

Universalism for Such a Time As This

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On September 4, in 1793, a meeting was convened in Oxford, Massachusetts, the purpose of which was to provide a structure and shape to a religious movement which had come into being on the North American continent, a movement which had roots in the old world, but which was without a counterpart in Europe. Calling itself the "General Convention of the Universal Churches and Societies in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, Vermont, Connecticut and New York," this meeting marks the beginning of the oldest non-native religious denomination in this country. Over time, the General Convention would become the Universalist Church of America, and in 1961 would merge with the American Unitarian Association to become the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations.

To be sure, this meeting in a small New England town was not the first regional gathering of Universalists. There had been earlier meetings in New England, and in Philadelphia, but it was the meeting in Oxford, two hundred years ago this month, which created an enduring institution. And certainly, the history of Universalism on this continent was already long and complex by the time a handful of people met in 1793 to create that organization. It is generally conceded that many of the German Baptists--people we know today as Mennonites, Amish and Dunkers--were universalist in their theology when they arrived on this continent in the first half of the 18th century. Settled among these German mystics, near Ephrata in Pennsylvania, was a French-protestant physician and preacher, Dr. George de Benneville, who provided medical services to natives and settlers alike, who preached and promoted the doctrines of Universalism, and arranged for the publication of Universalist books, including the first German Bible printed on this continent--a Bible which printed in bold type all the proof-texts of Universalism.

In 1770, John Murray, an erstwhile Methodist lay preacher, turned Universalist, came from England to North America. When his ship was driven aground of the Jersey coast, he went ashore at Good Luck, and was prevailed upon to preach in the meeting house which had been established by an illiterate farmer named Thomas Potter, who had had the Bible read to him, and who had arrived at a Universalist position as a result. From that beginning, Murray preached Universalism up and down the coast until he was called to serve the first Universalist church ever established, the Independent Christian Church of Gloucester, Massachusetts, which was founded in 1779. Meanwhile, men like Caleb Rich, in New Hampshire and Elhannan Winchester in Philadelphia, were founding Universalist congregations on their own. By 1793, it was clear that churches embracing one or another form of Universalism were springing up in the new nation--a circumstance that impelled the meeting in Oxford that September, in an effort to establish a formal connection between them and to define the faith they held in common.

Those of us who are the heirs of the Universalist movement often have difficulty understanding the importance of the heritage which is ours, or the power of the religious vision which under girds the Universalist faith. For most of us, "Universalist" is a cumbersome name which was tacked onto the simpler and better known Unitarian title primarily to placate a minority at the time of the merger, and over and over again, we find people wondering whether we might not just drop the term altogether. That attitude betrays a lack of insight into the significance of Universalism in the history of this country. This morning I would like to share with you a bit of Universalist history, in an effort to help us understand why Whitney Cross, an historian who is not Unitarian Universalist, concluded, in his book, *THE BURNED OVER DISTRICT*, that the impact of Universalists "on reform movements and upon the growth of modern religious attitudes might prove to be greater than that of either the Unitarians or the freethinkers. And their...warfare upon the forces fettering the American mind might be demonstrated to have equaled the influence of the transcendentalist philosophers."

The first thing that must be said about the Universalists is that they began their history with nothing but a single, profound conviction about the nature of reality. Unlike the Unitarians, who inherited the traditions, the institutions, and a good deal of the property and communion silver of the Puritan churches in New England, the Universalists began with no churches, with no ordained clergy, with no educational institutions, with no standing in the community. They began with a simple, profound, heretical idea. Universalism was that great heresy which insisted that whatever else God might be, God was revealed to human beings as unconditional love, that the love of an omnipotent God could not be resisted or thwarted or evaded, and therefore, ultimately there could be no eternity of punishment for any of God's children or any portion of God's creation. To phrase this central conviction in the clearest terms, Universalists insisted upon the Universal salvation of all things, upon the recognition that there can be no eternal punishment in hell for hell would represent the ultimate failure of God's purpose, and therefore, in the end, even the Devil himself would be restored to harmony with God.

Now, at the end of the twentieth century, this does not seem to be such a radical gospel around which to organize a church. After all, many of us are not at all certain that there is any life beyond this one; we are quite comfortable with the assertion that religion should be more than just a form of fire insurance, and that our challenge is to live this life well letting the future take care of itself; and there are few main-line churches which spend much time preaching hell-fire and damnation. But that was not the case when the Universalists began preaching their gospel of inescapable and irresistible love.

For a great many people, the doctrine of eternal punishment was the only vehicle by which society could defend itself against the inherent wickedness of humanity. What is more, it was a powerful tool with which to defend the manifest social inequity of daily life. The doctrine of hell promised that even if one escaped immediate punishment by secular authorities, evil deeds would be punished in a terrible and inescapable way. This belief in inescapable retribution, this faith in eternal punishment, it was held, represented the last, best constraint against lawlessness. And the promise that in the future life virtue would be rewarded and vice punished was seen as an essential mechanism whereby the

poor and the desperate might be induced to accept their situation and not murder their exploiters in their beds.

Universalists, by denying the doctrine of hell were seen by many as a threat to the social order. As a consequence,, in various places, Universalists were barred from holding public office, or even serving on juries, for it was thought that without fear of hell, there could be no way to guarantee a person's veracity, no way to be certain an individual would take an oath seriously. What is more, it was a common conviction, reinforced by the religious opposition, that the prisons were filled with criminals who had been lured into crime as a consequence of Universalist teachings that they would face no punishment after death.

Universalists responded by insisting that fear is an ineffective tool for shaping people who are moral as the history of the Christian church proved beyond a doubt. They insisted that moral living is its own reward. They argued that God does not punish people for their sins. Rather, people are punished by their sins, by the sense that they have betrayed their better nature, by the sense of having separated themselves from that love which is at very the center of this universe.

This simple doctrine was quickly combined with the rationalism of the Enlightenment which was shaping the culture of the new nation. In 1805, Hosea Ballou