

# The history of Unitarianism in Norway 1893-1937

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**Please note that this paper is only discussing the first Norwegian Unitarian movement beginning 1893 and ending 1937. There is also a later second Norwegian Unitarian movement distant connected to the first that started at the end of last century and is still alive. For information about the sources used in this article, contact the author. This article is partly based on the authors thesis «Frisinnet kristendom, unitarismen i Norge 1893-1937», The Lutheran School of Theology (Faculty of Congregations), Oslo 2006, web site: [www.mf.no](http://www.mf.no)**

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## The history of Unitarianism in Norway 1893-1937.

*To whom it may concern! I take the liberty of suggesting that there should be established a Unitarian church society in Kristiania and at the same time and connected to this, a «Norwegian Unitarian society».*

With these words the history of organized Unitarianism begins in Norway. The quotation above is from a leaflet by Hans Tambs Lyche (1859-1898) which he in 1893 distributed among liberal minded people in the Norwegian capital Oslo (then named Kristiania or Christiania). He had just returned from the USA where he for many years served as a Unitarian pastor. Unfortunately his efforts to establish a Norwegian Unitarian church fails, but he is the first Norwegian to officially suggest such a church established. And his leaflet opens for first time for heavy Unitarian discussions in Norwegian newspapers and periodicals. Not able to reach his goals Tambs Lyche turns to publishing and starts the first Unitarian periodical to be printed in Norway, Free Words.

One year later, in 1894, the Unitarian pastor and writer Kristofer Janson (1841-1917) visits Oslo to give one of his many public lectures. Thanks to inspiration and support from the Norwegian writer to receive the Nobel Prize Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson (1832-1910), he too stayed for many years in the USA as a Unitarian pastor to the Norwegian settlers in Minnesota. His lecture was an immediate success. The newspaper Aftenposten writes January 7 1895 that Janson talks about how the Unitarian Christianity will remove Christian dogmas forced upon the people. His gospel is, get rid of the Trinity, Jesus was a human being not a god, down with the State Church and its orthodox faith, forward all liberal minded Christians – and of course no dogmas and no creeds. This is his main message. Aftenposten describes with enthusiasm how the listeners would stand up and applaud. Just some weeks later the first Norwegian Unitarian church was founded. It was named The Church of Brotherhood and its motto was to follow Jesus and his moral teaching.

But from that moment on most things seem to fail for Janson personally. His marriage has for long been in trouble and his divorce is a public scandal in Oslo. His interest for spiritualism is criticized

and will among other things soon become a matter of conflict with the board of his new church. Finally Janson is forced to resign as Unitarian pastor. The church will later change its name to Unitarian Society and engage Unitarian pastor Herman Haugerud (1864-1937) as their new minister – he also to return from the USA. Haugerud will stay loyal to Unitarian Society until his death. Then the society seems to cease to exist.

**For long time** the reasons to this failures have been unknown but to day it is possible to shed some light on the process. Based on new information from the historical archives collected the past ten years it is possible to track two (perhaps three) competitive Unitarian movements in Oslo 1893-1905. This in contrast to what earlier historians have suggested when focusing on Janson's Unitarian church as the only Unitarian movement in Norway. In fact it is evident that the Unitarian church administered by Janson only existed from 1895 to 1898 (and in any case never beyond 1905) while the Norwegian Unitarian movement as such existed from 1893 to 1937. In the past Norwegian scholars have partially focused on Janson's Unitarian church and seem not to have cared much about the work of Hans Tambs Lyche and Herman Haugerud. There may be many reasons for this, one is of course the fact that little research has been carried out on this part of Norwegian church history and as such allowing for mistakes and misunderstandings to be repeated unconditionally by different historians. But most important is probably the availability of new historical sources discovered. What follows is based on some of the new sources.

According to Tambs Lyche the Unitarian movement in the USA in the 1880ties developed in to directions, one conservative Unitarian movement that focused on the teaching of Jesus and Christianity, and one radical (or liberal) Unitarian movement that was centered on an ethical non-dogmatism not necessary limited to one religion but more akin to religious humanism. We now know that Tambs Lyche and Haugerud belonged to the radical movement and that Janson was part of the conservative. When they returned to Norway Tambs Lyche and Janson independently of each other introduced two different Unitarian movements. That is to say the Unitarian church Tambs Lyche wanted to establish in 1893 was something different that Janson manage to found in 1895.

Tambs Lyche wanted a Unitarian religious humanistic church and printed his leaflet to be spread among liberal citizens of Oslo. He managed to gather a group of interested liberals in 1893 and make a list of interested people, but for reasons not known decided that this would not be enough to establish his church. Later he will turn over his list of names to Janson, and Janson later on admitted that this list was the foundation of his Unitarian church in 1895. (An attempt to reconstruct this list shows that it would probably not contain more than thirty names.) It is unlikely to think that those mentioned in the list would be able to distinguish between the radical Unitarianism of Tambs Lyche and the conservative of Janson. What they heard Janson say in his lecture 1895 would seemingly be close to what they read in Tambs Lyche's leaflet. And many of the first members would probably join Janson's church believing it represented the radical Unitarianism of Tambs Lyche. Later when they understood that Janson's Unitarian Christian church was something else many of them became so disappointed and frustrated that a conflict was unavoidable.

**It was probably** only Tambs Lyche that was able to foresee this conflict. Just some weeks after the foundation of Jansons Unitarian church he in a number of articles in his periodical, Free Words, started to warn against the Unitarianism of Janson and once again encourage to establish another Unitarian church in Oslo. Perhaps he was familiar with the criticism Janson received from American Unitarians. Here they were disappointed that Janson focused to much of the importance of his person and not to mention his spiritualism which was criticised both by some American Unitarians, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, Tambs Lyche, members of Janson's church, and many others.

In 1898 Janson resigns as pastor to the first Norwegian Unitarian church. He was a bitter man saying the church board did not allow him to preach freely but wanted to control what he should say. This is probably not a fair description of the situation but we know that the church board was unhappy about Janson's Unitarian Christian gospel and his spiritualism. Then followed two years of great difficulty for the church. Janson's handwriting disappears from the church records and little is known about how the church organized its meetings and life. What is known is that there must have been an ongoing conflict between church members supporting Janson and those opposing him. This conflict led to a major exodus of members in January and February 1900. At the end of December 1899 there were 98 members recorded, two months later 23 of them would have left and joined Janson in what probably was his attempt to create a new Unitarian congregation. It failed some years later in 1905. What is left of the Church of Brotherhood March 1900 is 75 members without a pastor.

Still it was a victory for the radical Unitarian movement. Almost with something close to a *coup d'état* the Church of Brotherhood moved on from Unitarian Christianity to Unitarian religious humanism. To mark this change they added Unitarian Society to their name and this would later become the name of the church. The bylaws of both the Church of Brotherhood and the Unitarian Society are found in the archives. And if we did not know the history behind these bylaws it would have been easy to conclude that those two churches never would have been connected. In the bylaws of Church of Brotherhood it says that the congregation follows Jesus and his teaching. The bylaws of the Unitarian Society does not mention Jesus at all but states that the church aims at education people and foster brotherhood among mankind.

Facing some competition from the 23 member congregation of Janson, the Unitarian Society now starts to reorganize. We do not know when but sometime between 1900 and 1904 the congregation wrote to Herman Haugerud in the USA asking him to consider to be their pastor. He accepted and returned to Norway 1904. Then for first time – and probably last – in the history Unitarianism in Norway there actually were two Unitarian pastors competing. Each Sunday Janson and Haugerud would invite people to their Services at the same hour but at different locations. This competition continued from April 1904 to April 1905 when Janson seems to feel defeated. From April 1905 on Janson is more or less invisible in the Unitarian movement in Norway. Still he will write books about Unitarianism and still he will be invited to give Unitarian lectures and sermons now and then but that is all. And when the Unitarian Society youth organization arranges a celebration for Janson he is only titled «Mr. Janson». The former Unitarian church founder is no longer «pastor Janson». From Janson's autobiography and other writings we read about a bitter man. It is no surprise he in 1903 titled his autobiographical novel «Lonely».

**Haugerud on the other hand** is full of optimism and starts at once to revitalize the church, but it is too late. It seems like the congregation is tired from conflicts and there are few new members. All his efforts seem to fail: An attempt to establish a new Unitarian congregation in the town Skien fails, he starts publishing a periodical, *The Unitarian*, but it lives only for a year, the Unitarian youth organization of 1906 seems to dissolve but a new one would be established in 1914 (also soon to dissolve). From the advertisements in *The Unitarian* we read about the Unitarian Choir but it is unknown what happened to it. The Unitarian Association does no longer advertise its meetings in Norwegian newspapers. Everything points at a congregation dying.

Therefore it is a great surprise to find in the archives letters from 1909 inviting Haugerud to visit Unitarians in England and in the USA. And with a letter of introduction from his church board Haugerud would visit and speak in churches in different places in Europe in order to collect money to erect a Unitarian church building in Oslo. In letter of introduction we read about a flowering

Norwegian Unitarian Society with meetings gathering 200 people each Sunday. It has not been possible to find any information that would confirm this number. On the other hand what is confirmed is that the number of church members were declining and from 1910 to 1937 there is only 11 new members recorded – that is to say in a 27 years period of time the church only have 11 new members! And this is a church that is supposed to gather a couple of hundreds of people each Sunday? From 1909 to 1930 membership would drop from 108 to 69.

The plans for this church building is not known besides that the congregation would in 1909 need £ 1,000 in addition to what the congregation would be able to collect by its own. It is hard to understand the reason for the optimism that led to Norwegian Unitarians planning to erect a church building. Never the less, Haugerud did collect money and a handwritten letter from the Hungarian Unitarian bishop, Jopseph Ferencz, informs us that in 1909 the Hungarian Unitarian churches sent 1,000 Crowns to the Norwegian Unitarian Society for the erection of a church building. A letter from The British & Foreign Unitarian Association, April 29 1910, informs us that their Committee granted £ 50 to the Unitarians in Norway and add that they hoped to be able to give Haugerud a stipend of £ 100 a year. Needless to say the church building was never erected.

Little is know about the Unitarian Society after the failure of erecting the church building. We know that Haugerud established a new Unitarian youth organization in 1914, that he during First World War visited England in 1915 in order to give information about German propaganda in neutral countries such as Norway, that the Unitarian Society wrote him a letter in 1917 asking him to continue as their pastor. And finally an advertisement in a Norwegian newspaper tells that pastor Haugerud will speak at the general strike in Norway in 1919. This meeting was arranged by the Labour Party. Then almost nothing is known until 1937 when Haugerud dies. A qualified guess would be that the Unitarian Society died together with its pastor. Same year as Haugerud dies the church book is given to the National Archive.

The first Norwegian Unitarian movement is dead – a process that more or less started 1910. In 1950 only 17 Unitarians are recorded in Norway. To day (2007) the only surviving member of the Unitarian Society is Haugerud's youngest daughter.