

Who Are The Universalists, the second U of the UU's?

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	2
The History of Universalism.....	2
Theology.....	6
Universalist Contributions.....	7
For democracy.....	7
For Women.....	7
For the Widening of Beliefs.....	8
For Free Speech.....	8
For Beyond Christianity.....	9

Introduction

In 1961 The Universalist Church of America and the American Unitarian Association officially consolidated and became the Unitarian Universalist Association. The joke that continues today about this joining goes like this: It was fitting that these two religious bodies should merge because the Universalists believed that there was no hell and everyone went to heaven and the Unitarians thought they were too good to go to hell!

I believe it is sad that we as Unitarian Universalists (although our head body in Canada is called the Canadian Unitarian Council) know so little about the Universalists who actually contributed much to our way of thinking. Thus, you have me in front of you today, with great trepidation in giving a form of history lesson. The little voice in my head says “could be BORING” and last Sunday one of our members said to me, “Jim, I am looking forward to your talk next Sunday with great expectations!” Then there was another member I had been talking to about my upcoming talk about Who Are the Universalists and he said, “Who cares!” Talk about pressure!

I actually became acquainted with Universalists back around 1993 when the Bicentennial of Universalism was being celebrated and material came to our Church to help us organize and give recognition to the event. At this time, the President of the Church was Fred Dyck, a fellow school principal. Fred had his triumvirate of myself, I believe I was program co-ordinator and that wonderful lady, Dr. Monica Hornyanski, Professor of Philosophy at Brock, meet for lunch each month to prepare the way for the upcoming Board meeting. When Fred and I went through the material we both said, “Can you believe it? The two of us are actually more Universalist than Unitarian!”

One final point before I get into this talk and an answer to Who Cares! I came across a quote and I cannot remember where exactly, “A people who do not know their own history do not have a past nor do they have a future.”

I have tried to organize my talk into 3 parts; the history, the theology and Contributions.

The History of Universalism

Universalism has many roots, one of its oldest in the theological ferment of the “Radical Reformation”, a mystical and pietist movement erupted in the wake of the new Protestant “State Churches”. It was a movement of sensitive, learned, and common people who shared the conviction that faith was a direct and individual experience. Does that sound familiar to you? It was a movement centered in family, close community, shared participation in worship (as in the early Christian community), and personal experience of holiness not mediated or dictated by any church, priest, or power.

George deBenneville is the the best known of the early preachers of such a Universalism in North America in the 1740's. He declared:

“The spirit of love will be intensified to Godly proportions when reciprocal love exists between the entire human race and each of its individual members. That love must be based upon mutual respect for the differences in colour, language, and worship, even as we appreciate and accept with gratitude the differences that tend to unite the male and the female of all species. We do not find those differences obstacles to love.”

And again,

“Preach the Universal and the Everlasting Gospel of Boundless Universal Love for the entire human race, without exception, and for each one in particular.”

It was this root faith that caught fire in Hosea Ballou half a century later.

The primary institutional root of Universalism in America is in the life and work of John Murray, follower of the British preacher John Rely and his modified Calvinism-holding to the doctrine of the Trinity, original sin, predestination, and punishment beyond this life BUT believing that in God's good time none should be utterly cast out from God's grace and glory. It was Murray's persuasive ways and stubborn determination that created the first Universalist churches (Gloucester in 1779, Boston in 1793), fought for their recognition in law, and organized them into a common Universalist body. And, John Murray's wife, Judith Sargent Murray, an author and playwright, became one of America's earliest advocates for women.

A third historic root of Universalism in North America is to be found in the popular reaction to the narrow theological orthodoxies of this period such as:

- the condemning of unbaptized infants and children to an eternity of torment (remember the farmer's drowned child in *Inherit the Wind*)
- the labeling of good and honorable folk of other faiths – God-despising heretics
- the fomenting of bitter religious warfare in towns, churches, and even families (Gee, is it any different today?)

Many thoughtful, compassionate souls, rejecting these “Glad Tidings of endless damnation”, left the Congregational, Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist folds and sought a more loving, less exclusive faith. It was such a faith that the Universalists were preaching up and down the Eastern seaboard in the early 1800's.

The Universalists were diverse in theology (just as the UU's are today) but all departed from the humanized Calvinism of Murray; and all preached the embracing love of God from which no one may finally and forever flee, Hosea Ballou, who became a formative figure in the new Universalism, moved the faith toward a Unitarian view of God in his “A Treatise on Atonement” in 1805, becoming minister of Second Universalist Church in Boston in 1817, where he remained until his death in 1852.

Universalism swept north into Canada, south in the U.S. and westward following the flow of settlement. Universalism was spread by itinerant ministers mostly in towns and

villages, and in new population centers everywhere, until the newly established congregations could find ministers of more settled way and “less wandering habits.”

So swiftly did Universalism grow that by the 1850's it seemed statistically the sixth largest denomination in the United States. But Universalists had a deep and abiding fear of religious bureaucracies, of denominational and ecclesiastical hierarchies that could conspire against the freedoms of the people. They were always and everywhere democratic – to a fault – and never created the denominational organization necessary to sustain their tremendously popular movement in changing and hard times.

And, too, the powerful theological issues that fired the growth of Universalism – infant damnation, God's unquenchable wrath, and bitter interfaith warfare – began to die out as other denominations learned the errors of their theological ways. By the turn of the 20th Century most denominations had grown quiet on these subjects; and were far less certain, in public at least, that the company of heaven was quite so sectarian as they had formerly preached.

The issues of slavery and its abolition rent denominations ideologically and institutionally along the Mason-Dixie line. But even the surviving Northern-based bodies had great difficulty facing the anti-slavery struggle directly. The Universalists, after years of tough discussion, passed an anti-slavery memorial at the huge (8000 attended) 1846 Universalist Convention in Akron, Ohio, putting Universalists clearly and officially on record. John Berry tells me that he discovered from his readings that some Unitarians during this period joined the established Churches such as Episcopalians, in order to either have more influence about the issue or to avoid the “in your face” actions. Actually, the Unitarians wrote beautiful documents and declarations; the Universalists marched claim some historians.

Universalism faced other powerful changes. The women's movement brought new energy and new light as women organized the first women's association of any denomination (the Women's Centenary Association in 1869). The Universalists became the first denomination open to women in the ministry and women poured into the pulpit and positions of leadership in significant numbers.

Missionary endeavors were begun at home and abroad as Universalism reached out to people in other countries, and to African Americans and others at home. Settlement houses, urban women's centers, retirement homes, prison and mental health reform projects, labor rights reform, and Clara Barton's work for the Red Cross drew the famous and the common together in new areas of service and advocacy.

Universalist theology by the turn of this century became an area of sharp contention. Universalists divided into at least three camps, and the warfare among them became a barrier to growth for years. There was a large block of supporters who were grounded in the other-worldly focus of the older Biblically literal Universalist theology.

There was a new groundswell toward a more inclusive liberal Christian Universalism that reached out to include those religiously orphaned by the “rightly religious”. Most of the new preachers, women and men, were in this camp. There were also voices crying in the wilderness for a more universal Universalism that could relish and celebrate the wisdom of the world’s faiths, and encompass the larger religious search that includes all the world’s peoples. They found their champion in Clarence Skinner, Dean of Crane Theological School at Tufts, and forceful voice for the new Universalist social gospel.

Through all the agony of the Great Depression and the two great wars of the 20th century Universalism struggled to hold and organize its social vision. The important post Second World War relief work of the Universalist Service Committee still lives in the memory of many. Inclusive modern Universalism found its most expressive and enthusiastic advocate in Kenneth Patton and his development of new hymns, spaces, and forms of worship for a “Religion for One World,” at the Charles Street Meeting House in Boston.

L.B.Fisher once noted that “Universalists are often asked where they stand, The only true answer...is that we do not stand at all, we move.” Universalism has always encompassed an immense and amazing diversity of thought, conviction, commitment, and action in the bonds of an open democratic faith – striving to live that love which must embrace all humanity at last.

For your information here are some statistics of Universalism in Canada:

1. The five oldest UU congregations in Canada today are Montreal (1842 founded), Halifax (1843), Toronto (1845), Olinda (1880), and North Hatley (1886).
2. Three of these (Halifax, Olinda, and North Hatley) were founded by Universalists.
3. In 1851 the census of what is now Ontario and Quebec reported 7000 Universalists and 1200 Unitarians.
4. During the next 20 years the balance began to shift. In 1871 the combined figures for Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia showed 4896 Universalists and 2275 Unitarians, about 2 to 1 favouring Universalists.
5. By 1961, the year of the UU merger, Unitarians outnumbered Universalist in Canada by 100 to 1. There were only three surviving Universalist societies: Halifax, North Hatley and Olinda.
6. Universalists were pioneers in admitting women and minorities to the pulpit and the ordained ministry. Some Ontario facts:
7. 1830 –Mary Ann Church was a Universalist lay preacher in Merrickville (north of Brockville).
8. 1871 – The Universalist Association of Ontario ordained George Moses, a native Indian, who ministered to a small congregation on a reserve near Hagersville.
9. 1888 – The reverend Fidelia Woolley Gillette was called to the church at Bloomfield. It is possible that she was the first ordained woman to serve in Canada.
10. 1930 – Edna Bruner, a member of the Olinda congregation, was ordained at Canton Theological School. In 1952 she became Executive Director of the Department of Education for the Universalist Church of America.

11. In 1934, the Universalist young people of Olinda and Blenheim joined with their Unitarian counterparts in Ontario and Quebec to form the Religious Liberal Youth of Canada. This preceded by 20 years the continental merger of Unitarian and Universalist youth.

Theology

I have already mentioned some ideas of Universalist theology. Universalist theological notions remind us of H.J. Heinz Company – 57 varieties, more or less. The variety of theological opinions that characterized Universalism spoke to a desire to address a wide audience, not all of which spoke the same theological language. There were Trinitarians and Unitarians. There were those firmly in the Christian faith, and those who believed that the redemption of humankind was already an established fact, and those who reckoned it to be something that would be achieved in the future. Some argued for limited, corrective punishment; others believed the punishment and reward concept unnecessary. Some saw the Universalist mission as the liberalizing and completing of the Christian message. Others presented Universalism as the religion and the church of the future. Some appropriated an ancient history for Universalism in the works of Origen, Arius, Arminius, Pelagius and others. Then there were those who found historical precedents largely meaningless and/ or irrelevant.

But there were underlying themes that were shared by all the varieties of Universalism. A clue may be found in these words of John Murray; “Go out into the highways and byways 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.” So, hope and courage, light and understanding, are the themes which are woven into the fabrics of the many theological varieties calling themselves Universalist.

John Murray humanized the Calvinism of his time but did not reject it entirely and emphasized a more loving God. Hosea Ballou rejected the notion of the inherent sinfulness of humankind, and posited the belief that human beings were inherently creatures of a loving God. He believed that the volitions of humans were dependent, not independent, of God. For Ballou, Jesus was the incomparable example of a human being living so as to exhibit the love of God in his words and deeds. Ballou further set forth the idea of the limited nature of sin and of its consequences, thus asserting the eventual triumph of love and the establishment of the Kingdom of God.

Implicit in the Universalism of Murray and Ballou was the belief that being or becoming a Christian was not essential to one’s salvation, or restoration. Later, some Universalists found this to be an important emphasis, since it suggested that Christianity might be

considered one of the world's important faiths, but not necessarily superior to others among the world's religions.

Universalists generally found little problem in embracing a variety of theological ideas and stance, confident that none of them, however odd or erroneous, could lead to ultimate consequences of unhappiness or damnation. Believe what you will or must, you cannot excommunicate yourself from God's love. Among the Universalists were theists, deists, humanists, transcendentalists, each with internal variations. Through them all shone a sense of hope and confidence.

Universalist Contributions.

For democracy

Among the hardy and independent early Universalists were Yankee sea captains and their families along the eastern seaboard of America. More liberal than their Calvinist neighbours, because they had sailed their vessels across the world and saw the teeming millions of Asia and Africa. They knew it was a diverse world and could not believe that only a handful of the "elect" in New England were to be saved.

Their first church was founded in Gloucester, Massachusetts in 1779. The original Charter of Compact of this Church states:

As subjects of that King whose Kingdom is not of this world, we cannot acknowledge the authority of any earthly power for the regulation of our consciences...

So believing, they refused to pay taxes to support the established church in the town. (In those days, all the inhabitants of a town were required to support the one official church, no matter what their own personal beliefs were). To collect the religious tax, the town seized the household goods of many of the Universalists. Immediately the Universalists brought suit against the town, in the name and person of their minister, John Murray. In the ensuing battle they fought their case through the courts and won not only the right to worship independently, but also the return of their goods and 80 pounds sterling in damages. The precedent thus set ultimately became written into law: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..."

Of the 85 members who signed this Charter of Compact in 1785, one was Gloster Dalton, an African. No other church at that time, or for many years to come, admitted blacks as members.

For Women

Judith Sargent Murray, the first known feminist writer in America, was also the wife of John Murray. Her essay "On Behalf of the Rights of Women" was published in the Massachusetts Magazine in 1790. George Washington and Thomas Jefferson were both subscribers to this publication.

Universalists early on opened up the ministry to women. By the time the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution had been passed, on August 6, 1920, giving women the right to vote, a total of 86 women had been ordained to the ministry by the Universalists, whereas the Unitarians had ordained only 42.

It was perhaps natural that Universalists should lead the way in being inclusive of women in education. All five of their major colleges had been open to women without question from the day of their founding: Tufts in Massachusetts, St. Lawrence in New York, Buchtel in Ohio, Lombard in Illinois and what later became Cal Tech in California. This was highly unusual practice in the nineteenth century.

For the Widening of Beliefs

We have seen how the Universalists opposed the hellfire and damnation doctrine central of main stream Protestantism. Professor John Godbey of the Meadville/Lombard Theological School, says that in essence the Universalists won the day but became victims of their own success. For, without acknowledging it, or crediting the Universalists in any way, nearly all of mainstream Protestantism ceased its portrayal of a vengeful Creator by the beginning of the 20th Century. As a result the number of Universalists began to decline. So, if North American Protestantism today is more generous in its portrayal of God, or more compassionate with regard to human nature, Universalism is to be thanked for it.

For Free Speech

The last person to be convicted for blasphemy in the United States was the Universalist minister Abner Kneeland. He was sentenced to sixty days imprisonment in Massachusetts for blasphemy in 1834, even though the judge and prosecuting attorney were Unitarians. Kneeland had written in his newspaper that God was a figment of our imagination and Jesus was a mixture of myths and fables. He later moved to Salubria, Iowa, and there founded a utopian religious community. Toward the end of his life, in 1883, he published this final statement of heretical belief:

I believe in the existence of a universe of sun and planets among which there is one sun belonging to our planetary system, and that other suns, being more remote, are called stars and that they are indeed suns to other planetary systems. I believe that the whole

universe is NATURE...and that God and Nature, so far as we can attach any rational idea to either, are perfectly synonymous terms...Hence, I believe that it is in God that we live, move, have our being, and that the whole duty of humanity consists in living as long as we can, and in promoting as much happiness as we can as long as we live.

This emphasis on freedom of thought and speech was carried on into this century.

For Beyond Christianity

Finally, it remains to be said that Universalism's reach beyond the confines of Christianity was a celebration of the gifts of many differing religious cultures. Also its governance practice of holding General Assemblies throughout the continent brought a whole new egalitarian and liberating dimension to Unitarians. The Unitarian Universalist Association's quest today for multicultural diversity is the fruit of that legacy. And "the final harmony of all souls' is still our goal. Yes, Universalism is truly a Faith for such a time as this.