

March 4, 2007
UUFTC, Sonora

A Universalist Perspective: Hosea Ballou

Thank you for inviting me here to speak with you today. I want to share with you the perspective of a Universalist minister of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. As many of you know, the Unitarians and the Universalists were separate traditions until the two were consolidated in 1961 into the Unitarian Universalist Association. Although Universalism was by far the larger denomination in the 19th Century, by the time of the consolidation, the Universalist movement was in decline. Many Universalists feared that their movement would become lost when it joined together with the Unitarians. In many respects, they were right – today, far more attention is paid to Unitarian history and tradition than to Universalism. So, I want to share with you some notion of the development of Universalism, and also to suggest some ways in which Universalism remains relevant today.

Now please remember that my ministry arose in the context of Protestant Christianity in New England. In relating my experiences, I have to resort from time to time to words like “God” and “salvation.” These were words that we used daily. Also try to remember that we challenged the prevailing orthodoxies of our day, and that we roundly condemned as heretics by many. So when I use some of this terminology, try to think of different words or concepts that might make our experience of 200 years ago useful to you today.

In America, both Unitarianism and Universalism had their roots in the later part of the 18th Century. They came about, at least in part, as a reaction to the movement within many mainline denominations that was known as “the Great Awakening.” This movement, which began in the 1740s, was strictly Calvinist -- its preachers emphasized the danger for humanity that they would burn in everlasting hell. This Calvinism was premised on the idea all of humanity had inherited the sin of Adam and Eve. Therefore, all humans come into the world totally depraved. Because of this inherent sinfulness, most humans were doomed to eternal misery after death. For an elect portion of humanity, however, things would be different. At some time in their lives, they would feel the Holy Spirit working within them, and they would experience an ecstatic conversion. But this experience would come to very few. As I child, I was taught that it would come to no more than one person in a thousand!!

This was the tradition into which I was raised, after my birth in 1771 to Maturin and Lydia Ballou. My family lived in the small town of Richmond, New Hampshire, just across the state line from Massachusetts. My father was a Baptist preacher, deeply instilled with Calvinist doctrine. He came to the area to minister to a growing community of fellow believers, and the family had to eke out a bare existence from farming the stony soil and working at various trades. My father had little education, but this was not considered an impediment to being a preacher in those days.

Well, I had an inquiring mind, even as a young man, and I questioned this doctrine that said that most humans would roast in Hell forever. The God I believed in was a loving God, and I couldn't reconcile eternal damnation with this God of love. During my teens, I came in contact with Universalism, which was on the rise in New

England. A man named John Murray had brought Universalist ideas to the area, and few brave souls had begun to preach it. Universalism was the belief that all humans – not just the elect -- will be “saved.” Although it was viewed as heretical in 18th century New England, Universalists actually traced their roots back to 3rd Century Alexandria and theologian named Origen. Origen argued that all souls possessed the potential for good; they were not eternally damned, but would eventually find their way to redemption. Augustine, writing around 400 CE, brought about the eclipse of Universalist thought. Augustine’s writings gave rise to form of Christianity that stressed the total depravity of humans, the notion of divine grace, and the system of partial election of souls to “salvation.”

Like my father, I had little in the way of formal education. But my thinking led me to consider the Universalism I heard from local preachers, and in 1789, at the age of 18, I converted to Universalism. I knew that I wanted to be a preacher, like my father. During my 19th and 20th years, I studied hard to try to make up my academic deficiencies, but I was always to suffer from the lack of a good, thorough education. In the fall of 1791, I began to preach. I had always been a skilled debater, but this was different – my first few attempts were miserable failures – I simply froze in the pulpit and no words would come out. Little by little, my confidence grew and my preaching improved.

For several years, I taught school and served as an itinerant preacher, going from one small New England town to another to serve rural congregations. I was rustic in my appearance and dress, but I was understandable to my listeners – I spoke their language and I could illustrate my points with references to stories of the land and its people. In 1794, I rode to Oxford, MA to attend the annual convention of Universalists. On the last day of the convention, I happened to be in the pulpit with the fiery and famous Universalist preacher, Elhanan Winchester. I had not yet asked to be ordained, because I was not in a settled ministry. But Winchester, at the conclusion of his sermon, lifted up the Bible, pressed it to my chest, and declared that I was ordained. After ordination, I continued my circuit-riding, serving congregations from my native New Hampshire all the way to towns in Rhode Island and Connecticut.

Now I want to speak with you about what we Universalists believed. During the period after my ordination, I did a great deal of reading and thinking, trying to continue to hone and to shape my Universalist beliefs. One of my chief influences was Ethan Allen, the revolutionary war leader of the Green Mountain Boys. Allen had published a book entitled *Reason: the only Oracle of Man*. Allen’s book presented a powerful case for a religion of reason, and it influenced me to examine everything by the light of reason, including scripture. Reason, I concluded, must be used to see what the scriptures really say. It was this new emphasis on reason that caused me to search for justification for the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. I realized that such justification did not exist, neither in the Scriptures nor in reason. This beginning of unitarian belief began to affect my entire theology.

In 1805, I published my most important and influential work, *A Treatise on Atonement*. We wrote very differently in those days, and the *Treatise* might prove to be heavy going for modern readers. In its day, however, it proved to be extremely popular, and it also, I believe, helped to clarify Universalist theology for those who would come after me. Out of the many points I sought to make in the *Treatise*, I will focus on just two

here, to give you some flavor of the work. The first is the commitment to reason that underlies the entire work. Christian doctrine at the time held that sin is infinite, and thus merits infinite punishment. In the Treatise, I showed how this notion of infinite sin is neither scriptural nor reasonable. Sin is real, I believed, and it is serious, but it can't be infinite. If it were infinite, neither goodness nor God could be greater.

Similarly, I demonstrated that the doctrine of the Trinity was neither Biblical nor reasonable. If the Trinitarian Godhead is said to consist of three distinct persons, and each of these persons is infinite, then the Godhead would amount to the amazing sum of infinity times three! On the other hand, if it is claimed that none of the three is infinite, then the three together, along with a million more, could not make an infinite being.

What then is the atonement, which was supposedly mediated by Jesus? The traditional Christian argument was that Jesus, the Son, was sent to Earth to reconcile God to humanity's sinfulness. But, I wrote, it is not God who needs to be reconciled to humans, but humans who need to be reconciled to God. Because sin is not infinite, and because sin consists of a misapprehension by humans of what makes for happiness, it is possible, in this life, for humans to be reconciled and to be in harmony with God.

So atonement is a reconciliation, a renewal. A person is able to be free of his or her sin and to embrace love. Only love can overcome sin. This is the way I put in my *Treatise*:

There is nothing in heaven above, nor in the earth beneath,
that can do away sin, but love;
and we have reason to be eternally thankful that love is stronger than death,
that many waters cannot quench it, nor the floods drown it
that it hath power to remove the moral maladies of mankind,
and to make us free from the law of sin and death,
to reconcile us to God, and to wash us pure, in the blood of life,
of the everlasting covenant.
O love, thou great Physician of souls, what a work thou has undertaken!
All souls are thy patients; prosperous be thy labors!

The power of love is not exclusively Christian, and here lay the seeds of the Universalism that would follow. When we said that all are saved, we meant just that. Love cannot be restricted to "names, sects, denominations, people, or kingdoms."

Well, after my ordination, I served many congregations throughout New England. Most of these small, growing congregations could not afford to pay a full-time minister. I then had settled ministries in Portsmouth, New Hampshire and Salem, MA. In 1817, I was installed as minister of the Second Universalist Society in Boston. I would remain at 2nd Universalist until my death in 1852. During those 35 years, I served my congregation, continued to write and to publish, and I went on several extended speaking tours.

Although I settled in Boston, the center of Unitarian thought, there was almost no communication between the two movements. Remember that I had been (small u) unitarian in belief for a number of years. I delivered my first unitarian sermon in 1795, at least a decade before the Unitarian movement began to take formal shape. By 1805, most Universalists were unitarian in their theology. Nonetheless, Universalists generally felt shunned by the Unitarians, and I was not welcomed as an ally when I moved to

Boston. Part of the reason was theological – although Universalists included Unitarianism in their beliefs, Unitarians refused to be classed as Universalists. The idea of universal salvation was unthinkable to Unitarians at that time.

Another reason was social. Both Unitarianism and Universalism arose out of reactions to the strict Calvinism that was being preached in the 1700s. However, they arose in very different contexts. Unitarianism arose out of Congregationalist churches that mostly served the elites of New England – the emerging sea-faring merchant class, as well those with inherited wealth. Unitarians were mostly well-educated and well-off financially. Most of their ministers attended Harvard Divinity School, and by 1805 they pretty well ran the college. Universalists, by contrast, were mostly rural people, who worked at farming and manual trades. Universalists came from a motley array of denominations – Baptist, Lutheran, Moravian, Methodist, and they were looked down on as crude and uncouth by the more homogenous Unitarians.

Another reason for our distance, I believe, lay in the nature of our preaching and our worship. Both movements relied greatly on reason as the basis for our approach to the Bible and to doctrine. But we Universalists tended much more towards an appeal to the heart, to the emotions, in our gatherings. Unitarians, being well-educated and thoughtful, tended to deliver well-reasoned, carefully thought-out sermons that appealed to the intellect. Although I researched my writings and wrote them carefully, I believed that the Universalist message of redeeming love often needed to be conveyed with the involvement of one's heart, not just one's head.

Although I greatly admired William Ellery Channing, the leading Unitarian minister of his day, I did not always agree with him. Sometimes I challenged his ideas in print, and he responded. Sadly, although we served churches near each other in Boston, we never met. Thus was lost, I believe, an opportunity for our two great movements to have become allies and friends during their formative years.

So, you might ask, what does all this have to do with 21st Century Unitarian Universalism? Well, I would suggest that there are a number of lessons that might be learned from my experiences as a Universalist minister. Let me suggest three.

First of all, Never be afraid to be considered a heretic! We were probably more heretical in our day than you are in yours, but no matter! We both are committed to using reason in all aspects of our lives, including our life together as religious congregations. We must always use our rationality when someone tells us what the Bible says, what we should believe, and so forth. We must stand up for science and the scientific method. We must stand up for reason!

Secondly, I encourage you -- in your congregational life -- to give full expression to all aspects of who you are. We need to give ourselves permission to acknowledge those parts of us that go beyond our reason – our hearts, our emotions, our compassion, our spiritual selves. We are more than just our brains, and we need to nourish all sides of ourselves. We do this, for example, when we include music in our Sunday gatherings. Music speaks to different parts of ourselves than the purely rational. We do this when we join together in meditation and prayer. We do this when we join hands as a community. We do this when we open our hearts to others in companionship. We do this when we express reverence for the wonder and beauty of this universe we inhabit. Reason and Reverence!!

And finally, remember that our Universalist message was salvation for all people. And we truly meant all people; not just Universalists, not just Christians, not just Americans, not just white people. The important part of the belief that “all people are saved” is the all people part of it. And Unitarian Universalists recognize this – it is one of our greatest strengths. It means that we welcome and seek to include people of all economic classes; that we include people of all races and ethnicities; that we include gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people; that we include Atheists, Christians, Jews, Pagans, Buddhists, Hindus, and so on. Especially, at this time in our history, it means that we include our Muslim brothers and sisters. Salvation can take many forms, and we might consider what we mean by salvation in the modern world. Shouldn't we, for example, be concerned with saving all people from violent death and destruction, and from various of oppression? All people in this dazzling mass of humanity are worthy of being saved – in this life!