

UNITARIAN FOUNDERS AROUND THE WORLD
A sermon for several voices by Rev. James Robinson,
Essex Chapel, London, England November, 2008

Narrator: The Unitarian heritage is a long and distinguished tradition. In our service today, we will invite six Unitarian founders to come back from history and briefly speak to us.

An early Church leader, Arius, proposed the idea that Jesus was a great teacher but not the same as God. He was denounced as a heretic. The idea surfaced again during the Reformation in Europe. Michael Servetus, a Spanish Doctor, wrote a treatise outlining a Unitarian view point. Although he was burned at the stake, the ideas out lived him and were widely discussed. A church sympathetic to the Unitarian ideal (of a loving God and a human Jesus) arose in Poland.

This sets the stage for our first historical figure, Queen Isabella, who with her son John (the King of Transylvania) initiated the first openly Unitarian Church community.

QUEEN ISABELLA

I was born in 1520. My parents were King and Queen of Poland. My mother raised me to believe that women should be as keenly interested in world affairs as the men.

At the age of 18, the King of Transylvania asked me to marry him and become the Queen. It was a joy to accept his offer. But sadly our marriage was not a long one. After the birth of our son, John, my husband died of the fever.

In 1543 Transylvania officially declared itself independent from Hungary, with my young son as King and me as the Queen. But our independence was short lived. In 1551 a German and Hungarian army over ran us, and I fled to Poland with my eleven year old son. But these years in exile proved valuable. Young John and I talked for hours about the kind of nation we would want Transylvania to be: a nation of freedom. We were deeply influenced by the court doctor, Giorgio Biandrata, who shared with us his Unitarian view point. It seemed so sensible.

In 1555, Transylvania regained its independence. Our return was a triumph for the people. At the first Parliament I offered a decree that “everyone might hold the faith of their choice ... without any offence to any”. It was the first time religious freedom was the law of the land in a European country. My son and I became Unitarian. Led by the great preacher, Francis David, there were soon tens of thousands of Unitarians in Transylvania.

I died soon after that. I know it has been a struggle, but the Unitarian Church is still alive in Transylvania. And I am glad that your chapel is also benefitting from the Unitarian heritage my son and I began together.

Narrator: The Unitarian emphasis on freedom of belief and tolerance, of a human Jesus and a loving God, was outlawed throughout Europe. Attempts to form new Unitarian groups throughout the continent ended in persecution and violence.

But Unitarian ideas were still discussed and debated. Nearly 200 years after Queen Isabella, a Unitarian movement arose in England. Despite the fact that Unitarianism was against the law, our next speaker founded the first openly Unitarian congregation right here in London. His name was Theophilus Lindsey.

THEOPHILUS LINDSEY

Dear friends, I was founder of the first openly Unitarian church in England.

I was an Anglican vicar. However, my intense study of the Scriptures led me to have serious doubts about many doctrines of the church, including the Trinity.

I was not alone in my confusion. 250 clergy signed a petition, sent to Parliament, requesting that Anglican clergymen be relieved from having to subscribe to all the articles of faith required of them by the church. The House of Commons refused to even consider the request.

I was fifty years of age, in frail health, and without funds. But my conscience would not let me rest. I moved to London and worked on a liberal revision of the Book of Common Prayer. With the help of Dr. Joseph Priestly, we rented an empty auction house. It was there, on April 17th, 1774, that we held our first service. 200 people attended, including the American Benjamin Franklin. I preached a Unitarian theology and the congregation prospered. We soon moved into our own church building.

In 1783 I wrote a treatise on Unitarianism, showing its roots in Christian history. When Dr. Priestly was attacked from all sides, I rushed to his defence. It was not easy preaching a rational and sensible Unitarian message when the mob was against us and while Parliament continued to out law us. But we made the stand and I believe the world is better for it. The Gospel of Jesus is about love and tolerance, not about judging people for their theological position.

I died in 1805. I am glad that your chapel is keeping alive this heritage of an open, free, and loving faith.

Narrator: The Unitarian movement spread from Britain to America. The Book of Common Prayer which Lindsey revised along a Unitarian philosophy was adopted by Kings Chapel in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1774, becoming the first Unitarian church in America.

It was the leadership of our next speaker which allowed the founding of a vibrant Unitarian denomination in America. His words were widely read not only in America but also in Britain, Transylvania, and around the world. His name is William Ellery Channing.

WILLIAM ELLERY CHANNING

My name is William Ellery Channing. It surprises me that I have become, over the centuries, one of the leading thinkers in the Unitarian tradition.

I was a minister in New England. I had become uncomfortable with severe Christian beliefs, which saw children born with sin and many sent to eternal damnation. I was angry at how Christian beliefs were used to justify the abomination of slavery in the United States. So I began to preach a different message.

In 1819 I gave a sermon in the city of Baltimore outlining the key points of a Unitarian view point. There was one God and God was loving and just. Jesus was the great human teacher. The human spirit was not born in sin but born in goodness. Our life is meant to be lived in service to our neighbour – the social gospel which Jesus taught and lived. And since God gave us a mind to think, we must be free to interpret the Bible as our conscience dictates, unfettered by any creed or dogma. This sermon became the rallying document for a new Unitarian denomination in America, which was formed in 1825.

I served a Unitarian Church in Boston Massachusetts for forty years. It is still standing on the commons green – a beacon of hope and freedom in the centre of New England.

Narrator: By 1850 the Unitarian movement was well established in Britain, America, Canada, and Transylvania. But because the idea of having missionaries was against the Unitarian ideals of freedom and cultural respect, the faith grew very slowly around the world. The next three speakers will share with us how they helped create a Unitarian movement within their own cultural setting. At this time we welcome Martha Turner back from history to tell us about the beginnings of Unitarianism in Australia.

MARTHA TURNER

When I was appointed minister of the Melbourne Unitarian Church in 1874 I became the first woman minister of any denomination in Australia.

I first came to Australia back in 1870 from my native England. The Melbourne congregation did not have a settled minister, so lay people often gave the sermons. People said that I gave the most inspiring sermons of all, and so they made me the minister.

The Unitarian movement had arisen in Australia around 1850, first in Sydney, a few years later in Melbourne, and then in all the major cities. We were well aware of the writings of the American Dr. Channing, and of earlier English founders like Reverend Lindsey, but we felt free to create our own Unitarian style for Australia. My friend Catherine Spence was a noted author and lay preacher, and she helped start a Unitarian Church in Adelaide.

I was minister of the Melbourne Unitarian church for ten years. I preached the social gospel of the man Jesus, and faith in a loving and good God. We encouraged tolerance between religions and taught that mutual respect is more important than arguing over beliefs. But because we did not have a definite creed, it was hard to explain our faith to others, and thus we never grew large.

Not long after my death, the first woman minister was ordained in Britain, and she also was a Unitarian. May woman always hold positions of importance in the Unitarian movement.

Narrator: A remarkable thing about Unitarianism in the late 19th and entire 20th century is how it spread around the world without any missionary work evangelizing. Individuals, within their own cultural context, read or heard about Unitarianism and began their own version of it. Our next speaker, Hajom Singh, will tell us how he founded a Unitarian movement in his region of India.

HAJOM SINGH

I was born in 1865 and lived my entire life in the Khasi Hills of north eastern India. My Khasi tribe had a faith that believed in a Creator God and employed shamanistic practices to appease many deities.

When I was 15 I converted to the Reform faith of the Welsh missionaries. But I did not like many of their doctrines. I felt that Jesus taught us a good way to live, and had nothing to do with hell or damnation. It also seemed to me that Jesus was a human being first and foremost. So I left the church.

Then a Brahma Samaj friend told me about the Unitarian religion. I established a correspondence with a Unitarian who sent me the writings of William Ellery Channing. With joy I realized that I was not alone – others believed as I did. So I called my faith Unitarian. I invited friends and neighbours to join me in religious discussion. On September 18th, 1887, I led the first Unitarian church service in the Khasi Hills. We formulated this statement of our Unitarian beliefs: “We believe in the unity of God, the fatherhood and motherhood of God, in one human family, in love, union, worship, faith, and immortality.” By 1899 the church numbered 214 members.

I am glad to say that many Unitarian members and leaders came after me. I understand that today there are 10,000 Unitarians in the Khasi Hills. It has always been important to us to be connected to our Unitarian family around the world. In fact, your chapel has sent us money to help repair and maintain one of our schools. May our connection with you remain strong.

Narrator: Whether in India, Nigeria, Indonesia, or Sri Lanka Unitarian communities were formed by local people within their own cultural setting. These Unitarian groups around the world vary greatly in their worship, language, and customs. Our next speaker, Toribio Quimada, will share with us how he founded the Unitarian Universalist Church in the Philippines.

Toribio Qumimada

I was born the 13th child of poor parents. I left school early to help support the family. As a young man I switched from the Catholic religion to a Protestant one. I volunteered my time to my church, and then was asked to become a minister. I become minister of a church too poor to own any bibles or have a building of its own.

I decided to appeal for help. I sent out many requests. One request was answered by the Universalist Service Committee in America. As I learned about Universalism, I realized that I already agreed with their basic teachings: God is love, Jesus is a great human teacher, everyone person is a child of God, and someday everyone would be in heaven. Soon afterwards the Unitarians in America merged with the Universalists to become Unitarian Universalists.

Because of my beliefs, the church I worked for fired me. So I started the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Philippines and served as a minister. Soon we were a growing network of Unitarian Universalist Churches. Most of our members were poor farmers or labourers. The religion gave everyone great hope.

I began to work organizing the peasants. After some years I started receiving threats. If I did not stop organizing the peasants then I would be hurt. But I continued anyway. In May 1988 I was murdered by right wing paramilitary gun men. My body was brought inside my house and the house was burned to the ground.

My daughter carried on my work, as did many others. There is now a thriving Unitarian Universalist Church in the Philippines. We proudly take our place in the world wide Unitarian community.

Narrator: Today, there are Unitarian communities in some 35 countries around the world. There is an international council which draws these Unitarians together for conferences and mutual support. We are honoured to receive greetings this morning from the Reverend Brian Kiely, President of the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists.