

The Unfolding of a Religion: Universalism

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Presented by Reverend Jane Bramadat

Meditation

So strong and blinding was the prejudice that controlled almost everybody's judgement respecting those who professed the faith of final salvation that without hesitancy Universalists were pronounced a very bad people; they were infidels and guilty of all degrees of sin, as described in the following incident (which occurred in the 19th Century):

A traveling Universalist clergy chanced to fall in with a boy whom he drew into familiar conversation, and as they came near the village, the preacher asked the boy what denomination owned the large church yonder on the hill.

"Well," said the boy, "that is the Presbyterian."

"And what is church is that away on the left?" asked the preacher. "That is the Methodist."

"And, continued the preacher, "I see a fine church yonder on the right, what is that church?" "That's the Episcopal," answered the boy.

"And way over in the south end of the village you see a small meeting house, that is the Universalist."

"Ah!" said the preacher, "then there are some Universalists in this village." "Yes," said the boy, "a good many." "Ah ha!" said the preacher.

"Well, what kind of people are these Universalists?" "Oh bad, awful bad," replied the boy. "They get drunk, they lie, they steal, they murder, etc., I suppose" remarked the preacher. "Yes," said the boy, "They do all these things."

"And," asked the minister, "they are arrested, put in jail and state's prison and sometimes they are hanged, I suppose?" "No," replied the boy, "never anything of that kind."

"But," asked the preacher, "such bad people, so dreadfully wicked and don't get punished for their deeds! How is this?"

"Why," said the boy, "I'll tell you; they are so plaguey sly you never can catch them at it."

- *The Maine Book on Universalism* pp 72-73 (slightly adapted-jmrb)

Sermon

I continue this morning with more of the story of our Universalist roots. For those of you who are here for the first time, let me tell you that you have wandered into the middle of my Fall series of sermons - the series details the religious history of our Unitarian Universalist faith. On previous Sundays I have tried to bring to life the beginnings, in the 16th and 17th Century, of both our Unitarian and Universalist heritages, in each case, arising from doctrinal differences during the Protestant Reformation. I have also told you part of the story of how our Unitarian beginnings changed from the 16th into the 20th Century.

Now let me take you on a journey towards the present with the Universalists. I had left the story of the Universalists back in the 18th Century with George De Benneville who was a doctor travelling around Europe spreading the good news of universal salvation rather than the glad tidings of eternal damnation. DeBenneville then sailed to the New World where he continued to share with pilgrims and aboriginals alike, the optimistic theology of Universalism; that no one would be condemned eternally, because God was a God of love.

I had also underlined the three foundational principles of Universalism that provide a good balance to the Unitarian principles of freedom, reason and tolerance: the Universalist principles are interdependence, grace and walking our talk. Hopefully you will see these principles lived out in the continuation of this Universalist journey.

But before I begin, in parenthesis let me say that at this stage whether in England or the new America or in Europe - in the life of Universalism, most adherents were trinitarians and believed that there were three separate aspects to God. This paralleled in some ways the fact that Unitarians in the early days often tended to believe in a heavy-handed God that would mete out punishment after death - a loving God was not one of their original beliefs.

Well, as the story unfolds, here we are in the 18th Century and for a while, back in England. It was here in London, England that an ex-Methodist named James Rely was preaching the gospel of universalism. A still-faithful Methodist minister, John Murray, believing in the Calvinist theology of predestination and hellfire and damnation, was commissioned by the Methodists to try to rescue or 'save' a young woman who had become a Universalist after listening to James Rely. Murray found to his acute embarrassment that she was more committed and logical about her religious conviction than was he...and he could not talk her out of it.

Eventually he went to hear Rely preach, became convinced of the life-giving message of Universalism and himself began preaching on universal salvation. This act resulted in his being voted out of the Methodist convention. Fairly quickly he found himself in jail for debts that he could not pay [mostly because he no longer had a job as a Methodist minister and had been blacklisted]; and then, impoverished and unable to adequately provide food and shelter for his family, his son and then his wife died. In a totally despondent and despairing mood, and vowing never again to preach to anyone about anything, John Murray set sail for the New World.

Here is where Universalists like to say a miracle occurred. (And as you may remember, Universalists were quite comfortable with miracles: recall what happened with Dr. George De Benneville who died and then came back to life 42 hours later..) Well, the ship on which John Murray was sailing went aground on a sand bar at a place called Good Luck Point on the New Jersey coast and the winds were blowing the wrong way. The ship was becalmed. Murray got off the ship to buy provisions for the sailors and to wait for the wind to change. The man who had fish to sell to Murray was called Thomas Potter. Potter had become wealthy from his own hard work and had built a church that was intended to be Universalist in theology but he was waiting for a Universalist preacher and he insisted that God had sent Murray to him. Now, Murray had a pretty strong belief in Providence - and Potter insisted that the wind would not change until he preached in the church - so Murray gave in and preached and then the wind did change and the rest is history! John Murray went on to establish the Universalist Church of America, building on the foundation that George De Benneville had established over previous decades.

John Murray preached and preached and preached. He was an orator of no small order. People who attended his services would leave filled with enthusiasm and hope. Here is a small example of his compelling words:

"Go out in to the highways and by-ways of America, your new country. Give the people, blanketed with a decaying and crumbling Calvinism, something of your new vision. You may possess only a small light but uncover it, let it shine, use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of men and women. Give them, not Hell, but hope and courage. Do not push them deeper into their theological despair, but preach the kindness and everlasting love of God."

Even though these were incredibly inspiring and courage-provoking words, I hope you understand that the Universalist Church was not received with open arms by the other Christian denominations.

His unusual ideas caused consternation and even riots wherever he went; on one occasion while he was preaching, a large rock narrowly missed his head. Almost without missing a beat he stooped down picked up the rock and said, "this argument is solid and weighty, but it is neither rational nor convincing." How could people help but listen to him?!

Attempts were made to discredit John Murray by having him, first of all, declared a vagrant and when that failed, ordering him to leave because of the violent response of those who did not want to hear the message of love and hope. Murray stood his ground, however, and so did his followers, many of whom were first of all excommunicated for not having attended public worship [that used to be the order of the day- you had to attend the church you were committed to every Sunday- now to my way of thinking that's power used inappropriately...although it certainly would increase attendance!] And after Murray's followers refused to go back to their original churches, they had their property seized and sold at public auction to pay for their church taxes. The Universalists still refused and took their cause for the right of freedom in religion to the courts. Eventually they were successful in having their property returned to them. This was a landmark case in the history of free religion. It ultimately helped other religious groups who were also struggling against the status quo.

Universalism continued to grow in the new world. In the 19th Century it was the sixth largest Christian

denomination. And Universalist theology continued to develop as well. A key work in this regard was written by a Universalist minister, Hosea Ballou, called *A Treatise on Atonement* in which Ballou thoroughly examined and attacked the Calvinistic doctrine of limited election to grace. Ballou was known as an 'ultra-Universalist' because of his stance that the consequences of sin manifest themselves in this lifetime only. Ballou believed that the consequences of sin were the spiritual, psychological and physical harm to the sinner, not the punishment of an angry God. Now, not all Universalists went this far, some believed in what was called restorationism - that is everyone would eventually be restored to God's good graces and to heaven but for those who had been particularly nasty they might have to go through as much as 50,000 years of purgatory first.

In my opinion, even though the Universalists mostly came from a different and less sophisticated social class [more rural, blue-collar and self-taught than the Unitarian urban, starched-white collar and university-educated] they were top-brass when it came to integrity and courage. The Universalists were the first religious group to openly oppose slavery; they were the first denomination to sponsor women to its ministry; they were the first to sponsor prison reforms. They would also be too humble to want to brag about these virtues.

One of the other 'firsts' the Universalists like to mention rather mischievously from time to time is the fact that it was one of their ministers, Hosea Ballou, who in the new world first advocated the "unity" rather than the "trinity" of God - the position taken more publicly by the Unitarians ten years later. While this is true, it was not a religious position that was developed in any depth. The Universalists were much more interested in the importance of celebrating a loving God who would 'never condemn to an eternal blaze the same creatures that the deity had infused with life.' It infuriated and maddened the Calvinistic Christians to see the cheerfulness of the Universalists and their audacity at poking fun at hellfire. They didn't even seem to get upset at the nickname the conservative Christians gave them, the "no-hellites!" The Universalists seldom seemed at a loss for words or wit no matter how they were attacked. They used humour as 'a healing balm in an often dreary, treacherous world.' (Tom O-T) There is the report of an clever interchange between Hosea Ballou and an irate person who wanted to know what Ballou would do with people who had died reeking in sin and crime, and Ballou's response was: "I think it would be a good plan to bury them, don't you?" (Tom O-T)

The Universalists had a good sense of humour but unfortunately were just lukewarm institutionalists. As the decades marched on and the numbers of Universalists increased, something had to be done about organising. The Universalists, like the Unitarians, were fiercely devoted to the right of the individual to decide on his or her own religious views. In fact, Universalists tended more often to stop at the individual - few of them were interested in promoting an institutional organisation that could carry forward an advertisement of Universalism's theological stance.

Along with this was another paradoxical fact. Universalism's message became so popular that the major, more conservative Christian Protestant denominations slowly but surely softened their position vis-a-vis eternal damnation and incorporated a loving, forgiving God into their religious message. In any case, Universalists were, by the beginning of the 20th Century, seeing their faith as being too large to be held within the arms of Christianity alone. From the Universalists' perspective Christianity was the precious seed that grew into the tree that was a world tree - available to Christians, but also to all others who

chose to participate in the ongoing struggle for wholeness, compassion, and inclusion.

By the beginning of the 20th Century as well, there was beginning to be talk about the Unitarians and the Universalists joining forces because they were, as it was said: "one in thought, in spirit and in purpose." [Miller] Both had participated strongly in the creation of the first World Parliament of Religions in 1893 [with Universalist minister Augusta Chapin leading the women's section and speaking from the podium to leaders of all major religions]; both were devoted to the liberation of the human mind and equality of all; both were supportive of the most liberal of causes. But it was going to take time to bring the rational, tolerant, truth-sayers and the heart-smart champions of love and humanity together. But it did happen, and if you come out to the sermons that happen in the next few weeks you will find out just how it happened; and just who actually brought it about. If you don't know, the answer may surprise you.

But before this, I will be delving into more of our Unitarian and Universalist background. I will be sharing with you some of my favorite heroes and heroines among Unitarians and Universalists... and also some of the rascals that I can't help admiring. I will also be telling you a bit about when and how Unitarian and Universalist roots in Canada began. And at Christmastime this year we will celebrate many of our Unitarian and Universalist forbears who have enriched the meaning, the rituals and the atmosphere of Christmas.

There is so much in our religious past that we need to carry forward with us into our present. There are so many of our religious ancestors and religious ideas that we had forgotten to thank for their role in making our faith what it is today. Appreciation and affirmation of our past are needed if we are to fully comprehend who we are now and where we will go from here. May appreciation and affirmation be heard in my voice and be found in your hearts and minds.

Closing Words

"Where the heart stirs,
there moves Universalism.
The center holds us
within its transformative power of love.
We know with a wholeness of spirit
that God is love,
that life is good,
that people are created for goodness out of love,
that in the final reckoning
all shall be one.
When we hurt, when we are broken, when we become separated:
Let us seek the center which holds.
Let us remember the goodness for which we were created.
Let us be open to the transformative power of love,
that moves with the heart of life

and be whole once again."

quoted from the Reverend Elizabeth Strong, Universalist