

HOW WE CAME BY THE NAME “UNITARIAN”

Early Unitarians simply called themselves “Christians,” believing that they were returning to a real and not corrupted form of the religion of Christ, a religion based on a wise and loving God and the teachings of Jesus rather than on the complex and harsh religion about him that later developed. As for the 16th century founders of Unitarianism, Michael Servetus was an “anti-trinitarian,” and the followers of Faustus Socinus in Poland were labeled “Socinians.” Only in Transylvania in the late 16th century did the label “Unitarian” (“Unitárius” in Hungarian) come to be applied broadly to designate the movement inaugurated by Francis David, even though it represented far more than anti-trinitarianism. Unitarians in Prussia and Holland avoided the label.

The name “Unitarian” reemerged in England a century later. Most whom we would label as Unitarians were to themselves just Christians, or primitive Christians, Arians, English Presbyterians, or more broadly Dissenters. Then in the 1680s some gravitated to the name “Unitarian,” and by the time Theophilus Lindsey opened the first Unitarian chapel by that name in 1774, the term had become well established in Britain.

At that time in America there was no standard term for what we now call Unitarianism. Those in Massachusetts preferred to be just “Christians” or “Liberal Christians,” as they saw themselves representing a pure Christianity of reason and morality as opposed to the corruptions propagated by others. Those in Philadelphia knew themselves as “Unitarians,” as many had emigrated from Britain where the term Unitarian was already in use. Those at the College of William and Mary in Virginia were denounced as “Socinians.” by orthodox sleuths seeking to ferret out heresy, while the subjects of such investigations preferred to keep their Unitarian views well hidden to avoid persecution. Further, religiously liberal faculty members of the College and the Unitarian rector of Bruton Parish Church would forfeit their positions and therefore the chance to extend the influence of their advanced ideas if they emerged from the closet.

It was an opponent of Unitarianism who prompted that label to be affirmed by American religious liberals. In New England around the turn of the 19th century Calvinist voices bitterly denounced the heresy of so-called “Liberal Christianity.” Finally one of the most prominent of Boston’s Calvinist ministers, Jedidiah Morse, published what he took as the most extreme passages from the pens of English Unitarians, and added a long condemnation in the form of a preface, without appending his name, making it seem that this was a manifesto produced by the liberals themselves. Morse titled his denunciatory tract *American Unitarianism; or a Brief History of the Progress and Present State of the Unitarian Churches in America* (Boston, 1815). His intent was to smoke out the liberals, not let them hide under the cloak of “Christianity,” and banish them from the body of “true” Christians.

In response to this assault, the Liberal Christians determined to accept the challenge head on, accept the label “Unitarian,” state their views clearly and forthrightly, and thus become a separate denomination. The result was William Ellery Channing’s sermon “Unitarian Christianity,” preached in Baltimore in 1819 and widely distributed in print. It proclaimed the free mind and ethical living as the foundational elements of American Unitarianism. Six years later the American Unitarian Association had been formed. “Unitarian” was the label that now

stuck throughout America. Applied as an epithet to denounce the heresy, it soon became a label proudly proclaimed by generations of Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists in America and the world from then on.

Ref.: Charles A. Howe, *For Faith and Freedom* (Boston, 1997); Jedidiah Morse, *American Unitarianism; or a Brief History* (Boston, 1815); William Ellery Channing, *Unitarian Christianity; A Sermon delivered at the Ordination of the Rev. Jared Sparks* (Baltimore, 1819).