

Socinianism

Written by K B Napier
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Socinianism is named after Fausto Sozzini, of the Polish Brethren*, which developed in the 15th and 16th

centuries. The system of belief was also adopted by the Unitarian Church of Transylvania. Its main heresy is that it did not accept the Trinity, but it also had other errors. (*They were members of the Minor Reformed Church of Poland. They were Arians or, in Polish, socynianie).

Unitarianism became stronger about the time of Charles Darwin, but its beliefs go back several more centuries. Unitarians believe God is one person (monotheism), not three (trinitarianism). They believe Jesus was just a prophet and not God Himself. (So these groups would have no problem with Islam). They also reject predestination and original sin and, recently, biblical inerrancy. Overall, this heretical false church is one of many 'liberal' groups, and not Christian.

Socinianism grew out of a branch of Reformed thinking, known as the Radical Reformation, and from Anabaptism (both require extended studies). At its start it was rooted in the Antitrinitarian Council of Venice (1550). Sozzini expanded on Arianism by denying that Christ pre-existed, basing his false ideas on a personalised meaning of 'logos'. His nephew further developed his thoughts in a longer treatise. In doing so, the group split from the main Calvinist churches.

Significantly, Sozzini's writings were widely circulated amongst Arminians, as well as amongst Remonstrants and Dissenters, and English Unitarians. The works also circulated to thinkers like Isaac Newton, John Locke and Voltaire. The term 'Socinianism' later became used for any kind of dissenting beliefs, whether good or bad, thus embracing false beliefs not originally found in the beginning.

The beliefs of this system are written into the Racovian Catechism, which rejected orthodox Christian teaching on God's knowledge, the Trinity, the divinity of Christ, and on soteriology (salvation). Thus, for example, the sect taught that John 1:1 was not a reference to the Creation as in Genesis, but referred instead to the beginning of the Gospel, etc. At first the virgin birth was accepted, but some (especially Unitarians) later rejected this, too. The idea of a personal devil was kept low-key.

So, Socinians taught that Christ did not exist until He was conceived in Mary as human, not as God. By rejecting original sin, they also rejected the idea that Adam died as a result of his sin.

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The teaching on Christ's propitiation was also cast out of their atonement theories.

We can see why Arminians liked Socinianism, when we see how it limited God's knowledge to 'necessary truth' and not to everything. Because, otherwise, they argued, man could not have free will... which man does not have anyway, because it is an impossibility! God, then, in this system, is not omniscient. Hodge thought the system had its roots in the philosophy of Skepticism, but this is not accurate, as early Socinians believed in miracles and the virgin birth. Conscientious Objection also became a part of the system, even though such a position is hard to maintain against genuine biblical understanding. This is a major part of Quakerism, too.

Original Socinianism led to the Unitarianism of England, which, even today, is included in the list of 'Christian' churches (though excluded at first). Today, it is just a philosophical society far removed from any Christian vestige. Groups that grew out of Socinianism include Christadelphians and the Church of the Blessed Hope.

Other ideas related to Socinianism include Adoptionism, Ebionitism, and Psilanthropism. 'Adoptionism' is the belief that Jesus was only adopted by God when He was baptised and was not the Son beforehand. The Ebionites believed they had to follow Jewish rites and laws, and rejected Paul and his writings, calling him an "apostate from the law". Psilanthropism taught that Jesus was a "mere human" born by ordinary means of both parents. Therefore, it rejects the virgin birth and Christ's divinity. At times it is used as an alternative term for Ebionitism.

Note that Socinianism is Arian in concept, and Arianism goes back to the teaching of Arius (250 AD to 336 AD). Arius taught that Christ was subordinate to the Father, and was therefore not equal to Him. The First council of Nicaea declared him to be an heretic in 325 AD, though he was later reinstated as a 'Christian' by the First synod of Tyre in 335 AD. But, after his death, he was again branded an heretic in 381, by the First council of Constantinople!

The distinct belief of Arianism is that Christ was created by the Father and so did not always exist. This is based on a wrong interpretation of the text in John 14:28, where Christ said "the Father is greater than I", thus completely ignoring such texts as John 10:30! Many cults base their entire beliefs and heresies on similarly superficial interpretations of scripture. We can say, then, that any system of belief that rejects the trinity (such as JWism) is ultimately Arian. We can also see that Arminianism is a close cousin to the system, because of its belief in man's free will (amongst other things).

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