



From heresy to liberty: The political trajectory of Unitarian theology and its contemporary relevance

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Abstract: This study analyzes the political trajectory of Unitarian theology from heresy to liberty and its contemporary relevance. Employing a qualitative descriptive analysis method, the findings reveal: The Origin and Development of Unitarianism, tracing its roots from early anti-Trinitarian thought (such as Arianism) to its crystallization during the Reformation through figures like Michael Servetus, and its evolution into a liberal movement in America. The Theological and Political Conflict with Trinitarianism is multidimensional; the rejection of the Trinity was perceived as a challenge to both ecclesiastical and state authority, inciting persecution and influencing political stability. Religious Freedom in the Modern Era demonstrates a paradigm shift: from a persecuted minority, Unitarianism became an architect of religious freedom thought and the separation of church and state, particularly within the Enlightenment and American constitutional contexts. The Socio-Political Implications of its doctrine are significant, fostering democracy, pluralism, social justice, and rational education. The response of the Orthodox or Catholic Church consistently rejects Unitarianism as a modern form of Arianism that threatens orthodoxy and social order. The study concludes that Unitarianism's journey is not merely a theological evolution but a dynamic reflection of the dialectic among religious belief, political power, and civil liberty in Western history, while also offering a critical lens for understanding challenges to religious freedom in states with institutionalized theological orthodoxy.

Keywords: church-state relations, political theology, religious freedom, Trinitarianism, Unitarianism

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1. Introduction

Christian theology has been a complex battleground since its early development, especially concerning the doctrine of the Trinity. The concept of the Trinity, which states that God consists of three persons in one essence, has been an integral part of mainstream Christian teaching since the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD.¹ However, not all Christian groups accept this doctrine uncritically. One of the groups that rejects the

¹ Ronald J. Feenstra, "The Trinity," in *Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2013), 595–604, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203813010>.

concept of the Trinity is Unitarianism, which emphasizes pure monotheism and denies the divinity of Jesus as part of the Trinity. The Unitarian movement has deep roots in the history of Christianity, evolving through various phases within different social, political, and theological contexts.² Studies on Unitarianism and its relationship with the doctrine of the Trinity have been extensively conducted, but there are still research gaps, particularly concerning the historical and political aspects that influence the development of this theology.

Previous research has extensively discussed Unitarianism from the perspective of theology and doctrinal history. For example, Richard Bauckham's work highlights the development of Christological doctrine and differing views on the divinity of Jesus in various early Christian traditions.³ Additionally, J. D. Bowers, in his book *Joseph Priestley and English Unitarianism in America*, discusses Joseph Priestley's role in spreading Unitarianism in England and America, highlighting how Enlightenment rationalism influenced the development of Unitarian theology.⁴ Another study by Earl Morse Wilbur in the book *A History of Unitarianism: In Transylvania, England, and America* comprehensively traces the history of the Unitarian movement, from the roots of Socinianism to its development in Europe and America.⁵ Although these studies provide deep insights into the development of Unitarian doctrine and its theological debates, research specifically examining the relationship between Unitarianism and political dynamics remains relatively limited.

Some studies, such as those conducted by Corfield, attempt to connect Unitarianism with the development of democracy and religious freedom in the Western world, but still within a limited scope.⁶ In the context of European history, studies on the impact of the Protestant Reformation on the emergence of Unitarianism have also been conducted by John Marshall in his book *John Locke, Toleration and Early Enlightenment Culture*.⁷ This research focuses more on political philosophy and the idea of religious tolerance rather than the direct relationship between Unitarianism and specific political policies.

² Alister E. McGrath, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2022), 6-7.

³ Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999).

⁴ Charles H. Lippy, "J.D. Bowers. Joseph Priestley and English Unitarianism in America," *The American Historical Review* 114, no. 4 (October 2009): 1072-73, <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr.114.4.1072>.

⁵ Earl Morse Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism: In Transylvania, England, and America*, vol. 2 (Boston: Beacon Press, 1945).

⁶ Penelope J. Corfield, "'We Are All One in the Eyes of the Lord': Christopher Hill and the Historical Meanings of Radical Religion," *History Workshop Journal* 58, no. 1 (2004): 110-27, <https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/58.1.110>.

⁷ John Marshall, *John Locke, Toleration and Early Enlightenment Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

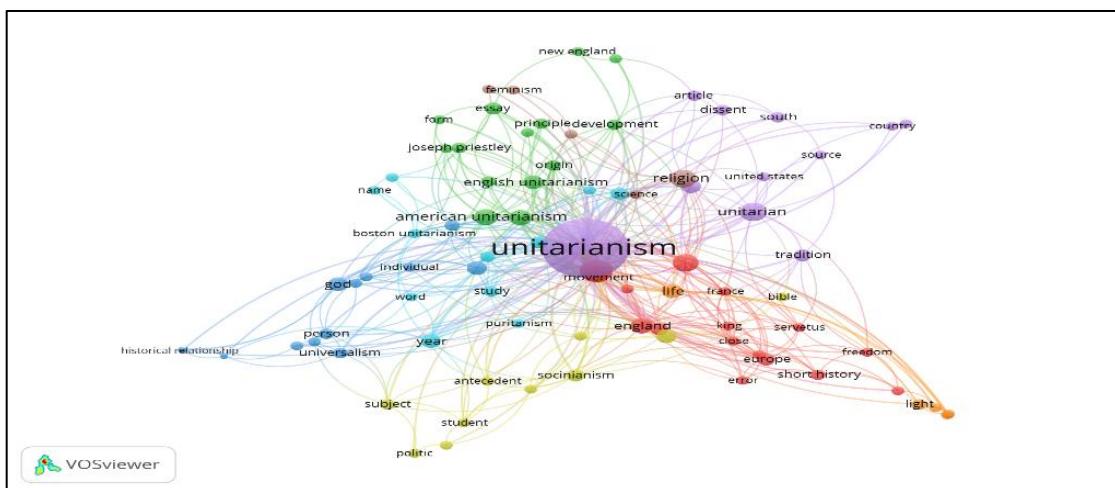


Figure 1. Analysis Bibliometric Unitarianism

From bibliometric metadata using VOS Viewer on Unitarianism. The identified research gap indicates that although there are many studies on the theology of Unitarianism and its history, there is still room to explore how political aspects contribute to the acceptance or rejection of Unitarianism in various historical contexts. For example, the persecution of Unitarian adherents in 16th and 17th-century Europe was often not only based on theological doctrine but also influenced by political factors and ecclesiastical power.⁸ Similarly, in the United States, the role of Unitarianism in shaping social and political policies, including its contributions to the abolitionist and civil rights movements, still needs further study.⁹ Therefore, this research aims to highlight the historical and political connections in the development of Unitarianism, emphasizing how these factors shape the acceptance and rejection of Unitarian theology in various historical contexts.

This study seeks to fill a critical gap by examining the intricate relationship between Unitarianism, history, and politics in greater depth. By adopting a historical-political approach, this research will interrogate how Unitarianism developed within diverse social environments and how the dialectical interaction between its theology and political structures influenced its dissemination and reception. Through this analysis, it aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how Unitarianism transcended the realm of theological debate to become a significant actor within the social and political dynamics of various eras.

⁸ Anca Parmena Olimid, "European Personalist Model of State-Church Relations. Political and Legal Fundaments in the 16th-17th Centuries," *Revista de Științe Politice. Revue Des Sciences Politiques*, no. 27 (2010): 60-68, <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=731405>.

⁹ Paul Goodman, *Of One Blood: Abolitionism and the Origins of Racial Equality* (Berkeley: Univ of California Press, 1998).

Historically, the emergence and development of Unitarianism were profoundly shaped by the political landscapes of Europe and North America.¹⁰ Its rise during the Reformation and Enlightenment was not merely a theological schism but a political act, challenging the hegemony of state-sanctioned trinitarian churches. In monarchical systems, where a single sovereign ruler mirrored the concept of a single sovereign God, Unitarian theology, with its rejection of the triune Godhead, was often perceived as seditious, a threat to both divine and temporal authority.¹¹ Its spread was thus contingent upon degrees of political toleration, usually emerging in pockets of intellectual liberalism or following periods of political upheaval that disrupted established religious monopolies.

In contrast, the contemporary political condition in many Western nations is characterized by secularism, pluralism, and the constitutional separation of church and state.¹² Here, Unitarianism's political significance has shifted. No longer a direct challenge to state power, its modern political engagement often aligns with progressive social movements, advocating for human rights, LGBTQ+ inclusion, and interfaith dialogue. Its struggle is less about doctrinal legitimacy against a state church and more about asserting relevance and a distinctive ethical voice within a competitive marketplace of ideas and beliefs.

A critical lacuna in this global analysis, however, is the Indonesian context. While this case is situated within Indonesia and aims to develop indigenous religious and theological thought, the nation's unique socio-political framework is conspicuously absent from most Unitarian historiography.¹³ Indonesia's political theology is constitutionally predicated on the principle of *Ketuhanan Yang Maha Esa* (Belief in the One and Only God); a formulation that has been officially interpreted through a predominantly trinitarian and Islamic lens. Consequently, the reception of a non-trinitarian, unitarian Christianity exists in a complex and often precarious space, navigating issues of theological recognition, legal identity, and social acceptance.¹⁴ Therefore, this study is not merely an academic exercise but a necessary intervention. By situating the global historical-political analysis of Unitarianism in direct conversation with the Indonesian context, it seeks to illuminate the local dynamics of

¹⁰ Earl Morse Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism: In Transylvania, England, and America*, vol. 2 (Boston: Beacon Press, 1945), 112.

¹¹ Beau Branson, "One God, the Father: The Neglected Doctrine of the Monarchy of the Father, and Its Implications for the Analytic Debate about the Trinity," *TheoLogica: An International Journal for Philosophy of Religion and Philosophical Theology* 6, no. 2 (December 2022): 6–58, <https://doi.org/10.14428/thl.v6i2.67603>.

¹² Michel Rosenfeld, "Constitution and Secularism: A Western Account," in *Constitutions and Religion* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2020), 21–40, <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781786439291.00007>.

¹³ Denna Fryer, "Rethinking the Dominant Narrative: An Analysis of Indonesian Approaches to Ethnic Conflict in Indonesia," PhD diss., UNSW Sydney, 2015, 12.

¹⁴ Karen E Macke, *Que (e) Rying Religious Activism: Culture, Identity, and the Politics of Family in Unitarian Universalist Churches* (New York: Syracuse University, 2016), 17.

religious pluralism, challenge hegemonic theological interpretations, and contribute authentically to the development of a more nuanced and inclusive Indonesian theological discourse.

Thus, this research contributes significantly not only to the specialized field of theological studies but also to the broader disciplines of history and political science. The interdisciplinary methodology, synthesizing historical narrative with political theory, facilitates a more granular and contextualized analysis of how a heterodox theology like Unitarianism dynamically interacts with, and is shaped by, external socio-political forces. By meticulously examining the historical and political relationships inherent to Unitarianism's development, this research enriches our comprehension of the intricate dialectic between religious ideology and political power within Western intellectual history. It moves beyond a mere chronicle of doctrinal evolution to expose how theological propositions such as the rejection of the Trinity were often inextricably linked to contemporaneous debates on sovereignty, individual conscience, and the very legitimacy of governing structures. For instance, the Unitarian emphasis on a singular Godhead can be seen as a theological correlate of emerging Enlightenment ideals of a unified, rational cosmic order, which in turn influenced political philosophies that challenged hierarchical, monarchical systems.

Furthermore, this study possesses the potential to open a more robust and critical discursive space regarding the proactive role of theology in shaping, rather than merely reflecting, social and political structures within societies in constant flux. The historical case of Unitarianism serves as a powerful exemplar of how a theological minority can act as a catalyst for legal change, such as in the establishment of religious toleration acts, and can influence the development of secular public spheres by advocating for the separation of religious authority from civic life.

2. Research Methods

This study employs a qualitative research design with a descriptive-analytical approach to systematically investigate the historical and political dimensions of Unitarian theology in relation to Trinitarianism. As a library-based historical study, it employs critical analysis of primary sources, such as theological texts and creeds, as well as secondary scholarly literature. The analytical procedure involves historical-narrative tracing to map the evolution of Unitarian thought, complemented by thematic and contextual analysis to elucidate the complex interplay between theological arguments and their socio-political milieus.¹⁵ This methodology aims to construct a

¹⁵ M. Kala, *Historiography: A Critical Study of Methods, Interpretation, and Trends* (London: LexArcheus Publications, 2025), 92-93.

comprehensive narrative that illuminates the symbiotic relationship between doctrine and politics, providing a foundational overview for future research.¹⁶

3. Results and Discussion

The Origin and Development of Unitarianism in Christian History

Unitarianism is a theological movement within Christianity that rejects the doctrine of the Trinity and embraces the belief that God is a single person (strict monotheism), in contrast to the orthodox view that believes in God as three persons in one essence (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). Unitarian thought emerged as a challenge to the mainstream of Christian theology, especially since the era of the Protestant Reformation. This study traces the historical origins of Unitarianism, its development in the context of the early church and the Reformation, and its influence in the history of Christian thought.

Although Unitarianism is often associated with the Protestant Reformation, its roots can be traced back to the early church. Some early Christian groups, such as the Ebionites and Adoptionists, viewed Jesus as a man adopted by God, not as a divine person equal to the Father.¹⁷ Arius (256–336 AD), a presbyter from Alexandria, argued that Jesus was a creation of God (Arianism), not of the same essence as God.¹⁸ The Arian controversy sparked the Council of Nicaea (325 AD), which ultimately affirmed the divinity of Jesus and gave rise to the Nicene Creed. However, anti-Trinitarian thought did not completely disappear. According to Beeley, groups such as Macedonianism (which denies the divinity of the Holy Spirit) and some Gnostic sects continue to question the doctrine of the Trinity, despite being suppressed by church authorities.¹⁹

The 16th-century Protestant Reformation opened up space for the reinterpretation of Christian doctrines, including the Trinity. Michael Servetus (1511–1553), a Spanish theologian and scientist, was a critical figure who rejected the Trinity in his work *De Trinitatis Erroribus* (1531).²⁰ He argued that the Trinity was an unbiblical doctrine and philosophically corrupt. As a result, he was condemned by Calvinists and Catholics, and then executed in Geneva in 1553.

After Servetus, Unitarianism rapidly developed in Transylvania and Poland. Fausto Sozzini (1539–1604), an Italian theologian, formulated a more systematic

¹⁶ Jonathan W. Moses and Torbjørn L. Knutsen, *Ways of Knowing: Competing Methodologies in Social and Political Research* (London: Bloomsbury publishing, 2019), 71–72.

¹⁷ Peter-Ben Smit, “The End of Early Christian Adoptionism? A Note on the Invention of Adoptionism, Its Sources, and Its Current Demise,” *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 76, no. 3 (2015): 177–99, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21692327.2015.1091981>.

¹⁸ William P. Haugaard, “Arius: Twice a Heretic?: Arius and the Human Soul of Jesus Christ,” *Church History* 29, no. 3 (1960): 251–63, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3162210>.

¹⁹ Christopher A. Beeley, “The Holy Spirit in the Cappadocians: Past and Present,” *Modern Theology* 26, no. 1 (2010): 90–119, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0025.2009.01581.x>.

²⁰ Talha Fortaci, “The Trinity in the Theology of Michael Servetus,” *Oksident* 4, no. 2 (2022): 173–206, <https://doi.org/10.51490/oksident.1185570>.

Unitarian theology, known as Socinianism.²¹ This movement emphasizes rationality in theology, rejects the doctrine of original sin, and views Jesus as a manmade savior by God. The Unitarian Church of Transylvania, led by Ferenc Dávid (1510–1579), became the first officially recognized Unitarian church under the Edict of Torda (1568).

In the 18th and 19th centuries, Unitarianism spread to England and the United States, where it developed into a liberal movement that emphasized reason, religious freedom, and inclusivity. Figures such as Joseph Priestley (1733–1804) and William Ellery Channing (1780–1842) promoted Unitarianism as a form of Christianity that was rational and free from traditional dogma.²² In America, Unitarianism merged with Universalism, forming the Unitarian Universalist Association, which not only maintained a non-Trinitarian theology but also embraced religious pluralism and secular humanism. Unitarianism has deep roots in Christian history, starting from the Christological debates of the early church, resistance to orthodoxy during the Reformation, and its development as a liberal movement in the modern era.

The Theological and Political Conflict between Unitarianism and Trinitarianism

Unitarianism and Trinitarianism are two theological concepts that have influenced the history of religion and politics for centuries. The conflict between the two is not limited to religious aspects but also extends to the political and social realms. Unitarianism rejects the doctrine of the Trinity and emphasizes the oneness of God. At the same time, Trinitarianism maintains the concept that God consists of three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. These theological differences have sparked various debates, schisms, and even political conflicts in different parts of the world.

Trinitarianism is the central doctrine in orthodox Christianity, especially in the Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodoxy, and the majority of Protestant denominations. This doctrine is based on biblical teachings and was further developed in the Council of Nicaea (325 AD) and the Council of Constantinople (381 AD).²³ In this doctrine, God is understood as one essence but three distinct and interrelated persons. On the other hand, Unitarianism rejects the doctrine of the Trinity, claiming that it lacks a strong foundation in the Bible. Unitarianism is rooted in the Reformation movement that sought to restore the pure teachings of Jesus Christ, who was believed to be a moral teacher and prophet, not God. This thought found its place in various sects and religious

²¹ Philip Schaff, *The American Church History Series: A History of the Unitarians and the Universalists*, by JH Allen and R. Eddy, vol. 10 (New York: Christian literature Company, 1894), 475.

²² Helen Jane Aling, *Dickens's Unitarian Theology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1996), 22.

²³ John Anthony McGuckin, *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Orthodox Christianity* (Malden: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), 44.

movements in Europe and America, such as in the Socinianism tradition in Poland and Transylvanian Unitarianism in the 16th century.²⁴

Since the beginning of its development, the difference between Unitarianism and Trinitarianism has been a subject of intense theological debate. One of the major conflicts occurred in the 4th century when Arius, a theologian from Alexandria, rejected the concept of the Trinity and stated that Jesus Christ was not God equal to the Father, but the highest created being.²⁵ This view, known as Arianism, was rejected at the Council of Nicaea. The Catholic Church then suppressed Arianism, but it persisted in some regions, including among the Germanic tribes that adopted Arian Christianity.

In the 16th century, Unitarianism developed in Eastern Europe and became a challenge to the dominant church authorities. Michael Servetus, a Spanish physician and theologian, became one of the leading figures opposing the doctrine of the Trinity. He published "Christianismi Restitutio," which rejected the concept of the Trinity and affirmed the oneness of God. As a result of his views, he was executed by the Protestant authorities in Geneva led by John Calvin in 1553.²⁶ The case of Servetus shows that both Catholic and Protestant authorities strongly opposed Unitarianism.

In addition to theological debates, the conflict between Unitarianism and Trinitarianism also had significant political impacts. In Europe, countries like Poland and Transylvania once became centers of Unitarianism. Poland-Lithuania, for example, was known as a center for the development of the Socinianism movement, which was later suppressed by Catholic authorities in the Warsaw Confederation in the late 17th century.²⁷

In England and the United States, Unitarianism developed as part of the Enlightenment movement and religious liberalism. In America, many Founding Fathers, such as Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, held views that leaned towards Unitarianism. Jefferson himself rejected the doctrine of the Trinity and composed the "Jefferson Bible," which emphasized the moral teachings of Jesus but omitted supernatural elements.²⁸ This development shows that the conflict between Unitarianism and Trinitarianism also reflects the tension between traditional religious authority and the idea of freedom of thought.

²⁴ Lech Szczucki, "Polish and Transylvanian Unitarianism in the Second Half of the 16th Century," in *Antitrinitarianism in the Second Half of the 16th Century* (Leiden: Brill, 1982), 231, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004451384_018.

²⁵ J. Warren Smith, "The Trinity in the Fourth-Century Fathers," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity*, edited by Gilles Emery and Matthew Levering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 109–22.

²⁶ Michael Servetus, *Restitución del cristianismo* (2 v.), ed. Ángel Alcalá y Luis Betés, vol. 5, *Obras completas* (Zaragoza: Universidad de Zaragoza, 2003), 76.

²⁷ Richard Butterwick, "Catholicism and Enlightenment in Poland-Lithuania," in *A Companion to the Catholic Enlightenment in Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 297, <https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004183513.i-466.56>.

²⁸ Thomas Jefferson, *The Jefferson Bible, Smithsonian Edition: The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 2011), 47.

With the advancement of science, the debate between Unitarianism and Trinitarianism has also evolved within the context of academia and rationalism. Critical studies of the Bible texts, which have rapidly developed since the 18th century, show that the doctrine of the Trinity is not explicitly mentioned in the original Scriptures.²⁹ Many liberal theology scholars use textual criticism to reject or revise the doctrine of the Trinity. The claim that “many liberal theology scholars use textual criticism to reject or revise the doctrine of the Trinity” is substantiated by the work of several key figures. Notably, Adolf von Harnack, in his seminal work *History of Dogma*, argued that the doctrine of the Trinity was not a primitive Christian belief but a later Hellenistic accretion onto the simple teachings of Jesus.³⁰ He contended that its formalization in the 4th century represented a corruption of the original gospel message.

In the 20th century, Walter Bauer’s thesis in *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* further challenged traditional narratives by suggesting that what was later deemed “heresy,” including various non-Trinitarian views, was often the earliest form of Christianity in many regions.³¹ This perspective inherently questions the inevitability and originality of the Trinitarian orthodoxy.

More recently, scholars associated with the “Jesus Seminar” and contemporary New Testament critics have applied rigorous textual analysis to the same end.³² For instance, Bart D. Ehrman, in his book, *Did Jesus Exist?* employs textual criticism to demonstrate that the doctrine of the Trinity is absent from the earliest New Testament manuscripts.³³ He analyzes specific passages, such as the Comma Johanneum (1John 5:7-8), a clear Trinitarian formula now widely recognized as a later addition, and highlights the theological development of Christology in the Gospel, arguing that the concept of Jesus’ divinity evolved and was not present in the earliest Christian communities. Thus, by pointing to specific scholars like Harnack, Bauer, and Ehrman, we can precisely illustrate how textual criticism has been a foundational tool for liberal theologians in deconstructing and critically revising the traditional doctrine of the Trinity.

Furthermore, scientific phenomena related to the psychology of belief and the neuroscience of religion also provide new perspectives in understanding this conflict. The conflict between Unitarian and Trinitarian theology, traditionally rooted in

²⁹ Paul E. Capetz, “Theology and the Historical-Critical Study of the Bible,” *Harvard Theological Review* 104, no. 4 (2011): 459–88, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816011000411>.

³⁰ Adolf von Harnack, *Outlines of the History of Dogma* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001), 22.

³¹ Walter Bauer et al., *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press Philadelphia, 1971).

³² William Lane Craig, “Rediscovering the Historical Jesus: Presuppositions and Pretensions of the Jesus Seminar,” *Faith and Mission* 15 (1998): 15, <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/scholarly-writings/historical-jesus/rediscovering-the-historical-jesus-presuppositions-and-pretensions-of-the-j>.

³³ Bart D. Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), 17.

scripture and reason, is reframed by scientific perspectives. The cognitive science of religion suggests complex doctrines like the Trinity are cognitively “unnatural,” requiring significant reinforcement.³⁴ Meanwhile, neuroscience identifies biological correlates for religious experiences used to support theological claims. These fields do not resolve the theological debate but explain the mental mechanisms of belief, shifting the discussion to include the natural foundations of religious cognition and experience. Some studies suggest that belief in the concept of the Trinity may be related to human cognitive tendencies in understanding social relations and the personification of God. Unitarianism, with its rational and monotheistic approach, is more in line with modern secular and scientific thought.

Several studies compare the development of Unitarianism and Trinitarianism in social and historical contexts. For example, research by Philip Jenkins in “The Lost History of Christianity” highlights how Unitarian theology has endured more in open and liberal societies, while Trinitarianism tends to dominate in more hierarchical and institutionally structured societies.³⁵ The conflict between Unitarianism and Trinitarianism is not only a theological debate but also reflects social, political, and scientific tensions throughout history. Although Unitarianism is often associated with rationalism and religious reform, Trinitarianism remains the dominant doctrine in mainstream Christianity. With the advancement of science and freedom of thought, the debate between the two remains relevant in contemporary religious and philosophical discussions.

Unitarianism and Religious Freedom in the Modern Era

The theological and historical trajectory of Unitarianism presents a compelling case study in the complex interplay between religious dissent, political power, and the evolution of religious freedom. A study of Unitarianism’s critique of Trinitarian theology, examined through its historical and political relations, reveals that its journey from persecuted heresy to a proponent of liberal religion is inextricably linked to the modern redefinition of the state’s role in matters of conscience. This narrative, spanning from the Reformation to the contemporary global stage, demonstrates how a theological proposition, the oneness of God, became a catalyst for profound political and social transformation, culminating in its unique position in the modern discourse on pluralism and freedom.

The historical emergence of Unitarianism during the Reformation and Enlightenment was as much a political event as a theological one. In a European political order where the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio* (whose realm, his religion)

³⁴ Tanya M. Luhrmann, “A Hyperreal God and Modern Belief: Toward an Anthropological Theory of Mind,” *Current Anthropology* 53, no. 4 (2012): 371, <https://doi.org/10.1086/666529>.

³⁵ Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia-and How It Died* (New York: Harper One, 2008), 65.

prevailed, religious uniformity was a cornerstone of state stability.³⁶ The doctrine of the Trinity was not merely a theological tenet but also a political identifier, a symbol of orthodoxy that aligned with the hierarchical and unified structure of monarchical authority. To deny the Trinity was therefore an act of sedition; it challenged the theological foundation of the state and the divine right of the sovereign. Unitarian thinkers like Michael Servetus, who was executed for his anti-Trinitarian views in Calvin's Geneva, and Faustus Socinus, whose teachings spread across Eastern Europe, embodied this perilous intersection of theology and politics. Their persecution was a direct result of a political theology that could not accommodate a fundamental challenge to its core religious identity.

The political philosophy of the Enlightenment and the subsequent rise of the secular nation-state provided the necessary conditions for Unitarianism to transition from a tolerated minority to an active architect of religious freedom. Enlightenment thinkers, advocating for reason and individual conscience, found a natural ally in Unitarianism's rationalist approach to scripture and its rejection of incomprehensible dogmas. In the American context, this relationship became foundational. Unitarian and deist influences were profoundly evident in the thought of key figures like Thomas Jefferson, who explicitly rejected the Trinity and championed a "wall of separation" between church and state.³⁷ The establishment of the First Amendment in the United States Constitution can be seen as a political triumph for a principle that Unitarian theology had long advanced: that the state's authority should not extend to coercing belief in specific religious doctrines. This was the political actualization of a theological stance. The state, in this new model, was no longer the defender of a particular orthodoxy but the neutral guarantor of a space where competing theologies, including Unitarianism, could coexist and compete on their own merits.

In the modern era, the relationship between Unitarianism and religious freedom has evolved further. In Western secular democracies, where pluralism is a legal and social fact, Unitarianism's political struggle has shifted.³⁸ It no longer fights for its fundamental right to exist. However, it engages in broader societal debates, advocating for the expansion of religious freedom to include non-theistic beliefs, LGBTQ+ rights, and interfaith dialogue. Its theological commitment to a unifying, non-divisive Godhead translates into a political commitment to a unifying, non-sectarian public square. However, this modern position unveils new complexities and a critical geographical disparity.

³⁶ Susanna Mancini, "Global Religion in a Post-Westphalia World," in *Handbook on Global Constitutionalism* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2023), 556, <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781802200263.00050>.

³⁷ Philip Hamburger, *Separation of Church and State* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 31.

³⁸ Veit Bader, "Religious Pluralism: Secularism or Priority for Democracy?," *Political Theory* 27, no. 5 (1999): 597, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591799027005002>.

The most potent test of Unitarianism's relationship with religious freedom today lies outside its Western heartlands, in nations with different political-theological configurations, such as Indonesia. Indonesia's state philosophy, *Pancasila*, with its first principle, *Ketuhanan Yang Maha Esa* (Belief in the One and Only God), presents a unique case. While this principle appears to align with Unitarian theology, its official interpretation has been overwhelmingly monopolized by Trinitarian Christian and Islamic understandings of monotheism. Consequently, Unitarian groups often find themselves in a precarious legal and social position, their status challenged not by an established church but by a state-managed religious orthodoxy. They face the paradoxical situation of having a theology that aligns with the letter of the state's principle (one God) while being rejected for its deviation from the state-sanctioned interpretations of that principle.³⁹

This global perspective underscores the central thesis of this study: the Unitarian critique of Trinitarian theology cannot be understood in a theological vacuum. Its historical persecution, its role in inspiring Enlightenment-era religious freedom, and its contemporary challenges in pluralistic and theologically managed states all demonstrate that its significance is profoundly political. The case of Indonesia highlights that the modern battle for religious freedom is often not about the freedom to believe in many gods or one God, but about the freedom to define the nature of that one God outside state-sanctioned orthodoxy. Thus, the study of Unitarianism's historical and political relations reveals it as an enduring benchmark for the health of religious freedom, a movement whose own fate consistently mirrors the shifting boundaries between theological authority and political power in any given era.

Socio-Political Implications of Unitarianism Doctrine

Democracy and Freedom of Thought

One of the most tangible impacts of Unitarianism is its contribution to the development of democracy. By emphasizing individual freedom in religion and thought, Unitarianism aligns with democratic values that stress freedom of expression and the freedom to choose political leaders. In many countries where Unitarianism has developed, such as the United States and England, its adherents often become key supporters of democracy and pluralism.⁴⁰

John Witte Jr., in his book *Religion and the American Constitutional Experiment* shows that Unitarian thought influenced the formation of the United States Constitution, particularly regarding the separation of church and state.⁴¹ Thomas

³⁹ Adelbert L. Wilber Jr., *Church and State: Examining the Wall of Separation* (Bloomington: WestBow Press, 2018), 110.

⁴⁰ William George Tarrant, *Unitarianism* (DigiCat, 2022).

⁴¹ John Witte and Joel A Nichols, *Religion and the American Constitutional Experiment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 87.

Jefferson, who held Unitarian views, played an important role in formulating democratic principles that protect religious freedom.

Secularism and Religious Pluralism

Unitarianism also plays a role in promoting secularism as a form of government that does not favor any particular religion. By emphasizing that beliefs should be based on reason and individual experience, Unitarianism rejects theocracy and supports the separation of religion from politics. This is evident in the policies of countries like the United States and Canada, where the principles of secularism form the foundation of governance.

Scientific phenomena related to religious pluralism show that more secular societies tend to be more tolerant of differences in beliefs. A study by the V Bader Center found that countries with higher religious freedom tend to have lower levels of social conflict. Unitarianism, with its inclusive approach to various beliefs, contributes to the creation of a more pluralistic and harmonious society.⁴²

Social Justice and Human Rights

Unitarianism also has a strong impact on the struggle for human rights. Many leaders of social movements in the West have Unitarian backgrounds or have been influenced by its principles. One of the most famous examples is the role of Unitarianism in the abolitionist movement in the United States in the 19th century. Figures like Theodore Parker and Lydia Maria Child were Unitarian activists who fought to abolish slavery and advocate for racial equality.⁴³

Moreover, in the 20th and 21st centuries, many Unitarian Universalist communities in the United States and Europe have been involved in the LGBT rights movement, feminism, and environmental justice.⁴⁴ A study by Mark Juergensmeyer in *Global Rebellion: Religious Challenges to the Secular State* shows that religious movements emphasizing social justice, such as Unitarianism, play a role in promoting more inclusive and equitable social change.⁴⁵

Education and Rationalism

Unitarianism has a close relationship with the development of inclusive and rationality-based educational systems. Many schools and universities in the Western

⁴² Veit Bader, "Religious Diversity and Democratic Institutional Pluralism," *Political Theory* 31, no. 2 (2003): 265, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591702251012>.

⁴³ Paul Teed, "Racial Nationalism and Its Challengers: Theodore Parker, John Rock, and the Antislavery Movement," *Civil War History* 41, no. 2 (1995): 142, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/cwh.1995.0007>.

⁴⁴ Mo Fox, "On Queer Utopianism and Environmental Justice." Master's Thesis, Wageningen University, 2023, <https://edepot.wur.nl/640750>.

⁴⁵ Mark Juergensmeyer, *Global Rebellion: Religious Challenges to the Secular State, from Christian Militias to Al Qaeda*, vol. 16 (Berkeley: Univ of California Press, 2008), 34.

world with Unitarian roots, such as Harvard University, were established with the aim of providing education based on freedom of thought and scientific research.

In scientific phenomena, many studies show that societies with better access to education tend to have higher levels of tolerance. The 2021 UNESCO report shows that education grounded in the values of freedom of thought and openness to difference can reduce extremism and enhance understanding among social groups.⁴⁶ Therefore, Unitarianism, which supports academic freedom and intellectual exploration, contributes to the development of a more rational and scientific society.

Implications in Contemporary Politics

In modern politics, Unitarianism still plays a role in various social and political issues. For example, in the United States immigration policy, many Unitarian Universalist communities are involved in helping immigrants and refugees through advocacy and legal support programs. Unitarianism also plays a role in the anti-poverty movement, with many Unitarian-based organizations actively providing social services to underprivileged communities.

One concrete example of the influence of Unitarianism in contemporary politics is the involvement of Unitarian churches in social protests, such as the Black Lives Matter movement and environmental actions against climate change.⁴⁷ This phenomenon shows that Unitarianism is not just a religious doctrine, but also an active political and social force in the struggle for justice.

Response of the Orthodox or Catholic Church to Unitarianism

The early response of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches to Unitarianism is evident in various ecclesiastical councils and theological decisions that condemned non-Trinitarian views. In the 16th century, as Unitarianism spread in Eastern Europe, the region's churches immediately took steps to suppress it. One of the most famous cases is the execution of Michael Servetus in 1553 in Geneva, which, although carried out by the Protestants, received widespread support from other Trinitarian churches, including the Catholic Church.

In the view of the Catholic Church, Unitarianism is considered a form of modern Arianism. Arianism is a doctrine that developed in the 4th century, stating that Jesus Christ is not the true God, but rather a creation of God who is higher than humans, but lower than God the Father. The Ecumenical Council of Nicaea officially condemned

⁴⁶ Saija Benjamin et al., "Safeguarding Social Justice and Equality: Exploring Finnish Youths' Intergroup Mindsets' as a Novel Approach in the Prevention of Radicalization and Extremism through Education," *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice* 19, no. 2 (2024): 292, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17461979221135845>.

⁴⁷ David N. Pellow, "Toward a Critical Environmental Justice Studies: Black Lives Matter as an Environmental Justice Challenge," *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 13, no. 2 (2016): 221, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X1600014X>.

Arianism, and the Catholic and Orthodox Churches uphold this decision as the basis for rejecting Unitarianism.⁴⁸

In the Orthodox Church, the emphasis on tradition and church authority becomes the primary foundation in facing Unitarianism. The Orthodox Church emphasizes that belief in the Trinity is not merely a dogma, but also part of the mystical experience and patristic theology inherited from the Church Fathers. Therefore, any attempt to reinterpret this doctrine, as done by the Unitarians, is considered a destruction of the theological heritage that has been preserved for centuries.

Several academic studies have examined how Trinitarian churches have responded to Unitarianism in various historical and social contexts. Research by Diarmaid MacCulloch in *A History of Christianity* shows that the suppression of Unitarianism often stems from the church's concerns about social and political stability.⁴⁹ In many cases, Unitarianism was not only seen as a theological threat but also as a threat to the political order based on the unity between church and state.

Another scientific phenomenon is the research on the psychology of religion, which shows that the differences between Trinitarianism and Unitarianism often reflect differences in how humans understand the concept of divinity. The study conducted by Justin Barrett in the field of cognitive psychology of religion shows that humans naturally tend to have an intuitive understanding of the existence of one personal God.⁵⁰ This may explain why Unitarianism remains appealing to some people who find it difficult to understand the concept of the Trinity.

The response of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches to Unitarianism can be understood in various dimensions, including theological, historical, and social. In many cases, Unitarianism is considered a threat to Christian orthodoxy, leading major churches to take repressive measures against its adherents. Moreover, scientific studies show that the differences between Unitarianism and Trinitarianism are not only doctrinal but also cognitive, reflecting how humans understand the concept of divinity. Despite facing great pressure, Unitarianism has endured and evolved in various forms, especially in the modern world, which is more open to religious freedom. As academic discussions and interfaith interactions continue to develop, the relationship among the Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church, and the Unitarian community can evolve towards a more inclusive and dialogical understanding.

⁴⁸ Henry Melvill Gwatkin, *Studies of Arianism: Chiefly Referring to the Character and Chronology of the Reaction Which Followed the Council of Nicaea* (Cambridge: Deighton, Bell, and Company, 1882), 66.

⁴⁹ Diarmaid MacCulloch, Gillian Bancroft, and Siân Salt, *A History of Christianity*, BBC Worldwide, 2010, 39.

⁵⁰ Justin L. Barrett, "Cognitive Science of Religion: What Is It and Why Is It?," *Religion Compass* 1, no. 6 (2007): 768, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8171.2007.00042.x>.

4. Conclusion

The study of Unitarianism and Trinitarianism shows that this theological difference is not only a doctrinal issue but also has wide historical, political, and social impacts. Since its emergence, Unitarianism has rejected the concept of the Trinity and emphasized the oneness of God and freedom of thought, which subsequently led to conflicts with the Catholic and Orthodox Churches as well as other Christian groups that upheld the doctrine of the Trinity. In its history, Unitarianism developed in Eastern Europe and the United States as a movement that challenged the authority of traditional churches. The theological conflicts that occurred often resulted in repressive actions from the main churches, such as the persecution and prohibition of Unitarianism. Besides being a religious movement, Unitarianism also has significant political implications, as it is often associated with social reform movements and individual freedom.

In the modern era, Unitarianism plays an important role in advocating for religious freedom and human rights. With an inclusive and rational approach, Unitarianism has become part of the progressive movement that supports pluralism and democracy. Meanwhile, the Catholic and Orthodox Churches maintain their theological positions and reject Unitarianism. In conclusion, the difference between Unitarianism and Trinitarianism is not merely a matter of belief but also reflects the dynamics of power and social change in Christian history. This debate continues in the context of religious freedom and the development of modern theological thought.

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