



## Universalism

### 1. Away from Hellfire and Damnation

In the early days of this country, at church you were likely to be treated to a sermon on hellfire and damnation. All men were sinners (and women too, in one of those rare cases where preachers used the word 'men' to include women, and perhaps even to mean primarily women). All sinners, men and women, were doomed to an eternity of Hell, unless they received salvation through the unearned grace of a just but merciful God. We were all, in the words of Jonathan Edwards, *sinners in the hands of an angry God*.

Now, in view of the fact that such sermonizing seemed to have little impact on the sinfulness of the parishioners, we might suspect that all the tumult and amens that accompanied such preaching was less a fear for one's own immortal soul than a gratification that one's neighbor was finally going to get what he deserved. Be that as it may, into this cacophony of terror at God's justice, emerged, almost unheard, a quiet but firm voice: "It ain't so! God wouldn't allow such a thing!" In the words of Starr King, a Universalist minister who became a Unitarian minister, without giving up his Universalism, "The one [the Universalist] thinks God is too good to damn [sinners] forever, the other [the Unitarian] thinks they are too good to be damned forever." Things haven't changed much.

Thus it was that the ancient doctrine of Universalism re-emerged into the American theological frontier, eventually to merge with Unitarianism, the other, numerically and socially more prominent, liberal faith.

## 2. A Brief History of Universalism

### 2.1. The Two UU Heresies

Unitarian Universalism was born of heresy, two of them:

- Unitarianism was the heresy of denying the Holy Trinity. It held to the unity of God, in opposition to a Trinity that Unitarians claimed defied all rules of logic. (The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit were all different, but were all identical to God.) I don't believe in the Christian Trinity, but neither am I a Unitarian. To my mind, gods are too hard to count to be sure there is just one. But I'll leave that subject to another day. (I am a Unitarian with respect to truth, but that too I'll leave until another day.)
- Universalism was the heresy of denying that humankind were sinners destined for an eternal Hell. They held that all people would be saved, that none would be condemned to an endless torment.

Both heresies meant severe repression of their adherents. And though the tactics of repression against blacks in the deep south were outrageous, they were beneficent when compared to what true believers in the dark and middle ages could mete out to heretics.

### 2.2. Christian Universalism

Christianity has always had a universalistic thread; many Christians just couldn't believe that a good God could create a universe that consigned those who committed finite sin to infinite punishment. But for centuries Universalism was not a distinct religion, just an idea. It didn't even become an official heresy until the 3rd Century. I suspect that about that time the Church discovered that dread of Hell sold too many pew seats, and feared their receipts and their power would dwindle without it. But like all declarations of heresy, this one did little to drive the idea out of people's heads. One after the other, Manicheans, Albanenses, the Albigenses, the Waldenses, the Paulicians, and the Lollards, raised their heads, only to be battered down (or burned up) by the Church.

### 2.3. American Universalism

Universalism manifested itself as a distinct religion only in the late 1790's with first General Convention of Universalists in Boston. UU's often make much of the exalted status of many Unitarians, including noted politicians, philosophers and theologians. By comparison, Universalists are much less prominent. They include people such as Clara Barton, Olympia Brown, Horace Greeley, Starr King and P.T. Barnum, whose fame rested mainly on activities that had little to do with Universalism itself. The fact is that American Universalism was driven by people that today are mostly unknown, such as Hosea Ballou and his family. As David Reich put it,

The early Universalists, both laity and clergy, had a distinctive character that set them off from other liberal religionists. Unlike the typically urban and urbane Unitarian clergy, many of the early Universalist preachers were rough-hewn circuit riders with little formal education who worked the frontiers, where they challenged the theology that Calvinist hellfire-and-brimstone preachers were spreading across the continent at tent meetings and revivals. In fact, the 19th-century Universalists took such pride in their ministers' humble backgrounds that it was an article of faith among them that the best way to ruin a good minister was to send him or her to theological school.

[\[http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/2745.shtml\]](http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/2745.shtml)

### 2.4. Punishment, Perdition and Salvation

Despite their differences from mainstream Christianity, Universalists were no less concerned with the sinfulness of humankind or with the need for sin to be punished. It could not serve God's justice, they thought, for sin to go unpunished. They just didn't believe, unlike their mainstream brethren, that a person's finite sins could merit infinite, eternal damnation. So there was much argument about how that punishment could be meted out. Was there a purgatory-like period of punishment between death and ultimate salvation? Did God miraculously absolve a sinners iniquities at death? This was a topic of much dispute, since Universalists were as argumentative as their UU counterparts are today. But the Universalist of that time did agree with the mainstream Christian on the meaning of salvation: it was still to be found in the afterlife in Heaven.

### 3. The Promises of Universalism Today

We are no longer in the 19th Century. The geographic, political, spiritual, and philosophical boundaries among faiths have been sundered by science and technology and transportation. Universalism as a distinct religion either has been homogenized into a faceless, non-committal smile within the bland, unjudging, political correctness of a Unitarian Universalist Association that would much prefer to talk of social justice than theology, or it has been relegated to the backwater heresy of Christian Universalism. Does Universalism have anything worth saying to us about salvation?

I think so. And this is what I believe.

#### 3.1. Availability of Salvation

The seeds of salvation are sown in every nation, culture, faith and community. No one needs to convert his or her faith to achieve it, nor to import doctrine from some other faith. Indeed, devoting your energies to discovering the *right religion*, may distract you from what you need to do to be saved.

To illustrate that point, let me quote from John Morehead, who was arguing against the proposition that the marriage of Christianity and Buddhism would produce a profound new religion. Morehead quotes at length from the Dalai Lama on the philosophical differences between Christianity and Buddhism, and then goes on to say.

The Dalai Lama then went on to state, "The conceptions of God and Creation are a point of departure between Buddhists and Christians" (55), and that "If you are Christian it is better to develop spiritually within your religion and be a genuine, good Christian. If you are a Buddhist, be a genuine Buddhist" (46). He then used illustrated his feelings here by quoting a Tibetan expression, which says, "Don't try to put a yak's head on a sheep's body" (105). ["Buddhist Christians?", <http://uncletaz.com/wc/wcthread/buddhchrist.html>, April 19, 1999, downloaded, February 26, 2009]

Now since I don't accept either Christian or Buddhist metaphysics as accurate, I am not troubled by Morehead's claims about their incompatibility. (I guess I can never be a good Christian or a good Buddhist.) But it does seem to me that he overlooked an important subtlety in the Dalai Lama's remarks. ***Spiritual salvation is better, i.e., more important, than being philosophically right.***

The Universalist recognizes that this world is just too complex for any philosophy to have it completely and exactly right. No god worthy of worship would make it a mortal sin to be mistaken about the nature of the world. It is not a sin, in and of itself, to believe what your religion tells you to believe, when you don't have any good evidence to the contrary, even when that belief is mistaken. Of course, if that belief is that people of other faiths are evil, and that you are entitled, or even obligated, to harm them, that's a wholly different story.

### 3.2. A Pathway to Salvation

Now although I don't believe that one's religious philosophy is a hindrance to salvation, and thus don't believe with the Christian Universalists that one will ultimately be converted to the *true faith* on the way to salvation, I am nonetheless **less** optimistic about salvation than the Christian Universalists. They believed that everyone **will be** saved. I believe only that salvation is **available**; it's on the menu. We still have to reach out and take it. It will not be given to us, like an inoculation, whether we want it or not.

To achieve salvation, we have to follow what I like to call the *Braided Pathway*:

1. *The Golden Rule*
2. *The Phoenix Communion*
3. *The Serenity Prayer*

The Golden Rule, sometimes known as brotherly love, the principle of reciprocity, or compassion, is our guide for making choices that harmonize with those being made by others.

The Phoenix Communion acknowledges the divinity of others, expresses our gratitude, hope and commitment to them, our apology for the harm we have done them, and our forgiveness for the harm they have done us. In whatever form they take, these expressions restore and strengthen the bonds that tie us together in community. They remove the obstacles to acting with love towards others.

The Serenity Prayer, with which we opened this service, provides a level-set against expecting too much of ourselves or others. We cannot do everything that needs doing all at once. We must not so overstate the importance of *now* and our sense of current failure that we cannot recognize the good we have done.

It is this, what I have called the Braided Pathway, that my Universalism accepts as the standard of rightness for human actions, not the Ten Commandments, nor the 613 laws of God in the Torah [<http://www.milechai.com/judaism/613-laws-of-the-torah.html>], nor the commands of the sovereign, nor the laws of the church or state, nor the orders of superior officers, nor the instructions of parents. I am not saying we should not *obey* those rules; in almost all cases we should. For the most part they are practical expressions of what the Golden Rule requires for a particular situation. But in those cases where the laws of human institutions conflict with the Golden Rule, with acting out of love for your neighbor, your salvation requires disobedience to human rules.

### 3.3. A Heaven worth Seeking

But what is this salvation I've been talking about?

Christian Universalists, as I have said, seem not to differ much from other Christians in their descriptions of salvation. It is *Heaven*, an eternity of joy and bliss in the presence of God. Just what that is remains a mystery, about which Christians differ greatly among themselves. The Eastern Church seems to describe Heaven as basking in the unending love of God, while Hell is facing the eternal wrath of God. (Think of the best and worst moments of your relationship with your parents, writ infinite in their intensity and duration.) The Western Church, as well as Islam, has been more prosaic in its popular depiction of both, relying on earthly examples of both delights and torments.

Whether your image of Heaven and Hell comes from Dante Alighieri, the 13th Century Florentine poet, or Pieter Bruegel the Elder, the 16th Century Dutch painter (both of whom were far more adept in depicting the terrors of Hell than the delights of Heaven), or whether it comes from elsewhere, don't worry. The Braided Pathway does not offer to lead from one or to the other. (Though if there is a Heaven worthy of the name, I believe that only those who walk the pathway will get there.)

The Braided Pathway of Universalism offers not a death worth dying for, but a life worth living. The damnation we should concern ourselves with is here on earth. It is to be found in the hatred, the rage, the fear, the dysfunctionality, the alienation that pervades most human relationships. By that definition, we are all in a Hell of our own making for much of our lives. The salvation offered by the Braided Pathway is in part an escape from that Hell. It is a way of shedding the shackles of our past mistakes and beginning our lives and our relationships anew, with a fresh commitment to love and cooperation. It is also a guide through the minefield of temptations that will blow us off the path and back into the pit.

But it is more than that. The Braided Pathway not only keeps us from dangers of alienation and dysfunctionality; it also leads to a life that is positively fulfilling. To truly live the Golden Rule, to acknowledge and respect the divinity of others and to have them acknowledge and respect our own, to honor the contributions of others and to be honored for our own, to establish working methods of consensus democracy rather than to rely on the raw power of numbers or political or military might, all of these contribute to the creation of a spiritual ecosystem in which every individual is fulfilled through voluntarily working well together.

For the universalist, the ultimate goal is to be a freely contributing part of a physically and spiritually healthy whole. That is the salvation, the Heaven, that I seek. This I believe.