

Universalism

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How big is everything? What are the limits of the universe? What would a religion that calls itself “Universalism” be like? With history as our guide, we’ll find that, just like our expanding universe, Universalism is an ever-growing faith, one that started in Christian love and eventually became so inclusive that it overcame the limitations of its own heritage.

The “universal” part of the term, “universalism,” originally represented the idea of universal salvation. Universal salvation is the religious idea that there is no such thing as eternal punishment; that there is no hell to which sinners will be condemned. Although doing away with hell may sound like heresy to some, 2,000 years ago the idea of hell was more controversial than universal salvation.

Jews had an idea of a kind of afterlife they called, “Sheol.” Sheol, translated into Greek as Hades, was a shadowy place where everyone went after death, the good and the bad alike. It wasn’t a particularly well-developed idea, and really only came up as the address of a dead person who might be contacted, as when King Saul commanded the witch of Endor to speak to the spirit of the prophet, Samuel, who promptly predicted Saul’s downfall.

Hell seems to be based more on a Greek belief in a place called “Tartarus,” where defeated gods received punishment. Oddly, the word used most often in the New Testament is “Gehenna,” which was a valley outside Jerusalem that was used as a garbage dump and this is where they carted the bodies of those too poor to afford being buried in a tomb. Sometimes the dump caught fire and burned noxiously. The early Christian church provided burial with honor for their members, so the term referred more to what happen to the bodies of people who died without anyone to care fore them rather than anything like eternal punishment.

Anyway, the theme of punishment was conspicuously absent from Jesus’ teachings. Jesus’ stories emphasize forgiveness and reconciliation rather than

retribution. The parable of the lost sheep emphasizes the shepherd's concern for the one sheep in the flock that goes astray, implying that all people are important and loved, not just the ones who follow the rules.

This is made even more explicit in the story of the prodigal son. Imagine a small family business run by a father and his two sons, when the younger son gets restless, fed up with the dull daily routine. He wants to travel, to get away. So he goes to his father and demands his share of the business that he would eventually share with his older brother upon the father's death. Now a transfer of a family business as part of an estate is one thing, but this demand is something else: he demands his share in cash. Now, they're doing pretty well, they've got employees and servants, but cash flow is always a challenge in the business world.

But the father doesn't flinch. Somehow he finds the money, which he gives to his son along with his blessings. Happy, foolish son hits the road, finds the big city, falls in with people who are skilled at helping him spend his money, and quickly blows the whole bankroll. He ends up broke, starving, and living in the street. He gets a job feeding pigs (an especially loathsome job for a Jew) that doesn't even pay a living wage. When he realizes the pigs are eating better than he is, he finally hits bottom, swallows his pride and decides to go home and hopes his father will take him back as a low-level hired hand.

But when he returns his father immediately rejoices and proclaims a feast and restores his place without resentment or recrimination. The older brother is upset about rewarding his wastrel brother, but his father points out, "Son, you are always with me and all that is mine is yours. But we have to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was lost and has been found." This is a story of a god that values love and reconciliation over punishment. The most important Biblical passage for Universalists is "God is love," and this provided the basis for the writings of Origen, bishop of Alexandria.

The emergence of Christianity was an extremely diverse movement, with many, many differing opinions about the meaning of Jesus' life and teachings. But Origen unified those many views around the year 200 into what became, essentially, the first widely accepted teaching, the first Christian orthodoxy. And it is a story that had no use for either punishment or hell.

In the beginning, so the story went, God existed peacefully in eternal union with all the souls in the universe. And then, for some unknowable reason long before the beginning of time, a desire to separate from God arose among the souls. This desire for independent existence saddened God, who knew that souls could only be fulfilled in joyous union with their creator. But God loved the souls and wanted to help them learn this difficult truth. So, out of sadness and compassion, God created the Earth as a place where souls could be born and taste separate existence, eventually to learn that their fate and destiny was to be reunited with God.

However, when the souls separated from God, there was one contented soul that remained united with God. And it was that one faithful soul whom God eventually sent to Earth to be born as Jesus in order to teach people the way back to their true home in the loving embrace of their creator.

This sweet story of divine love provided the first unifying theme for Christianity. Notice that it is truly universal: all souls came from God and will eventually be reunited – none lost, none damned. While we're at it, notice also that it is Unitarian – Jesus was a soul like all others, but one who brought a healing message of divine love.

Christianity didn't need the idea of punishment, but it turned out that Christians eventually did. Christianity experienced a radical militarization during the periods before and after the year 1,000, first under Charlemagne and later under the so-called Holy Roman Empire, eventually leading to the crusades. This expansion of Christianity through military conquest produced a diverse body of believers, many of whom lacked much interest in following the dictates of the church. It was during this relatively late period that the concepts of an afterlife including the rewards of heaven and the eternal punishments of hell were introduced.

Jesus' teaching of reconciliation and universal salvation was thus lost to Christianity. And the Holy Roman Empire is far from dead; it's alive and influential to this very day as part of our religious and cultural heritage.

The doctrine of hell, however popular, remained philosophically unsatisfying. Like the idea of a round Earth, Universalism was known without

controversy amongst scholars throughout history. John Scotus, head of the influential Palatine Academy in 9th century France, concluded that, since God is the source and end of everything, all humans also had their beginning in God and would end in God.

In the 14th century John Wyclif mounted vigorous attacks on orthodox church doctrines. He believed that individuals could interpret the Bible for themselves, without the interpretation from Church clergy, and that Grace was universally available.

In the 18th century, the humanism of the Enlightenment provided the impetus for the reemergence of Universalism as a religious movement. America's founding vision was a religious humanism that saw no need for a God who took personal interest in the affairs of individuals. Rather, their God endowed persons with certain unalienable rights, chief among them being life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for all, not the few elect. Benjamin Rush, signer of the Declaration of Independence and Father of American Psychiatry, was an outspoken Universalist.

One of the founders of modern English Universalism was James Rely. Rely began as a Calvinist Methodist in the 1700's, and was quickly embraced as a powerful and popular preacher. His enthusiasm for the salvation of all souls troubled the denomination, however, and he was dismissed. This only gave him the freedom to expand his views, though, and he decided upon an interpretation of Jesus' atonement as universal, not partial, salvation. Although his conclusions were controversial, his theology was quite traditional. In his best-selling book, *Union: or a treatise of consanguinity and affinity between Christ and his Church*, Rely reasoned that, if all had sinned in Adam, all were saved in Christ.

One who took issue with this Universalist heresy was the young Methodist preacher, John Murray. A staunch opponent of Rely's ideas, he visited a Relyian disciple to convince her of her error. Much to his surprise, she confounded him with the logic of her position. Murray then attended a worship service led by Rely and was moved by the depth of sincerity and spirituality he encountered there, and converted to Universalism. His idealism, however, led to personal misfortune. He lost his position in the Methodist church and soon after lost his

infant son and beloved wife to illness. At risk for being sent to debtor's prison for medical bills, downcast and distressed, he vowed to give up religion altogether and make a new life for himself in America.

Murray booked passage on the brig, "Hand in Hand," bound for New York. Diverted first to Philadelphia, they were on their way back up the Jersey coast when they ran aground on a sandbar. Murray went ashore to seek provisions, where he met a farmer named Thomas Potter, an uneducated but deeply religious man who had built a chapel on his property and invited itinerant ministers to preach there, hoping to hear a message he could wholeheartedly accept. On learning that Murray had once done some preaching, Potter invited him to deliver a sermon the following Sunday. Murray refused at first but gave in to Potter's persistence and accepted, provided that the wind did not change first and blow the ship off the sandbar. Potter assured him that it would not, and indeed the wind held steady. Murray's sermon on universal grace, delivered to Potter and his daughters on September 30, 1770, was evidently exactly the one Potter had long been waiting to hear, and its effect on Murray himself was likewise profound – by the time he had finished, his reservations about preaching were gone forever.

Soon after the service was over, a sailor came from the ship with the news that the wind had just changed direction, and the ship was off the sandbar and ready to sail. Potter and Murray both regarded their chance meeting and the postponement of the wind's change as a sign of God's Providence – perhaps a Universalist miracle! Murray sailed on to New York City, preached there to an enthusiastic congregation, and was soon traveling up and down the northeastern coast, sowing the seeds of Universalism wherever he went.

His critics, mostly the orthodox clergy, were hostile of his ideas. A pamphlet titled "An Attempt to Nip in the bud the Unscriptural Doctrine of Universal Salvation" described Murray as a "false teacher" of "corrupt tenets."

John Murray was a charismatic speaker with a common touch to which people readily responded. He spoke extemporaneously, and seems never to have been at a loss for words. Once, while preaching in Boston, one of his opponents threw a large rock through the window, narrowly missing his head. Murray

promptly picked up the rock and said, “This argument is solid and weighty, but it is neither rational nor convincing.”

He had intended to return to Thomas Potter’s church and make his home there, but his popularity and success called him to more urban areas. He settled in Gloucester, Massachusetts, founding a Universalist church there – the first in America – and later in Boston. He was instrumental in organizing Universalism as a denomination in 1793. He had his own version of the great commission, with which he sent his followers out to spread the good news of Universal salvation:

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. 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.

John Murray’s successor in the Universalist movement was Hosea Ballou. Hosea Ballou was a self-educated farm boy who became a lay preacher, eventually arriving at his own unique version of the Universalist doctrine, which he published in 1805 as *A Treatise on Atonement*, the title page of which proclaimed, “in which the finite nature of sin is argued, its cause and consequences as such; the necessity and nature of Atonement; and its glorious consequences, in the final reconciliation of all to holiness and happiness.”

Ballou’s unique argument was that God is, in a sense, the author of sin, since, being almighty, God would not allow it to exist unless it served some useful purpose. Sin is simply God’s teaching method, demonstrating the desirability of good over evil. He believed that sin was an element of earthly life and that the human soul would be immediately purged of sin at death, and hence no future punishment would be necessary.

Universalism as a movement appealed to the heart, to love, to compassionate reconciliation of all who were separated. In Universalism there are no condemned sinners, no one who is less than fully human. This

commitment to the inherent worth and dignity of every person placed Universalism at the forefront of 19th century social justice issues. They were early abolitionists, working to free and shelter runaway slaves. They were educators and feminists, founding Tufts College in 1852, and St. Lawrence University in 1856, where Olympia Brown graduated in 1863, becoming the first woman ordained by an American religious denomination.

Like Unitarianism, Universalism was initially an entirely Christian faith. Also like Unitarianism, Universalism's evolution toward greater inclusiveness was not without its challenges. As the social gospel movement expanded the frontiers of liberal religion at the end of the 19th century, J. M. Pullman issued the challenge: "You Universalists have squatted on the biggest word in the English language. Now the world is beginning to want that big word, and you Universalists must either improve the property or move off the premises!"

Universalists did, indeed, improve the property, expanding their circle to include world religions, science, and reason. But the central core of Universalism was always the eternal, incalculable love of God for all of creation. When there are so many churches using their religion as a tool to separate, to criticize, to condemn, the Universalist vision of non-judgmental love is still a revolutionary message.

Before the merger with Universalism in 1961, Unitarianism had become a rather arid field of intellectual rigor with little space for transformative encounter with mysteries beyond reason. Unitarians proclaim that there is only one ultimate reality, however it is named. Universalists have never been afraid to say that the ultimate nature of reality is love.

Universalism and Unitarianism complete each other. Love without reason can be naïvely vulnerable, but reason without love can be cruel. Whenever we're tempted to judge or reject or disapprove, let's take a moment to check in with the Universalist side of our faith and ask, "How can I use this impulse to increase the love in my heart; how can it increase the love I feel for those with whom I disagree?"

Many Christian denominations have proclaimed that you'd better get it right or you'll go to hell. This encourages the assumption that fear is the most

useful human motivation. Universalism proclaims that unless your heart and mind and life are full of love, you're in hell already, the only one there is. Universalism knows that the truest and best human motive is love.

Sometimes we say we're Unitarians as though the Universalists were just a big meal we ate in 1961. Our Universalist heritage provides something we desperately need: a doctrine of forgiveness, reconciliation, and love. I hope everyone here will feel proud to proclaim, "I am a Unitarian ***Universalist!***"