



Stories of the Universalist Church and Its People

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My talk today is about the Universalist Church and its people. I briefly explore the history and beliefs of Universalism, including notable events and eminent Universalists. The religion of Universalism was founded on the idea that everybody gets saved. In other words, universal salvation. Its development had a remarkable set of Universalist characters. Examples include a third century scholar who refused under torture to recant his beliefs, a group of English farmers planting vegetables on common land who were beaten for it time and again, and the founder of the American Red Cross. The period I cover today starts with that third century scholar and ends in 1961 when the American Universalists and Unitarians merged.

The idea of universal salvation begins with Origen of Alexandria. He was born in a Christian family around 185 CE in what was then Roman Egypt. When Origen was only seventeen his father was martyred for his Christian beliefs and Origen wanted very much to go to his father and die with him. However, his mother had other ideas and hid all his clothes to stop him going.

Origen developed into one of the most famous biblical scholars of the time. He learned Hebrew so that he could read scripture in its original language, wrote commentaries about what he read and ran several schools in Alexandria and surrounding areas attended by students from near and far.

Origen, after careful study of scripture, concluded that God's love was all encompassing and would not permanently exclude anyone from its reach. He termed it *apokatastasis* or in English restoration. Origen believed that it was a contradiction for God to have a punishment stronger than his love and that everyone's soul would eventually be purified and restored to divine harmony.

Around 250 CE Origen was tortured for his Christian beliefs by the Roman authorities. The injuries weakened him and he died a few years later having refused while being tortured to recant his beliefs. Almost 300 years later, Origen's doctrine of universal salvation was formally outlawed by an imperial edict.

Up until the Reformation, over 1000 years later, universal salvation persisted on the fringes of organised religion. With the collapse of a single, centralized church plus the invention of the printing press, there was a re-emergence of beliefs in universal salvation.

In 1648 in England, Gerald Winstanley published the book *The Mystery of God*, the first formal statement of universal salvation in the English language. Winstanley further believed that if God's love covered everybody then a land ownership system where some people own land and others are landless, contradicted God's intention. He got together a group of poor men and women in April 1649

and led them onto common land on a hill in Surrey. The group dug up the land and planted vegetables, calling themselves the True Levellers. Local landowners sent men to destroy their work and beat them. The True Levellers, or Diggers as they were often called, came back and were beaten again but they planted again. This continued back and forth for almost a year. Winstanley made sure that it was all documented and that pamphlets describing the events were produced and distributed.

Pamphleteering was the media technology of his time, and he used it to spread his firm belief that a God of universal love was also a God of universal social justice.

The 1700s saw Universalism develop into an organised religion and a lasting movement. A notable English figure is James Rely, from a farming family, born around 1722 in Wales. When Rely was in his twenties he got caught up in George Whitefield's Calvinistic evangelical movement. He preached to large outdoor crowds, honing his skills and becoming a rising figure in the movement. However, as he read and carefully studied scripture, he found what he believed to be a huge logical and moral contradiction between scripture and Whitefield's Calvinistic evangelical teachings. He could no longer support church doctrine and said so causing his colleagues, followers and the community that had supported him to turn against him. Rely initially then preached as an itinerant evangelist, but he eventually settled in London, gathering a small, devoted congregation at Coachmakers' Hall and spent the remainder of his ministry preaching and writing, publishing the book *Union* in 1759.

It was at Coachmaker's Hall that a young John Murray first attended Rely's services. Murray at the time had been attending Whitefield's Calvinist congregation in London and a young woman from that congregation had become interested in what Rely was preaching. Murray was sent to show her the danger she was in and to bring her back to the true faith. The young woman kept asking Murray questions about what Rely was preaching and to learn more, he went to hear Rely preach. John Murray and his wife Eliza became convinced by Rely's message with John eventually becoming Rely's close disciple and preaching within Rely's circle. Sadly, in 1769 Eliza died following childbirth, and their infant son died shortly afterwards.

In 1770, overwhelmed by grief, Murray sailed for America, intending never to preach again. Upon reaching America, Murray's ship ran aground off the New Jersey coast. Murray was sent ashore to find supplies and met Thomas Potter, a farmer who had built a small meeting house on his property and invited him to preach there. Murray had definitely not planned to preach again and in addition, the ship would have to leave as soon as the wind became favourable. However, Potter managed to convince Murray to preach on Sunday if the wind remained unfavourable. The wind stayed unchanged and Murray thus preached what was the first Universalist sermon in America. He went on to create the first organised Universalist congregation at Gloucester, Massachusetts on New Year's Day in 1779. His leadership during the movement's early years, including preaching, organizing congregations, mentoring ministers, and defending Universalist rights, were all instrumental in organising the Universalist General Convention in 1793, which evolved into the Universalist Church of America.

John Murray married his second wife Judith Sergeant Murray in 1788. Judith went on to become a famous advocate for women's equality, writing an essay entitled "On the Equality of the Sexes". The essay argues that apparent differences between the intelligence of men and women are the result of education and opportunity rather than innate ability. It also argues that a life limited to domestic duties is a waste of women's talents. It's considered a foundational work of American feminist thought.

Although John Murray was vital in organising America's early universalist church, he was not the first universalist to preach in America. George de Benneville had arrived some 30 years previously with a more personally developed universalist belief. According to longstanding accounts, before arriving in

America, he was condemned to death for preaching universal salvation and was reprieved just hours before being executed and instead was ordered into exile. Benneville was a physician and after arriving in Pennsylvania in 1741, apart from his Universalist preaching, he practiced medicine for many decades and became well known among both German and English settlers, treating rich and poor alike as well as caring for patients who could not afford to pay anything at all.

Another notable Universalist figure is Hosea Ballou, born in 1771 in New Hampshire. He provided a logical framework for 19th century American universalism. The framework included an optimistic theology and a rejection of not just eternal punishment but also rejection of temporary punishment after death. He showed intellectual leadership through his influential works such as *A Treatise on Atonement*. In addition, Hosea Ballou rejected the traditional doctrine of the Trinity and became the most important supporter in nineteenth-century America of a Unitarian form of Universalism.

Turning now to Clara Barton, who grew up in the congregation founded by Hosea Ballou himself, we see a woman who bravely carried the Universalist faith into front line American Civil War battlefields. On these gruesome battlefields, she cared for union and confederate soldiers alike. She wrote later that her actions came from what she learned as a young Universalist, namely that God's love does not distinguish between people and therefore she should not either. After the war, she was instrumental in bringing the United States into the international Red Cross movement and the Geneva Convention system. She founded the American Red Cross in 1881, which helped align the United States with international humanitarian standards. Her efforts substantially contributed to the U.S. ratifying the Geneva Convention, at that time covering medical neutrality and the treatment of wounded soldiers. Clara Barton broadened that mission for the American Red Cross, arguing that humanitarian suffering was not limited to war, and that the American Red Cross should also respond to peacetime natural disasters. She permanently expanded its purpose from neutral medical care in wartime to broad humanitarian disaster relief, which became one of its core functions. This action helped spur other countries to do likewise.

Mary Livermore is another American Civil War figure. Her Universalist belief began on Christmas Eve, 1842, when she entered a church that she didn't normally go to. She heard a minister preaching that God brings everyone home safely no matter how lost they are and she requested a copy of the sermon. This led to friendship and eventual marriage. Her strong Universalist belief led her to arrange large relief efforts during the American Civil War. She is renowned for persuading president Abraham Lincoln to donate his original handwritten Emancipation Proclamation to a fundraising event. After the war she became a renowned feminist and reportedly the most requested speaker in the USA. She delivered the speech "What Shall We Do with Our Daughters" more than 800 times and developed it into a foundational book on feminism.

Another feminist Universalist is Olympia Brown. Born in 1835, she was the first woman in the United States to be ordained as a minister with the official approval from a national denomination. Gender discrimination had meant she had faced severe challenges pursuing her higher education but was determined to overcome societal barriers. As a woman, she had great difficulties in becoming ordained, being successful only after an appeal to higher levels. Along with her role in the Universalist church, she spent 50 years in a prominent role campaigning for women's suffrage. To honour Olympia Brown's legacy, a hymn tune was named after her and called Olympia. It's the tune for "Love Will Guide Us".

The United States isn't the only place where Universalism successfully developed and as we have seen, belief in universal salvation had existed elsewhere for centuries. However, arguably the U.S. is the only place Universalism ever became an organised, denominational church. The umbrella body for

British Unitarians today, the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches, colloquially called the British Unitarians, brings together a variety of strands and traditions, including Universalism. Germany is where many of the ideas surrounding universal salvation originated and were written about long before they appeared in the U.S. These ideas never vanished in Germany but were absorbed into larger church traditions.

Getting back to people now, Clarence Skinner, in the early 20th century, preached that Universalism was not just about the afterlife but was also about this life. If God's love encompassed everybody then it was a contradiction for human society to treat some people as worth less than others. He co-founded the Community Church of Boston which operated a free pulpit inviting many famous freethinkers of the time to speak. He wrote well received and widely read books and trained generations of Universalist ministers. He is considered the most influential Universalist of his generation and helped to move Universalism beyond teaching that everyone would ultimately be saved, to a religion built around the equal value of every person and the responsibility to create a better world. This unquestionably drew Universalists and Unitarians closer together.

Leading up to the actual Universalist-Unitarian merger in 1961, Brainard Gibbons emerges as an extremely important figure. He gave up a successful New York law practice rather than continue making a comfortable living as an attorney. In his own words, he wanted "to do something for society rather than just make money out of its difficulties." Leaving his successful Manhattan law practice he became a Universalist minister and later became the national head of the Universalist Church. He inspired countless people by demonstrating that service to humanity was more important than professional and financial success. Gibbons became one of the principal advocates for the merger with Unitarians, seeing it as Universalism's opportunity to influence and grow a larger movement. He believed Universalists and Unitarians already had much in common. Both valued freedom of belief, respected individual conscience, worked for a fairer society, and wanted to build a stronger liberal faith. He is reported as saying "We are not burying Universalism, we are planting it".

Dorothy Spoerl is another important figure leading up to the 1961 merger and was a leading voice of modern Universalism. She became a strong advocate for merging with the Unitarians and through being an excellent teacher as well as preacher, she helped Universalists look confidently toward the future. Like Brainard Gibbons, she also believed the two traditions shared the same core beliefs. Long before the 1961 merger, she helped lead the joint Universalist-Unitarian work on religious education. By developing shared curricula and teacher-training programs, thousands of children were helped to discover the common values of the two traditions.

To sum up, the story of Universalists and Unitarians originated in two quite different ways. The Universalists began with a belief in universal salvation; that all human souls will ultimately be reconciled to God and saved. The Unitarians began by rejecting the Trinity in favour of the oneness of God, building a faith shaped by reason and conscience. Over time, the two religions drew closer, forming shared values of human worth, compassion and freedom of belief. In 1961 in the United States the two churches merged. There was much long debate leading up to the merger and six principles and their wording were finally decided upon. In 1985 there was a revision resulting in our familiar seven principles.

The seven principles hung on our wall that we prize so much, and the values draped below me on the pulpit, come from the heritage of both Unitarians and Universalists. I hope we can build on that foundation.

Meditation / Conversation starter:

- What are the moments and people in the talk that meant the most to you and why?
- Some of the people in the talk paid a price for their beliefs. Has anything like that ever happened to you?