not accept the traditional Christian doctrine of the Trinity, which posits that God exists as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Instead, they view Jesus as a great teacher, prophet, or divinely inspired human, but not as God incarnate.
- **Emphasis on Reason and Scripture:** Unitarian theology often emphasizes the use of reason and personal interpretation of scripture, leading to a more liberal approach to religious doctrine.
- **View of Jesus:** While Unitarians hold Jesus in high regard, they typically see him as a moral exemplar and teacher rather than as divine. His teachings are valued, but he is not worshipped as God.

This theological stance has significant implications for how Unitarians approach faith, worship, and their understanding of salvation, setting them apart from mainstream Christian denominations.

HISTORY

EARLY ROOTS AND DEVELOPMENT

Unitarian thought emerged from early Christian debates on Christ's nature and the Trinity. During the Reformation, figures like Servetus and Sozzini challenged orthodox views, sparking the formal Unitarian movement.

GROWTH AND INSTITUTIONALIZATION

Unitarian churches were established in Poland and Transylvania in the 16th-17th centuries, later spreading to England and America. By the 19th century, Unitarianism became a formal denomination, emphasizing rational religion and social reform.

MODERN UNITARIANISM

Today, Unitarianism varies regionally, from traditional Christian roots to more pluralistic forms. It emphasizes reason, freedom of belief, and social justice, focusing on individual spiritual exploration.

KEY FIGURES

- **Michael Servetus (1509-1553):** Early proponent executed for rejecting the Trinity.
- **Fausto Sozzini (1539-1604):** Italian theologian who influenced the Polish Brethren.
- **Joseph Priestley (1733-1804):** Developed Unitarianism in England and America.
- **William Ellery Channing (1780-1842):** Defined American Unitarianism.
- **Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882):** Influenced liberal religious thought in America.

UNITARIAN BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

In Christian Unitarianism, Jesus is typically viewed as a significant prophet, teacher, or moral example, but not as God incarnate. Instead, God is understood as a singular, unified being. Some Unitarian Christians see Jesus as uniquely inspired by God and even possibly as possessing some divine attributes, but they do not equate him with God the Father in the traditional Trinitarian sense.

- **Scripture and Reason:** Unitarian Christians often emphasize the use of reason and personal conscience in interpreting the Bible. They tend to be skeptical of doctrines that are not clearly supported by Scripture or that seem illogical, such as the Trinity.
- **Human Nature:** Traditionally, Unitarian Christians have held a more optimistic view of human nature compared to Calvinistic or Augustinian traditions. They often reject the concept of depravity and instead emphasize human potential for good.
- **Salvation:** The concept of salvation in Unitarianism tends to be more focused on moral improvement and following the teachings of Jesus rather than on a dramatic conversion experience or acceptance of specific doctrines.

COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY: UNITARIANISM VS. ONENESS

While both Unitarianism and Oneness theology reject the traditional doctrine of the Trinity, they differ significantly in their understanding of God and Jesus Christ:

- **Nature of God:** Unitarians believe in the absolute unity of God as a single, indivisible being. Oneness theology, while also rejecting the Trinity, views God as one person who manifests Himself in different modes or roles (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit).
- **Christology:** Unitarians typically view Jesus as a great teacher, prophet, or divinely inspired human, but not as God incarnate. Oneness theology believes Jesus is the one God manifest in the flesh, being both fully God and fully man.
- **Salvation:** Unitarian beliefs about salvation often focus on moral improvement and following Jesus' teachings. Oneness theology emphasizes salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, repentance, water baptism in Jesus' name, and receiving the Holy Spirit.

- **Baptism:** Unitarian practices regarding baptism vary widely. Oneness theology emphasizes baptism in the name of Jesus only, considering it essential for salvation.

While both reject the Trinity, Unitarianism and Oneness theology have fundamentally different views on the nature of God, the divinity of Jesus, and the path to salvation.

UNITARIANISM AND UNIVERSALISM

The relationship between Unitarianism and Universalism developed over time due to their shared liberal religious outlook, eventually leading to a merger in the United States. Here's a brief overview of how this relationship came about:

- **Common Ground:** Despite having different theological focuses, both movements shared a liberal, rational approach to theology and rejected certain orthodox Christian doctrines.
- **Overlap in Membership:** The shared ethos between Unitarianism and Universalism led to significant overlap in membership over time.
- **Institutional Merger:** The most notable development in this relationship was the formation of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) in 1961, which formally merged many Unitarian and Universalist organizations in the United States.
- **Blended Traditions:** Today, within the context of the Unitarian Universalist Association, the two traditions have largely blended. Most members of the UUA would identify as both Unitarian and Universalist, embracing a wide range of spiritual beliefs within a framework of liberal religion.

It's important to note that while there is significant overlap between Unitarianism and Universalism, especially in modern times, they are not synonymous. There are still independent expressions of each tradition.

UNITARIANISM AND PROGRESSIVISM

Unitarianism has become closely associated with progressive values due to its emphasis on reason, individual conscience, and rejection of dogma. This has led to significant social activism within Unitarian congregations, who have historically supported causes like abolition, women's suffrage, civil rights, LGBTQ+ equality, and environmental protection.

The inclusive nature of modern Unitarianism, especially within the Unitarian Universalist Association, has reinforced these progressive leanings. By welcoming diverse beliefs and emphasizing tolerance, Unitarianism aligns naturally with progressive values of diversity and inclusion.

The 1961 merger of Unitarianism and Universalism in the United States further solidified the movement's progressive orientation. This union combined Universalism's emphasis on universal salvation with Unitarianism's focus on reason and moral conscience, creating a framework that strongly aligns with progressive values of individual worth and collective responsibility.

However, there are exceptions to this progressive alignment:

- **Conservative Unitarians:** Some Unitarians, particularly those identifying as "Biblical Unitarians," may hold more traditional or conservative views on theology, morality, and social issues.
- **Cultural variations:** In some cultural contexts, Unitarian congregations may reflect local values that are less progressive than those seen in North American or Western European contexts.

These exceptions highlight the diversity within Unitarianism and remind us that while the majority align with progressive values, individual beliefs can vary.

HOW DO YOU BUILD THESE BELIEFS?

Michael Servetus, a 16th-century Spanish theologian, challenged the Trinity doctrine in his work "*De Trinitatis Erroribus Libri VII*". He argued that God was a single, indivisible being, not three distinct persons. Servetus viewed Jesus as divinely inspired but not co-eternal with God, rejecting traditional Christology.

Servetus critiqued early Church councils, particularly Nicaea, for basing the Trinity doctrine on political and philosophical grounds rather than Scripture. He advocated for a simpler, more rational interpretation of the Bible, free from imposed theological constructs.

His radical views led to widespread condemnation and ultimately his execution for heresy in Geneva in 1553. Despite this, Servetus's ideas significantly influenced Unitarian thought, paving the way for later theologians to question the Trinity doctrine and advocate for God's unity.

My personal view on the origins of Unitarianism as a movement is that it emerged from the Council of Nicaea, which as Servetus insisted, was indeed more driven by political and philosophical considerations than biblical ones. In an attempt to unify the empire, the council oversimplified complex theological concepts and effectively prohibited discussion outside the boundaries of the councils and their creeds. The decrees that followed effectively sentenced dissenters to death, revealing the true purpose of such councils: to provide judges with grounds for heresy charges, enabling the purging of dissenting voices from both empires and churches.

In my opinion, which admittedly cannot be verified, Servetus articulated his dissent against the Nicene Creed in a reasoned manner. However, his understanding of God's nature was flawed. The tragedy lies in the fact that Servetus's martyrdom transformed his ideas into a protest movement rather than a subject for further theological study and debate, which the church (then or now) did not allow.

This perspective aligns with the critiques leveled by Servetus himself against the early Church councils, particularly the Council of Nicaea. As we've seen, Servetus accused these councils of establishing the doctrine of the Trinity based more on political and philosophical considerations than on a faithful interpretation of Scripture. The consequences of such politicization of theology were far-reaching, leading to centuries of theological rigidity and, in extreme cases, persecution of those who dared to question established doctrines.

The case of Servetus serves as a poignant reminder of the dangers of conflating political power with theological authority. His execution for heresy in Calvinist Geneva in 1553 not only ended a theological discourse but also martyred him in the eyes of many, inadvertently lending credence to his ideas. This tragic outcome highlights the importance of open theological dialogue and the dangers of using state or denominational power to enforce religious orthodoxy. The Bible is a book to be studied, not one to be rigidly enforced by authorities.

In fact, I think that a strong case could be made that Unitarians exist today because Calvinists were bloodthirsty tyrants in forcing their doctrine upon everyone. The blood of Servetus at the hands of the Calvinists soured a movement that accepted his ideas, rather than allowing individual study of the word of God.