

National Unitarian Fellowship

Affiliated to the General Assembly of Unitarian
and Free Christian Churches
Established 1945

Viewpoint



A Brief History of Universalism

by

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Issue 214

Dec 2010



Registered Charity 1040294

Definition

Originally, universalism meant that all human beings would be saved, thanks to Jesus, who was God. No one would spend eternity in hell, no matter how bad, as God was benevolent – and successful. Today we shall trace some of the ways in which this faith developed.

Beginnings

After Jesus died there were many different versions of Christianity, starting with a Sect of Judaism (Matthew) and spreading to all people (Luke) with many other variations, one of which was universalism. Many would agree with Henry Cheetham, who wrote in his book UNITARIANISM AND UNIVERSALISM, that “Paul was the architect of organized Christianity, which evolved from the small communities chiefly in the large cities, where there was great poverty and want among the people. {Despite or because of official persecution} The movement developed so rapidly that by the end of the second century it had a larger following in the Roman Empire than any other sect.../For the first three centuries, the church was divided by conflicting theories concerning the person of Christ and the Godhead.../Constantine The Great, wishing to bolster the crumbling Roman Empire, sought the support of a united Christendom to lead against the barbarian tribes.../In 325 A.D. the Emperor called the leaders of the church to a council of Nicea for the purpose of settling their theological differences and promulgating an official statement of belief binding upon all members of the Christian church. demanded uniformity of belief as the price of his acceptance of Christianity. result was the Nicene Creed by a majority vote of the Council (Cheetham p.13) (Want me to read it?) {Note Apochryphal? Story: Trinitarian Athanasians came back early from lunch and passed their version of the creed. , the followers of Arius, who taught that Jesus was not God but better than man, a bridge, lost the very human vote, thus establishing orthodoxy as Trinitarian.) The new orthodoxy based on the Nicene Creed strove to silence all religious controversy, became more dogmatic and eventually made heresy a crime punishable even by death.../ In 438 AD the Theodosian Code compelled all citizens to be members of the Christian church.../ In 544 A.D. Justinian, Emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire, condemned the belief in Universal Salvation as unchristian and put the curse of heresy upon all, past, present and forever, who taught this doctrine.” (Pp11-15)

Many examples can be cited of men who were thus tried right up to the Reformation. Once people began studying the scriptures for themselves after Luther broke free from the Roman Church,, many views of Jesus and God were proposed, by people such as Calvin, who claimed only God's elect would be saved, so act as if you were, but preach hellfire and damnation to those who do not agree, and Servetus, the anti-trinitarian burned at the stake by Calvin, and in effigy by the Catholics.

In 1552, Henry VIII's son, King Edward VI, outlawed universalism when he required assent to 42 articles of faith. But in 1562, King Charles reduced the number of articles people had to agree to, which meant that Universalism became legal again, whereas Unitarianism and Catholicism were illegal until 1813, though still practised before then.

Universalism in the UK was not very widespread. In fact there seem to be few resources exploring this. fancy a PHD on it? Glasgow University has a scholarship for Liberal scholars... Ironically, the so-called father of American Universalism was a former Methodist, though reared a Calvinist, Brit, John Murray, but more on that shortly. It is interesting to note in passing that there is an official group today called the Quaker Universalists.

In 1776, the year the American Revolution started, a group calling themselves 'Universalist Dissenters' established a congregation in Edinburgh, which continues today as St Mark's Unitarian Church, having broken away from the 'cruel God' of the Calvinist Presbyterians. Mention should also be made of a later preacher, Arthur Peacock, 1905-68. a Universalist who joined the Unitarians after

the demise of the Universalist movement in Britain. His motto was words from the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning, which said: 'Universalism – universe religion – the unity of all things, why it's the greatest word in our language.' (THE LARGER VIEW by Vernon Marshall, p.47)

The Glasgow Universalists ordained Rev Caroline Soule in 1880, years before the Unitarians ordained Gertrude von Petzold, in Leicester. The Glasgow Unitarian Church is celebrating its bicentenary this year..

In the mid-18th century, James Rely, a Universalist convert to and from Calvinism, taught that all people would be saved at death, without going to hell, for which he lost his position at evangelist George Whitfield's London Tabernacle but not before inspiring John Murray, who was also expelled. Let me quote now from the pamphlet "The Universalist story":

"Rejected in his native country, depressed by the death of his wife, and burdened with debt, Murray set sail for America, arriving in New Jersey in 1770. {incidentally at a place called Good Luck} He had intended to bury himself in obscurity among frontiersmen. Upon his arrival, however, he discovered groups of universalist-minded people scattered up and down the Atlantic coast. He preached to many of the groups and became minister of one such group in Gloucester, Massachusetts. Eventually, in 1779, The Independent Christian Church of Gloucester became the first organized Universalist church in America." He was also appointed a military chaplain by George Washington.

The next name to feature is Elhanan Winchester, a Massachusetts-born Baptist preacher who became a leading spokesman for another view of universalism, more in line with primitive universalism, that all creatures, not just humans, would be restored to God after whatever purgation is required after death. Ironically, he preached seven years in London in the late 1700s.

Now let me share another quote from Henry Cheetham's book, UNITARIANISM AND UNIVERSALISM:

"With the dawn of the nineteenth century, the New England Universalists felt the need to clarify their theological position and to arrive at some measure of agreement, thereby increasing the sense of purpose and unity in their churches. Thus, in 1803, the Universalists met at Winchester, NH and agreed on the following statement of belief, since known as the Winchester Profession of Faith:

"Article 1. We believe that the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament contain a revelation of the character of God, and the duty, interest and final destination of mankind.

Article 2. We believe that there is one God, whose nature is Love, revealed in one Lord Jesus Christ, by one Holy Spirit of Grace, who will finally restore the whole family of mankind to holiness and happiness.

Article 3. We believe that holiness and true happiness are inseparably connected, and that believers ought to be careful to maintain order and practice Good Works, for these things are good and profitable unto men.

"Fearful that the Winchester Profession might at some time be regarded as binding on any society or individual, there was appended to it the now famous LIBERTY CLAUSE:

Yet while we adopt a general profession of belief...We leave it to the several churches, societies or to smaller associations of churches, if such be formed, within the limits of our General Association to continue or adopt within themselves, such more articles of faith...as may appear to them best under their particular circumstances, provided they do not disagree with our general profession or plan. (pp91-2)

Not everyone agreed with this, but it was very influential during the rest of the 18th century.

Perhaps even more influential was Hosea Ballou (senior; his son was President of Tufts University; a cousin, Adin Ballou, was also prominent; Moses Ballou later). Raised a Baptist, he became the minister of Portsmouth, NH Universalist Church. In 1805 he published a book called *A TREATISE ON THE ATONEMENT*, which presented both a unitarian and a universalist point of view. Basing his views on a rational study of the scriptures, he rejected the following doctrines: The trinity; the fall of man; the depravity of the human race; the theory of atonement; salvation by faith alone; and everlasting punishment.

He affirmed the unchanging love of God as the supreme trait in Godhead; His eternal fatherhood; Man's sonship; the mission of Jesus as reconciler of man to God; the certainty of punishment for sin; and the final salvation of all souls. , he taught: "Our platform of faith is general and allows individuals an extensive latitude to think freely, investigate minutely, and to adopt the particular views which best comport with the honest convictions of the mind, and fearlessly to avow and defend the same. (Cheetham, 89-90)

I leave you to imagine the resulting debates within and without universalism in response to these assertions.

Next let us focus on the 1870 convention held in Murray's church in Gloucester, celebrating 100 years of universalism. Twelve thousand people were involved in this three-day celebration. By this time there were some distinct strands of the movement. The first strand was Christian Universalism, which came in three overlapping, successive forms. overlapping, but in succession to each other. First there was the Trinitarian form with conflict over when salvation occurred, at death or after sufficient purifying, and with the church both sending missionaries and holding heresy trials. The second phase was the unitarianising phase, with some wanting to restore primitive Christianity and others stressing not the afterlife, but divine benevolence and humane response here and now. The third phase was a moralising trend, following the leadership of Jesus.

The second strand was Republican Universalism, seeing themselves as the Church of America, 'the democracy of America', with their form of Christianity best reflecting American ideals. After the Revolution and the Civil War Americans felt in the vanguard as spokesmen for humanity, with the Universalists seeing themselves as the best vehicle for promoting these values.

The third strand was the view that Universalism represented both the primitive form of Christianity and the future form of world religion. Some saw this as Universalism being the best form of Christianity; others that it opened the door to natural religion and global humanism – a transchristian religion for one world. (Williams, "American Universalism", pp10-15)

Williams goes on to say that all three strands were still in evidence at the time of merger, 1961, but the ratio of followers continued to shift.

You may be wondering why it took so long for the two groups to unite. Without covering all the intermediary developments from 1870-1961, let me briefly sketch the Universalist relationships with outsiders.

Williams tells us that by the time the Universalists met outside Puritan-Presbyterian-Reformed NE and NY in 1837, in Philadelphia, there were notable differences between Unitarians and Universalists. "Denominational Universalism was the rural and small-town counterpart of seaboard Arminianism/Unitarianism in renouncing the sombre Calvinist views of man and God (define ARM?)...A common joke was that the Universalists believed 'God was too good to damn them' for eternity and the Unitarians thought men were too good to be damned'. Both asides felt they were too different

from each other.

There were various moves towards and against each other as the 19th century wore on.

In 1894, a meeting was held for the First Congress of Liberal Religious Societies, embracing Universalists, Unitarians, Reform Jews and Ethical Culturists. A second Congress was held, but that seemed to fizzle out.

In 1895 The Universalists debated a motion calling for UU 'cooperation', but the motion was tabled, only to be totally defeated at the next Convention at Chicago in 1897.

In 1899, the Unitarians resolved that in the interests of pure Christianity the two denominations should formally move toward closer relationships.' It did not happen. One commentator wrote: "Thus it appears that the radical Universalists and the conservative Unitarians stand side by side; while the conservative Universalists and the radical Unitarians are pretty far apart in their thoughts and tendencies.'

In 1909 at the Detroit Convention a motion proposing the eventual organic union with the Unitarians and an amendment allowing for joint ministerial fellowship were defeated with the following result 'that organic union be left to make its own way as the divine spirit of truth and Christian brotherhood may move our hearts'

In 1907 the Universalists did accept the Unitarian invitation to attend the IARF, The International Association for Religious Freedom, Congress. Some Unitarians had helped found this after helping to run the first World Parliament of Religions in 1893. is still going and last year there were over 6000 for the festivities in Sydney.

In 1913, however, The Universalists began negotiating with the Congregationalists. In 1925, both the Unitarians and the Congregationalists requested more cooperation with the Universalists. In 1927 the Universalists voted to seek closer ties, but not organic union, with the Congregationalists, who tabled the motion, seemingly preferring all or nothing.

Their next move was to try to join the Federal Council of Churches in the 40s, which failed. We are told they were more interested in enlarging their opportunities for social action than Christian ecumenism. The Universalists have a fine record of work on such concerns as women's rights, slavery, peace, penal affairs, temperance, labour laws and equality. "The first denominationally ordained woman minister in the country was Universalist Olympia Brown", in 1863. (Williams, p.46) Clara Barton, founder of the Red Cross, was one of their stars. The Universalist Church of Gloucester was the first to take a case to court and win the right not to pay taxes to the established Congregational Church and to ordain their own ministers. It is suggested that their reluctance to join others was also partly due to a sense that they had a unique mission. As Williams puts it: "Over against 'partialism' they embraced together an ever widening meaning of Universalism". (P. 82)

It is worth noting that one objection to Universalism was the claim that they were not only infidels, but were encouraging sin, having lost the fear of hell. (W.W.Rose)

An example of how far the Universalists had moved between the Winchester Confession and 1930 is the following statement approved that year: "We avow our faith in: God as Eternal and All-conquering Love; the spiritual leadership of Jesus; the supreme worth of every human personality; the authority of truth known or to be known; the power of men of goodwill and sacrificial spirit to overcome evil and progressively establish the Kingdom of God."

Finally, after years of negotiating, in May 1961, the Unitarian Universalist Association was formed and has gone from strength to strength, continuing to evolve as a broad, liberal religious

movement.

Here is the statement they were able to agree to this time:

- “1. To strengthen one another in a free and disciplined search for truth as the foundation of our religious fellowship;
 2. To cherish and spread universal truths taught by the great prophets and teachers of humanity in every age and tradition, immemorially summarized in the Judeo-Christian heritage as love to God and love to man;
 3. To affirm, defend and promote the dignity of man and the use of the democratic method in human relationships;
 4. To implement our vision of one world by striving for a world community founded on ideals of brotherhood, justice and peace;
 5. To serve the needs of member churches and fellowships and to extend and strengthen liberal religion;
 6. To encourage cooperation with men of goodwill in every land.
- Thus 895 groups and 156,443 legal members were united in one body.” (Cheetham, p.122)

British Unitarians work closely with our American counterparts and are both connected through the IARF, as well. More recently, a new body has been formed, the ICUU, the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists, with members in at least 24 countries. Cliff Reed and Christine Hayhurst have been founder members and David Shaw is now the treasurer.

Briefly, then, this is the Universalist tradition, part of our British Unitarian heritage. I hope that, like me, you have become even more aware of how varied, and changing our traditions have been. We are the living tradition. What we do brings the past as meaningful for us into action now in ways which will pass on an evolving tradition to our followers to make of what they will. Whenever we hear someone telling us to be true to our tradition- ask them which part - let us remember that the main point seems to be the personal search for meaning in a shared process, honouring the integrity and value of each individual. Our only heresy is refusing to respect the right of diversity. All are welcome here.

Biography

Phil was brought up in Chelmsford Mass. by a Unitarian family. He attended the local state schools, then universities, training to be a teacher and a minister. After nine years serving three churches, he brought his British wife and their two children home. He taught for 21 years as a secondary English teacher and Housemaster at Woodhouse Grove School in Bradford. Then he retired to the north of Scotland, but family pressures brought them to Cheadle, Staffs. Since 1970 he has been a part-time minister in Yorkshire, Scotland and Staffordshire. For over seven years he was Editor of the NUF "Viewpoint". Sometimes he is active in the national Unitarian scene. He is a member of the Newcastle-under-Lyme Unitarians

Comments -

We welcome your comments on this issue. With your permission your comments might also be included in the NUF Newsletter.

Please send your comments to the editor,

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