

# *Is There More to Universalism than Universal Salvation?*

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## **Reading:**

from Hosea Ballou's *Examination of the Doctrine of Future Retribution*  
(from Ernest Cassara's *Universalism in America*)

There were debates among the Universalists about the nature of punishment in the afterlife. Hosea Ballou was one who in 1817 came down on the side of there being no punishment in the afterlife, believing punishment and reward were both handed down in this life. His was an articulation of what came to be known as the ultra- Universalist position. His 1834 treatise, *Examination of the Doctrine of Future Retribution*, is considered to be one of the best statements of that position.

"All who preach the doctrine of future punishments, have relied on the terrors of that punishment, to induce men to be pious and virtuous; and yet they know that the most vicious and most abominable, in all Christian countries, have been brought up from childhood to believe that doctrine ... [Why is that?]

"It is well known, and will be acknowledged by every candid person, that the human heart is capable of becoming soft, or hard; kind, or unkind; merciful or unmerciful, by education and habit. On this principle we contend, that the infernal torments, which false religion has placed in the future world, and which ministers have, with an overflowing zeal, so constantly held up to the people, and urged with all their learning and eloquence, have tended so to harden the hearts of the professors of this religion, that they have exercised, toward their fellow creatures, a spirit of enmity, which but too well corresponds with the relentless cruelty of their doctrine, and the wrath which they have imagined to exist in our heavenly Father. By having such an example constantly before their eyes, they have become so transformed into its image, that, whenever they have had the power, they have actually executed a vengeance on men and women, which evinced that the cruelty of their doctrine had overcome the native kindness and compassion of the human heart. ...

"The preaching of future rewards and punishments, for the purpose of inducing people to love God and moral virtue, is not only useless, but pernicious ...

"There is no necessity of promising a reward in a future state for the practice of duty in the present. All that is wanting for this purpose is to understand and be persuaded that righteousness brings an ample reward, in the present life."

## **Sermon:**

As I said last week, these two sermons, on Unitarian theology and history and Universalist theology and history, are designed to ground us a little more deeply in the roots of our chosen faith. Few of us were raised in this faith, and even those who were often don't have a lot of understanding of the wide rivers of thought and deed that feed the living tradition that we inherit. A couple of times a year, I think it is useful to immerse ourselves in this heritage and see what pieces of it carry forward into our religious movement as it is lived today.

L.B. Fisher, a Universalist minister, when asked where Universalists stand, is said to have replied: "The only true answer to that question is that we do not stand at all, we move." His is a statement that gets at the liberal and questioning nature of Universalism that kept its theology growing and changing over time. It is one of the many ways that Unitarianism and Universalism have been alike since the beginning and why merger between the two denominations, when it was finally considered, made so much sense.

Universalists, like Unitarians, can trace some of their theological roots as far back as the earliest chapters of the Christian Church. The Universalists tie their theological roots to the theology of Clement of Alexandria and Origen, his student, two great 2nd- and 3rd-century thinkers who were also deeply influenced by Greek philosophy. Origen was known for trying to weave classical Greek neo-Platonist philosophy into nascent Christian theology. He was also known for preaching not just a literal but an allegorical reading of the Bible (an approach that has always been important to liberal Christians) and for advocating a particular position on the question of salvation. On this latter point, Origen's unique belief was that Providence or God wanted to restore all souls to the original state of blessedness and that none, *not even Satan*, was beyond repentance and salvation. It was this belief that was condemned by the church.

There is something that seems nearly universal about humanity's desire to want to see the good rewarded and those who have acted badly punished. The idea that Satan, of all creatures, might escape condemnation if he repented seemed to early Christians, at best, unfair and, at worst, heretical. For them, a God whose justice demanded punishment was better than a God whose mercy demanded forgiveness.

The Universalists throughout history have found themselves reversing that equation. For the modern Universalists, in particular, whose roots lie in England and the United States, what drew them out of their other faith traditions to question those traditions was always, in part, their beliefs about punishment and reward, about salvation and about the God implied by certain beliefs about salvation and the afterlife.

Perhaps the easiest way to describe the Universalists is that their starting point was often the nature of God. In particular, most Universalists had, as their anchoring point, a belief that God, or whatever force permeated creation, was a loving force. Once they committed to that notion, other teachings and beliefs came up for question. For instance, once you believe in the idea that the world is permeated by a loving force you call God, the idea of original sin becomes a problem. Would a loving God, after all, create creatures that were burdened by sin at the very moment of their conception? It hardly seemed so.

And what about Calvinism, with its belief in pre-destination? Would a loving God give life to men and women who were pre-destined to damnation, despite even their own best efforts to redeem themselves? That hardly seemed fair, but instead rather arbitrary and cruel.

And what about this eternal perdition that so many talked about -- the fiery pits of hell, Satan with his pitchfork? Why would a loving God create such a place and then damn any of creation to those eternal fires?

The Universalists, with their simple commitment to a loving God, had a lot of work to do to explain all this theological baggage or to reject it.

Fortunately, like the Unitarians, the Universalists believed that they could be trusted to find the answers. The Unitarians, you may recall, grounded their belief in the God-given faculty of reason and a belief that this was not a faculty meant to be checked at the church doors. The Universalists embraced reason also, but put as much faith in God. They believed that a loving God would make religious truth clear so that all her children could decipher it. So they set out with confidence to comb Scripture for the passages that justified a belief in a loving God.

What they found evolved over time, and involved some differences of opinion between them. It was an evolution of thought around the notion of salvation. I thought we'd look at where a few of the great early Universalists found themselves in this journey of exploration.

John Murray, who would be pivotal in founding American Universalism, started his adult life as a Methodist while living in England in the 18th century. He was in London when John Relly, one of the early English Universalists, was preaching this new message of universal salvation. Murray's own minister railed against the blasphemous Relly, but it wasn't until Murray explored Relly's teachings directly that he found himself drawn into the Universalist fold. What first took Murray a step closer to this heretical new theology was the defection of one of the most upright and moral women in Murray's own congregation. Believing he could convince her of the errors of her ways, Murray and a couple other members of the congregation went to call on her. He recounts their conversation and how her argument, gently offered, left him up short.

... *he, that believeth not, shall be damned* ... [I declared to her].

"What then, sir, must [a person] believe, in order to avoid damnation?" [she asked me.]

..."

... he must believe, that Christ Jesus is his complete Saviour; every individual must believe for himself, that Jesus Christ *is his complete Saviour*.

"Why, sir, is Jesus Christ the Saviour of any *unbelievers*?"

No, madam.

"Why, then, should any unbeliever believe ... *if [Jesus] be not his Saviour*?"

I say, he is not the Saviour of any one, until he believes.

"Then, if Jesus be not the Saviour of the unbeliever, until he *believes*, the *unbeliever* is

called upon to believe a lie. It appears to me, sir, that Jesus is the complete Saviour of *unbelievers*; and that unbelievers are called upon to believe the truth; and that, by *believing, they are saved, in their own apprehension, saved from all those dreadful fears*, which are consequent upon a state of conscious condemnation [such as you preach]."

No, madam; you are dreadfully, I trust not fatally, misled. Jesus never was, nor never will be, the Saviour of any unbeliever.

"Do you think Jesus is your Saviour, sir?"

I hope he is.

"Were you always a believer, sir?"

No, madam.

"Then you were once an unbeliever; that is, you once, believed that Jesus Christ was not your Saviour. Now, as you say, he never was, nor never *will be*, the Saviour of any *unbeliever*; as you were once an *unbeliever*, he can never be your Saviour."

He never was my Saviour, till I believed.

"Did he never die for you, till you believed, sir?"

Here I was extremely embarrassed, and most devoutly wished myself out of her habitation; I sighed bitterly, expressed deep commiseration for those deluded souls, who had nothing but head-knowledge; drew out my watch, discovered it was late; and, recollecting an engagement, observed it was time to take leave.

Thanks to the doubts this upright and rational woman was to raise in Murray, he was to explore Relly's teaching in greater depth over time and discover that the preaching of universal salvation indeed made sense. If a loving God had sent his son to die on the cross, surely it was for all of God's creation, not just some. And, furthermore, the logic went: Since that vicarious atonement happened already, we are all already promised salvation.

Initially, for Universalists like Murray, that salvation didn't mean that human beings wouldn't suffer for their sins, simply that Jesus had saved them from an eternity in hell. Indeed, Elhanan Winchester, another 18th-century Universalist, believed that the world would endure a period of 50,000 years during which the sinful would suffer for their sins. After that period, sinners and virtuous alike would be restored to God. These were called the "restorationist" Universalists.

Over time -- true to the whole notion that Universalists don't stand, they move -- the very notion of hell began to lose theological traction. Men like Hosea Ballou got to the point in their theological wanderings where they could not believe in a God who would send humanity to such a place as hell. Moreover, as we heard in the reading this morning, Ballou began to preach that even teaching such a doctrine endangered humanity's virtue, by encouraging them to emulate a God so cruel. Ballou and those like him were called ultra-Universalists and those who disagreed with them wondered (with great concern) what would make human beings be good if the threat of punishment in the afterlife were removed.

In their defense, the ultra-Universalists did still retain a place for punishment. Their idea was simply that sin would be punished in this life and in this world. They looked to the

Bible for stories that illustrated how this had always been the case; stories of the virtuous being rewarded on earth and the sinful visited with difficulty and pain.

Moreover, men like Ballou believed that virtue was also its own reward and sin its own punishment. To rephrase Sartre, hell, if not other people, was at least the company of other sinful people. Ballou writes: "[In the Scriptures] God is represented by a fountain of living waters. Divine truth, by waters, by wine and milk, by bread, etc. Should we be offered an immense reward for accepting these nourishing aliments." The ultra-Universalists seemed almost neo-Platonist, with the idea that virtue drew humanity to it as if we had been imprinted with a need to be whole that only virtue could complete. A life fed by the living waters of divine truth, as Ballou describes it, was one satiated and whole. A life alienated from it was one forever yearning and suffering and unfulfilled.

There is much more to say about Universalists and their theology, but perhaps it is best to touch on one last evolution of thought. In their first theological articulations around the notion of universal salvation, the Universalists took the word "all" in the phrase "all will be saved" to mean "all Christians will be saved." Over time, however, the Universalists' primary commitment to a loving God forced many of them to see this promise extended to all people, Christian and non-Christian alike. They had to admit that a loving deity would not damn any of his or her creation, regardless of belief. Moreover, some Universalists raised the question of whether a loving God would hand down truth in only one place and time, or were other religions sources of God's revelations also, even if Christianity was the one many Universalists themselves chose as their path.

Kenneth Patton, a minister of the 20th century, was at the long end of this particular Universalist lineage. He became minister of the Charles Street Meeting House in Boston in 1949 and covered its walls with symbols of all the world's religions. The goal of this community was to articulate the universal (small "u") truths that permeated all world faiths. Patton said, "It is the United Nations idea, especially as it is ... applied to religion ... We look for insight and wisdom to all of humanity, for truth and goodness have never been the monopoly of one people or religion." This new brand of Universalism sought the *worldly* reconciliation of all people, as Universalism had once sought the heavenly reconciliation of all.

*Where does that leave us?*

What remains with us throughout Universalism's history is, first, that same determination to question, the willingness to be the outsider, which they share with our Unitarian ancestors.

Second, and as important, is their insistence on believing and putting a stake in the ground around a commitment that what permeates the world and what we are therefore called to imitate in our own lives is a force innately good, loving and forgiving. I happen to share their belief that such a force is out there and also that it invites us to participate in it, but even if it is not the only force out there, a commitment to it is a self-fulfilling prophecy. In other words, believe in a random, cruel world and you are more likely to

accept and acquiesce to randomness and cruelty. Believe in an ordered, loving, determinedly forgiving force and you are likely to extend that trust and love and forgiveness to others. It's not an accident that the Universalists reformed American prisons, helped abolish slavery, reformed the treatment of the mentally ill, helped give women the vote. Their belief in a merciful, loving God inspired them to do work that gave that belief expression in the world. In that sense, belief in such a world, by its very nature, worked to create such a world. I think we still carry if not the optimism of their beliefs, then at least the commitment to act *as if* we believe love and a generous justice will prevail.

Finally, the later Universalist belief that truth and goodness are not the possession of one group alone is something that stays with us. It fuels our curiosity for other sources of wisdom and insight. It reminds us to be humble about our own faith, and not see it as the only saving grace. And that universalism of Patton's is an ideal many of us still hold -- a hope that a unified world, though hard, may be possible if we take the time to seek and find the beliefs and dreams that we all hold in common across culture and language and religion.

It is the optimism of Universalism, in short, we carry with us and its commitment to do the work of love. "Give them not hell," said John Murray, "but hope," preach kindness and an everlasting love.

Amen.