

The First Unitarians in New England

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Abstract

Starting from the early seventeenth century, Puritanism was the main religion in New England; but a number of circumstances affected its dominance and made the Puritans lose their influence. As a result, in the eighteenth century a number of Puritan Churches converted to Unitarianism. This paper deals with the historical development of Unitarianism in Europe and America, how the Puritan hegemony in the New World gave away, and with the main circumstances that compelled New England Churches to adopt Unitarianism. The method used in this paper is descriptive and contrastive.

Keywords: *Puritanism, Unitarianism, the Halfway Covenant, the Great Awakening, Constitution.*

بدءاً من أوائل القرن السابع عشر، كانت البيوريتانية الديانة الرئيسية و
المهيمنة في إنجلترا الجديدة، ولكن عدداً من الظروف أثرت على نفوذها و
قوتها وجعلت البيوريتانيون يخسرون هيمنتهم ونتيجة لذلك، عدد من
الكنائس البيوريتانية تحولت إلى كنائس توحيدية وذلك في القرن الثامن
عشر يتناول هذا المقال نبذة تاريخية عن الديانة التوحيدية في أوروبا وأمريكا
أسباب تلاشي الهيمنة البيوريتانية في أمريكا والظروف الرئيسية التي
أجبرت كنائس إنجلترا الجديدة اعتماد الديانة التوحيدية

الكلمات المفتاحية: البيوريتانية، التوحيدية، العضوية الدينية، الصحة
الدينية، الدستور

Unitarianism is a religious movement which emphasizes the existence of the Creator in only one instead of three persons: the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit (Britannica Concise Encyclopaedia. 2003: 675). The movement appeared many centuries before its emergence in New England in the eighteenth century. In fact, New England was founded by the Puritans who had escaped the English persecution. Their aim was to establish Puritanism as the only correct religion; therefore, they were intolerant toward those who held opinions different from their own. However, force of circumstance compelled a number of New England churches to adopt Unitarianism in the eighteenth century. The paper is designed to analyse the historical survey of the movement of Unitarianism in both Europe and America, as well as the differences between it and the Trinity. It also examines the reasons for the end of the Puritan hegemony, and the events surrounding the adoption of Unitarianism by the New England Churches. The reject of the Trinity doctrine began in the fourth century with Arius, who was a Christian priest in Alexandria. He believed that Christ was created and was not before he was made, and that Jesus was of another substance not the same as that of God. More precisely, Arius believed that God always existed without a beginning and separate from Jesus who had a beginning. As a result, the Council of Nicea, Turkey banned in 325 AD all of Arius' works and exiled him for refusing to submit to the Nicene Creed of the Council. The Creed stated that Jesus Christ was begotten and not made, which meant that he was from the same substance as that of God. (Vingroff, P. 1982: 60, 67). Centuries later, namely in the sixteenth century, Miguel De Servet, confirmed the same idea in his book *On the Errors of the Trinity* in which he wrote that the doctrine of Trinity was not biblical. This greatly influenced Hungary, where the monarch John Sigismund II (1540- 1570) converted to Unitarianism and established it

as the state religion. In England, the religious men did not succeed in declaring Unitarianism the state religion, but they managed in the eighteenth century to omit the Nicene Creed from the Book of Common Prayer. (Fisher, C.2009. 12) Essex Street Chapel was the first Unitarian Church in England launched by the theologian Theophilus Lindsey in 1774.

Religious changes in England were matched by parallel trends in New England. What motivated the birth of new trends in religion New England was a number of circumstances. It is clear that the Congregational Church in all the Puritan colonies was based on local organization, in the sense that each Church was independent and could govern its own affairs. (Britannica Concise Encyclopaedia. 2003: 441) Besides, the Puritans believed that all Christians had a role in the ministry of their church, but God chose a number of people to be ministers. The Puritans were convinced that church membership should be limited to "Visible Saints" who were elected by God. The latter decided to save a few people by giving them "saving faith." These people were elected to be church members. Actually, the historian Kenneth A. Lockridge discussed the idea of how visible saints were to be distinguished from other men. He thinks that the Creator alone could know them, those who received grace and were to be elected. Yet, people could be able to distinguish between people according to their behaviour and profession of faith. (pp. 26- 27)

In fact, the early Congregational Churches faced a church membership crisis, since full membership was restricted only to the "Visible Saints" who were regenerate members and had been baptized in England and therefore had the right to have their children baptized. This privilege was not to pass to the children of these children, or the third generation because they were children of unregenerate parents. The figures about admissions to church membership declined throughout the mid- seventeenth

century. For instance, in the town of Dedham, Massachusetts, the number of baptized children fell from eighty percent to forty. (Lockridge, K A. 1970: 34; Stearns, R.P. 2003: 11) In response to the crisis, the New England Puritans proposed in 1657 the Halfway Covenant, a document which was approved five years later by a church synod. The New England colonies agreed on permitting children, whose grandparents had been members of the church to be baptized and could vote at town meetings when they reached a certain age, but were not allowed to vote for a pastor or admitted to the Lord's Supper, until they made a confession of personal faith. Therefore, these children would become halfway, rather than full church members. (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2009: 973)

The Halfway Covenant was not advocated by all the New England Congregations. Solomon Stoddard, a Massachusetts minister, was against making separation between regenerate and unregenerate Christians, because it had no biblical justification. Therefore, he asked for an open communion to all the Congregationalists and not only to full church members to be used as a converting ordinance. (Solomon, S., 2008: 2)

Changes in the requirements for church membership contrasted with the Puritan beliefs. The Halfway Covenant offered a chance to irreligious people to be church members. It also resulted in the emergence of individualism in the Puritan settlements, in a way that people started to doubt about the established church and think of establishing an individual one. (Moore, R., 2009: 3) These circumstances would lead a number of Congregational Churches to split up into Unitarians and Trinitarians.

Next to the Halfway Covenant, the Great Awakening of the 1730's and 1740's launched by the Congregational ministers Jonathan Edwards of Northampton, Massachusetts, and George Whitefield was a further reason for the birth of Unitarianism in the Puritan colonies. The

Awakening aimed at a revival of Puritanism in the New England settlements. Both missionaries began to preach in the New England churches. They invited people to debate the Bible and choose which church they would follow. This helped the New England community move towards pluralism. (Lockridge, K.A. 1970: 162- 171; Moore, R. 2009: 4) Jonathan Edwards was against what he called “the dreary dryness of the churches.” He stated that he was verily persuaded, the generality of preachers talked of an unknown, unfelt Christ, and that the reason why Congregations had been so dead was because dead men preached to them. (Eck, D. L.; Pierce, E. J; and Wagner, A. G. 2009. 37) Thus, he and a group of ministers travelled in different churches to make speeches by which they could convince sinners to regret for their sins in order to achieve salvation. The minister allowed all people to be church members without giving evidence of their conversion experiences. Both revivalists tried to convert all the people, even the blacks, who were ready to recognize their sins. (Moore, R. 2009: 7) The number of the New Englanders who converted during the Awakening was big. For instance, in the Connecticut churches there were sixteen people between 1739 and 1740; and sixty- six in 1741 and 1742. Nearly similar numbers were seen in Massachusetts. Another result of the Great Awakening was the emergence of the two religious groups. The Moderate New Lights represented by Jonathan Edwards who advocated the revival and wanted to remain within the Congregational Church, and the Radical New Lights who considered the church oppressive and asked for a complete change. The Radical Lights broke away from the Congregational Churches to establish their own ones. The historian C. C. Geon classified over three hundred separations of one kind, most of them became Baptist Congregations. Thus, the number of the Baptist Churches increased from ninety-

six in 1740 to four hundred fifty- seven in 1780. (Eerdman's Handbook of Christianity in America, 2004: 6) The United States' Constitution also allowed freedom of religion. The Bill of Rights, which was ratified in 1791 followed by the enactment of the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth amendments ratified in the 1800's stated that a state cannot: "deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law." (US Const. art. 7) Article VI also stated explicitly the idea of religious liberty: The Senators and Representatives before mentioned, and the Members of the Several State legislatures, and all executive and judicial Officers, both of the United States and the several States, shall be bound by Oath or Affirmation, to support this Constitution; but no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States." (US Const., art. 6) The Halfway Covenant, the Great Awakening, and the American Constitution paved the way for the spread of Unitarianism in New England. Jonathan Mayhew in Boston- who rejected the Trinity and confirmed the unity of God- was an influential theologian in the eighteenth century. (Cooke, G. W. 2009. 322) He established in 1785 King's Chapel which was the first official Unitarian Church in New England, headed by the Unitarian James Freeman. The church had been Episcopal until the doctrine of Trinity was removed from the Book of Common Prayer. (Fisher, C. 2009. 12) Twenty years later, the Unitarian Henry Ware was elected to the Hollis Professorship of Divinity in Harvard College after the death of Dr. Tappan who was a Trinitarian. The election was opposed by a number of Congregationalists, including a Harvard Professor Dr. Pearson who stated that: "the University was the subject of such radical and constitutional maladies as to exclude the hope of rendering any essential service to the interests of religion by continuing his relation to it." (Vetter, H. F. 2008: 5) These attitudes continued for many

years which pushed Henry Ware to publish in 1820 *Letters to Trinitarians and Calvinists*, occasioned by Dr. Woods's *Letters to Unitarians*. (Vetter, H. F. 2008: 5) In addition, a number of publications helped grow Unitarianism such as: *One God in One Person Only* by John Sherman and *Bible News of Father, Son and Holy Ghost* by Noah Worcester published in 1805 and 1810 respectively. (Cooke, G. W. 2009. 325)

Although Unitarianism was active in the beginning of the nineteenth century, the movement started to be known by that name only in 1815. The historian George Willis Cooke agrees that at that time the Congregationalists were divided into the orthodox and liberal groups. The liberals had about one hundred Unitarian Churches in Massachusetts. (p. 328) The name was given by the conservative opponents to distinguish the Trinitarians from the Unitarians. The latter continued to adopt the Congregational form of government in the sense that each church was independent and could govern its own affairs. (Columbia Encyclopaedia. 2003: 7) The historian J. McRee Elrod, however, thinks that the separation of Unitarianism from Congregationalism was only after the Baltimore Sermon of the theologian William Ellery Channing in 1819 who tried to define Unitarianism.

The year 1825 was a turning point in the history of Unitarianism. The American Unitarian Association was founded in Massachusetts by Ezra Stiles Gannett, William Ellery Channing, and Henry Ware aiming primarily at spreading the movement not only inside America but also outside the continent. (Cooke, G.W. 2009. 329- 330)

To sum up, beginning from the fourth century, people in Europe started to reject the doctrine of Trinity and affirmed Unitarianism instead. Unitarian thought moved to America in the second half of the eighteenth century when Jonathan Mayhew established a Unitarian Church in Massachusetts. At that time, Congregationalism was the

official faith in New England; but despite the Puritans' efforts to maintain the dominance of their system, a number of Congregational Churches gradually developed leanings toward Unitarianism. The Halfway Covenant, the Great Awakening, the American Constitution, and publications in favour of the Unitarian belief were all reasons for the decline of the Puritan hegemony and the development of Unitarianism out of Congregationalism.

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