



CANADIAN
UNITARIAN
COUNCIL

CONSEIL
UNITARIEN
DU CANADA

A History of the Unitarian Movement

Rev. Dr. Phillip Hewett

Background

The origins of the Unitarian movement were in 16th-century Europe. New patterns of thinking had emerged in the Renaissance, beginning in Italy, while further north the Protestant Reformation had affirmed the right of private judgement in matters of religion. But the established authorities, whether Catholic or Protestant, set boundaries beyond which thinking was not to venture. There were some few independent thinkers, however, who were not prepared to accept such limitations, and felt morally obliged to follow wherever their unfettered reasoning would lead them.

Persons of this kind eventually became the founders of the Unitarian movement. Mostly Italians in the first instance, they had to leave their homeland if they valued their lives, because persecution was rife not only there, but wherever the power of state and church could be invoked against them. They took refuge in what were then the two most tolerant countries in Europe, Poland and Transylvania. There they joined with indigenous fellow-thinkers to establish congregations. In Poland, the forces of reaction were able to kill the movement after a century of existence, but in Transylvania (now part of Romania) it has maintained its existence, usually under very adverse conditions, right down to the present day.

During the period when they flourished in Poland, these early Unitarians produced a literature which circulated widely throughout Europe. In England the thread was picked up by such influential thinkers as John Locke, Sir Isaac Newton and John Milton. Presentations of the same themes by them and others resulted in the emergence of Unitarian congregations in England by a process of gradual evolution within already-existing religious bodies during the eighteenth century. A parallel process was also under way in Ireland and in New England.

All these eighteenth-century movements had a direct influence in Canada, not so much through the spread of literature as by immigration. Contrary to the experience elsewhere, Unitarian organization here began not by changes in thinking within existing



congregations, but by the arrival of individuals who brought their Unitarian views with them. A group of such individuals, after an abortive attempt under very unfavourable circumstances a decade earlier, succeeding in establishing the first congregation in Montreal in 1842. During the following years a few other congregations were founded, but their smallness in numbers and the distances between them did not make a national organization feasible, and each congregation affiliated separately with the British and American associations. From the time of World War II the ties with the British association weakened while those with the American association grew stronger.

With growth in numbers and easier communications, pressure for a national association resulted in the establishment of the Canadian Unitarian Council / Conseil unitarien du Canada in 1961. Limited at first in resources and scale of activities, it has progressively increased its operations until today it is responsible for all work beyond a local level with the exception of one or two areas where it makes more sense to work through the American organization, the Unitarian Universalist Association. Since the whole movement is democratically organized, the CUC is governed by the delegates from its individual congregations in the same way as those congregations are governed by their individual members.