

What's in a Name?
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Next year we celebrate the 200th anniversary of the founding of this congregation and its historic Meeting House. As 2009 draws near, people are taking a lively interest in the history of this building and of “Unitarians” on Nantucket.

People love the 1815 Portuguese bell, the 1831 Goodrich organ and Carl Wendte's 1844 trompe l'oeil paintings, and want to know more about them. But the question I'm most often asked is, “How did it get the name ‘Unitarian’?”

A good question, especially when we consider that the name on the signboard outside starts with “Second Congregational Meeting House and tags on “Unitarian Universalist” almost as an afterthought.

The answer to the question has two parts, the “global” and the “local.” It doesn't matter which part I start with; people always want to know the rest of the story. So today I'll start with the global part, and compress hundreds of years of history into about five minutes, and then go on to the local part, which requires at least the same amount of time but only covers a few years.

From the very earliest years of the history of Christianity, people did not agree on doctrine. The Council of Nicaea met in 325, called by the Roman Emperor Constantine to settle once and for all disagreement on Christian doctrine. It didn't work; the Council produced what is now called the “Nicene Creed” but didn't achieve much in the way of harmony.

Two later creeds developed and became widely accepted in the world of early Christianity. The “Apostles Creed” is recited in most Protestant churches today and dates back to the 8th century. The “Athanasian Creed,” which may have originated in the 9th century (although the date is disputed), is used mostly in the Roman Catholic church—but the Anglican Book of Common Prayer specifies 13 days each year when the Athanasian Creed must be recited.

What all three creeds have in common is that they specify what believers must believe. Whatever reservations may lie in the hearts of those who recite them, they are recited as outward proof of adherence to orthodoxy.

Fast forward to the Protestant reformation in the 16th century. Religious leaders like Martin Luther began to call for the “reform” of the Roman Catholic Church. Luther and other early reformers meant only to change practices they thought were corrupt. They steered clear of differences in doctrine.

But the invention of the printing press had made printed copies of the bible widely available. Ordinary people began reading scripture for themselves rather than simply hearing bits of it in church. As the general idea of reform took hold, a broader sense of “reform” developed, and soon there were not only “Lutherans” but also followers of John Calvin, who was based in Geneva, Switzerland. Calvin’s movement was often called the “Swiss Reformed Church.”

In Transylvania, which is now part of Romania but then was its own kingdom, there was heated debate among ordinary people about the differences between Catholicism, Lutheran reform, Swiss reform, and the “Reformed Church of Transylvania.” Most of the debate centered around the relationship between Jesus and God. Was Jesus the son of God, conceived by the Holy Spirit at about the time of his appearance on Earth? Or was Jesus part of God since the beginning of time, along with the Holy Spirit, three-in-one for all eternity?

These issues had arisen since the beginning of Christianity, and had led to the three creeds. But during the Protestant Reformation, and especially in Transylvania, ordinary people argued over the idea of the “trinity” in public debates, over lunch, after dinner, and before breakfast. Religious debate was a noted cause of fistfights in taverns.

People who considered themselves biblical literalists challenged the idea of the “trinity” as it was expressed in the Athanasian Creed. They said there was no scriptural basis for the idea of three beings. They were called Non-Trinitarians, or Anti-Trinitarians, or (more and more often) “Unitarians.” But the hallmark of their religion was not the trinity; it was the call for a way of life based on Christian principles. Jesus was the example for living: “Jesus as Exemplar” was the slogan.

Out of this seething hotbed of religious inquiry came the 1568 declaration of religious tolerance: no one could be hurt or blamed or lose a job because of religious beliefs, because (in the words of the declaration) “faith is the gift of God.”

The debate over the trinity seems weirdly narrow to most people today. The so-called Unitarians *believed* in God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit; their quarrel with orthodoxy was mainly over the use of the Athanasian Creed, and the Nicene Creed in its later versions, because neither is supported by the literal text of the Christian testament. For a century after the emergence of the Transylvanian Unitarians, their churches continued to use the Apostles Creed, which is less specific.

Fast forward again to America. The churches established by the Pilgrims were Calvinist with a strong Trinitarian orthodoxy. They were called “congregational” churches because each church chose its own minister and adopted its own covenant. These were not Anglican churches with the hierarchy of bishop and archbishop; the Pilgrims were religious dissenters. They had an antipathy to creeds imposed by denominational councils. Each congregation made its own decisions.

The congregational governance allowed the development of a more moderate Calvinism. In the early 1800s, the two ideas of “Jesus as Exemplar” and tolerance of a variety of ideas about the trinity began to flourish in Congregational churches.

Now to Nantucket. In 1809 this congregation was founded as an expansion church. The First Congregational was filled to overflowing, and there was a need for a second church on the “South” of Main Street. The Second Congregational Meeting House, “South Church,” organized itself with a typical Calvinist covenant. North Church, South Church. First Congregational, Second Congregational.

Ten years after this the founding of this congregation, a leading Boston minister, Rev. William Ellery Channing, laid claim to the derogatory name “Unitarian” as a positive evocation of a new and more inclusive spirit. His sermon was called “Unitarian Christianity.” He encouraged the idea of Jesus as Exemplar and free inquiry into religious matters, but also the use of reason in the interpretation of scripture. Reason led away from biblical literalism and encouraged greater tolerance for others with different views.

Over the next 20 years, Channing’s provocative and inspirational words prompted conflict, controversy, and ultimately the division of New England’s Congregational churches into two distinct groups: conservative or “orthodox” Congregationalists, and liberal or “Unitarian” Congregationalists.

In 1834 the Congregational church in Harvard square adopted a new covenant that allowed someone to be a member without agreeing fully with all the Calvinist ideas. It is considered the first “Unitarian” covenant. It didn’t use the word “Unitarian,” but it wasn’t insistently Trinitarian, either. Instead its centerpiece was the “intention to live a holy, religious, and useful life, after the example, and in the spirit of” Jesus.

This covenant re-focused congregational life. Beliefs, theories, and doctrines about the nature of God were less important in this covenant than the way people lived. It elevated the idea of living according to Christian principles and ethics. This Unitarian covenant, referred to as the “Harvard Covenant,” spread rapidly through Congregational churches.

Nantucket. In 1834, as First Parish adopted its Unitarian covenant, Rev. Seth Swift was retiring as minister of the Second Congregational Society. Rev. Henry Edes was chosen as the congregation’s new minister. Three years later, in 1837, the congregation adopted the Harvard Covenant, the “Unitarian” covenant.

First Congregational; Second Congregational. North Church; South Church. Congregational; Unitarian.

The covenant has changed several times since then, but the focus on living life in an ethical and principled way has remained its centerpiece. The language has allowed room for theological diversity, for the discussion and exploration of religious ideas.

In 1989, the membership adopted a brief new covenant. It expressly affirms Unitarian Universalist principles. The Unitarian and Universalist denominations merged in 1961, and by 1989 it was time to acknowledge the merger. The covenant says, simply, “we unite in the freedom of truth and in the spirit of love for worship and for service to humanity, to our community, and to each other.”

The words of this 20th-century covenant are fully in keeping with the ideals of those who were first called Unitarians, the Transylvanian Unitarians who tried to live in accordance with the teachings of Jesus. It affirms their belief that human beings *choose* how to live, and that how we live *matters*. It affirms their conviction it is our responsibility to do the best we can with the life we have.

As we look toward the next 200 years of this congregation, we might ask what our legacy will be. The name “Unitarian” doesn’t express the true views of those who first were called by that name. They chose a difficult path of *deeds*, not *creeds*. Their legacy is today’s theologically diverse congregation of members committed to the ideal of service.

We, too, have rejected the “creeds.”

What will our deeds be?