



Weaving a Tapestry of Faith – the Universalists

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A visitor came to the church one day, some years ago, when I was speaking out against the anti-gay and lesbian political movement taking root in our small community. I said I was often privileged to perform Ceremonies of Union for them, memorial services for their loved ones. I said I saw their love and I heard their pain.

After the service, the visitor asked for a few minutes of my time. Once we were cloistered away for the coffee crowd he said to me, “I thought it would be different in a small town, but they seem to be the same as in the big city where I live.” Thinking he was speaking against the political movement I had deplored in my sermon, I encouraged him to continue. But his complaint took an entirely different tack.

“It’s getting to be more and more embarrassing to be a Unitarian Universalist,” he began. “You always have to explain yourself and apologize for being different. On top of our theological peculiarities, in the past ten years we’ve had to put up with the ridicule that comes from allowing women into our pulpits.” (I had to assume he hadn’t seen that I one.) “Now,” he continued, “we insist on bringing up the homosexuals at every turn. I don’t have anything against them,” he assured me, “but do we have to talk about them all the time. Everyone is laughing at us?”

Offering a silent prayer of gratitude that he wasn’t a member of my congregation, I gave him an unsympathetic response. “Be glad they’re just laughing,” I told him. “We used to be put to death for this sort of thing.” Then I softened a little. “Look,” I said, “we’ve always been considered heretics for one opinion or another, and, I hope, we always will, for that is our heritage and our strength.” We need to know of that heritage.

The Universalist belief that the whole human race would enjoy the benefits of heaven and that no one would be sent to hell was condemned as heresy by a church council as long ago as 544 of the Common Era. In 1837 at a Universalist conference in Philadelphia the wits were saying that Universalists believed that God was too good to damn them for all eternity, while the Unitarians believed that people like themselves were too good to be damned. Those outside the faith laughed the loudest. Let 'em laugh.

Yes, it has been embarrassing at times, fatal at others, to be a Universalist, but there have also been many benefits. The Universalists in this country came together as a reaction against the Calvinistic view of hellfire and damnation, and the innate deprivation of humankind. They said that any god worth admiring, worth their time and trouble, would be a loving god who would not punish his children with eternal damnation. In fact, they said, eternity was not an issue at all. Today, here, now was what they were interested in.

When the Universalist minister L. B. Fisher was asked to clarify where Universalist stand on certain theological issues, he did not cause to call him heretic; he said, "The only true answer to give to this question is that we do not stand at all; we move." It is central to the Universalist belief that truth, rather than having been revealed, is something that evolves and grows, and that no one person, church, science or generation can see the whole truth or define it once and for all. We move. We move through life, through ideas, through works. We do not stand at all.

Universalists throughout history have emphasized individual freedom of belief, unrestricted use of reason, religion as a way of living, human beings and their welfare as central in organized life, truth as the only authority, the nurture of the inner spirit, and the Bible as only one of many forms of understanding.

The leading proponents of early Universalism have come from many walks of life and came to this country after dramatic upheavals in their own lives. George de Benneville was a physician and a lay preacher, who traveled in Germany, England, Holland and France, spreading the goods of universal salvation. This did not mean, to him or his followers, only a life in heaven after death on earth, but a relief from guilt and anxiety caused by the belief that humankind was inherently sinful. De Benneville was ostracized by the French Protestant Church in England when he was only 14, and later was imprisoned in France for heresy. He was saved from the guillotine by the intervention of King Louis XV, and he subsequently fled to America where he was welcomed by the Dunkers (also know as the Church of the Brethren, a group

opposed to military service), the Universal Baptists (a non-Calvinist branch of the Baptist church) and the Quakers (equally peace-loving and outspoken).

John Murray, sometimes called the father of American Universalism, had been a Methodist minister in England, part of a group sworn to put down the heresy of Universalist preachers like James Rely. But when Murray finally met Rely, he was so impressed with the person and so taken by his gentle nature and hopeful message, that he converted on the spot and became a Universalist. He was, of course, kicked out of his Methodist parish and fell on hard time. He spent time in debtor's prison and when his wife and baby died during his incarceration, he elected to leave the country and go to America.

The story of Murray's arrival is dramatic and famous. The ship on which he arrived in 1770 was fog-bound and unable to disembark its passengers. When Murray heard that a number of sailors were to take a row boat in search of another harbor, he offered to accompany them. They landed at Good Luck Point on Barnegat Bay, New Jersey, and were offered hospitality by Thomas Potter who farmed the point. (This is where the story gets mystical.) Potter had recently constructed a church on his land with the faith that if he built it a preacher would come to this out-of-the-way place. (Talk about being laughed at.) When he discovered that Murray was a former preacher, he urged the reluctant clergyman to begin preaching again. The Universalist message grew outward into the new country from that foggy beginning. Murray and Potter later teamed up to take the state of Massachusetts to court, and in 1786, won the right, which was later to be the right of all Americans, to support the church and minister of their own choosing rather than to pay taxes to support the congregational churches of the Standing Order of Massachusetts. (That's why I always say, "We take this offering, not because we must, but because we can.")

While the Unitarians organized in America as a group of established congregations that held beliefs in common, the Universalists were created by the ministers who drew people into their church, from the Baptist and the Methodist churches, people who wanted to hear the message of hope, of universal salvation. For the most part, they were self-educated people who doubted their early church education. They were come-outers, as are many of you.

If it is embarrassing to be a member of a heretical church today, consider the embarrassment of the nineteenth century. The don't-stand-still faithful of Universalism, in one hundred years of practice in this country, had moved themselves into three distinct groups of believers, at was with one another. But each of them left some truth for future generations to pond.

The Christian Universalist were divided by three distinct doctrines. One group continued to believe in the original message that salvation would be received in the afterlife, after some painful purgation of any sin that had been practiced, purposely or inadvertently. The second group believed that Jesus had already saved humanity and we were meant to enjoy the fruits of this present life rather than wait for a heavenly reward. The third group, headed by Hosea Ballou, simply wanted to have the other two get along, and stressed free will and the innate goodness of humankind.

Before I weave in the other two branches, a few words about Hosea Ballou. He is best known for drawing of the disparate factions together and the fruit of his work is his scholarly book whose title tells it all. It was called *A Treatise on Atonement in which The Finite Nature of Sin is Argued, Its Cause and consequences as such; The Necessity and Nature of Atonement; And its Glorious Consequences in the FINAL RECONCILIATION OF ALL MEN TO HOLINESS AND HAPPINESS*. It is blessedly referred to simply as *A Treatise on Atonement*. Ballou was a fine preacher and a well-known debater. Among the most vigorous opponents of the Universalist in his day were the Methodists, and it was not unusual for them to meet in public and hold forth at one another's expense. One story is told of how Ballou was invited to the over-night guest of a Vermont family, but when he arrived, he discovered that a Methodist minister had been accorded the same honor. Goaded on by the family, the two argued theology far into the night. Ballou referred several times to the New Testament letters of Paul to buttress his arguments, until the Methodist, in great frustration, shouted, "I suppose you believe St. Paul to be a the greatest Universalist!" "Oh, no," said Ballou, softly, but adamantly. "Jesus was the greatest Universalist."

Ballou's wit and humor, and his down-to-earth style of writing are probably what made his book so popular in Universalist circles. His definition of sin, for instance, would be acceptable even to today's Unitarian Universalists. I quote: "Sin is the violation of a law which exists in the mind, which law is the imperfect knowledge men have of moral good. This law is transgressed, whenever, by the influence of temptation, a good understanding yields to a contrary choice." He goes on to argue that sin is measured by the sinner's intention, guilt varies with the circumstances and sin is not ultimately evil. These were very new ideas in the mid-nineteenth century.

But to get back to our taxonomy of Universalists, the other two factions include the *Republican Universalists* and the *World Religion Universalists*. The former held that their beliefs were most congruent with the ideals of the Republic (that is, the United States government, once the blemish of slavery had been removed). But, they claimed, they could not be obedient to civil laws if they went against the laws of God the King. "We cannot acknowledge the right of any human authority to make laws for the regulating of our conscience in any spiritual matters," they wrote in the Articles of Association

of the first Universalist Church of Gloucester, Massachusetts, in 1779. It has been said that they thought of themselves, “in the wake of the Revolution and later of the Civil War . . ., like Revolutionary France and later, Revolutionary Russia, as the vanguard, spokesmen and representative embodiment of humanity.”

The World Religion Universalists saw in their beliefs of God’s love a religion that could be embraced by the whole world. These beliefs were communitarian, humanitarian and global. They were linked with the nineteenth-century doctrine of progress and manifest destiny. “The final destination of mankind,” read a document written in 1803, “in the confidence of one God of love, will finally restore the whole family of mankind to holiness and happiness. American Democracy and American Universalism would save the world, they believed. Their beliefs fostered several experiments in communal living as a way of showing the world how a *natural religion* compelled people to get along with one another. Unfortunately, none of the utopian societies that were created lasted long enough to prove anything. (The Hopedale UU Congregation is named after one of these communities, though some would argue that was an accident; they just liked the name.)

In his 1870 sermon titled *Natural Religion*, the Rev. Herman Bisbee of the Universalist church in St. Anthony, Minnesota, said, “I believe that Jesus taught Natural Religion, and claimed to teach nothing more. . . . There is no creed from his lips; no ceremony imposed. . . . He would not persecute; he would not ask us all to believe alike; he would say, “Be true to conscience; seek, trust the Father and fear not. . . . In Natural Religion there is not gift. Salvation does not come through grace. All the priests in the world cannot pray a soul out of its natural purgatory. Jesus taught goodness, and this is Natural Religion. It is my opinion that a man can believe one thing or another, and still be a Christian, but when a man becomes mean, he can no longer be a Universalist.” No creed, no imposed ceremony, no need to all believe alike, listen to your conscience. It sounds a little like what we say to you on any given Sunday, except that somewhere along the way we misplace the authority of Jesus.

For the most part, Universalist beliefs were optimistic and positive. While the language of the day spoke only of the lives and ideas of *men*, the Universalists took up women’s rights and allowed women to speak for themselves. “Maternal love,” argued Mary Livermore, an abolitionist, a temperance worker, an advocate of better education for women, a prison reformer, a suffragette and the wife of a Universalist Minister, “is more like that of God than the coarse love of men. Because of this maternal love, women sustain the helpless, restore the discouraged, heal the hurt, find the lost and bewildered and subdue the proud.” There was probably some embarrassment by the status quo Universalists even then. In spite of the words of Livermore, of the first Universalist woman minister ordained by her denomination,

Olympia Brown, and of other Universalist women like Phoebe Hanaford and Clara Barton, and in spite of the Universalist scriptural principle that there is in Christ neither male nor female, the Universalist convention as a whole did not support resolutions for women's suffrage when they were brought before the national body in 1909 and 1911.

The 1930s controversy over the doctrine of Religious Humanism swept the Universalist denomination. The Humanist Manifesto of 1933, issued during economic depression, was the work of ministers, professors and other leaders who believed in humankind's ability to overcome the problems it faced. The document was introduced with these words: "The time has come for widespread recognition of the radical changes in religious beliefs throughout the modern world. The time is past for mere revision of traditional attitudes. Science and economic change have disrupted the old beliefs. Religions the world over are under the necessity of coming to terms with new conditions created by a vastly increased knowledge and experience. In every field of human activity, the vital movement is now in the direction of candid and explicit humanism." Not everyone in the Universalist movement agreed with it, but there was enough support encourage religious humanist to stay in their Universalist churches."

So, yes, it can be embarrassing to be a Unitarian Universalist today, inheritors of the legacy of heresy. We no longer have a vote in the World Council of Churches, though we can attend. We are not barred from service on juries as were briefly in 18th-century Massachusetts. But we are still the butt of numerous theological arguments and jokes. In a 1993 book, titled *The Problem of Hell*, we are told that because of our stubborn understanding of good and evil, we have consciously chosen damnation, and are, therefore, fools as well as heretics.

I am not embarrassed by my denomination – its history, nor its present stances. I am proud. Following the legacy of our Universalist forebears, we take up the separation of Church and State; we support freedom of religious thought and practice; we believe in living the best life here and now, disdaining unknown consequences if we are returned to our creator; and we are workers for social justice and world peace. We are Universalists.