

Our Universalist Roots

Part of that sentence “a good destiny for the entire human race” [of Quillen Shinn] captures the idea of the single concise principle that some Unitarian Universalists would like to see instead of seven or eight principles. It sounds a bit like “God is Love.” It is universal, all inclusive, especially if we extend the idea to all sentient beings. It is this kind of sentiment, the inclusion of ALL, that lay at the heart of early Universalism when it reached North America in the 18th century.

When the word “universal” is used in a religious context, it can refer to three things: It can mean that there are many Gods that point to the same invisible unknowable mystery; Or, it can mean that there is one loving God, and that ALL will be reunited with that God after they leave this world; It can also mean that in a particular religious group or denomination, membership is open to ALL—membership is universal.

In the second half of the 1700s, American Universalists held to TWO of these three ideas: Universal salvation, and membership that is open to “all”—with just some basic and rather loose conditions.

The idea of universal salvation or a common end state exists in several religions. In Christianity, it did not just start in the 18th century in the Americas. You might say that Jesus Christ was a universalist. The statement that the kingdom of heaven is in us appears frequently in the New Testament. “In us” means in ALL of us. And the Apostle Paul took the religion that favored God’s chosen people, the Jews, and opened membership to non-Jews or gentiles. So, he was a universalist. And in the 3rd and 4th centuries, there were Christian theologians who expressed universalist ideas, ideas that were later condemned as heresy in the ecumenical councils.

In non-Christian religions, Mahayana Buddhism calls for the bodhisattva—the compassionate being—to stay behind until all other beings have reached the shores of satori, or enlightenment. The Heart Sutra ends with words that translate as Gone, gone, gone all the way over, everyone gone to the other shore, enlightenment, and the verse ends with a word that we might render as “Amen.” And in Pure Land Buddhism, Amitabha, or the Buddha of the Western Paradise, promises salvation in that heavenly paradise after death for all who will simply evoke the name “Amitabha.”

For the group of people who would call themselves Universalists in North America, we can look at the written words that encapsulate their principles, agreed upon in Philadelphia in 1790 and in a slightly different form in Winchester New Hampshire in 1803. The latter one became known as the Winchester Profession. Three things stand out in this document:

First, it begins with the sentence: “We believe that the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments CONTAIN A revelation of the character of God,” and so on.

The words “contain” and “a” give this sentence a universal, all-encompassing meaning: “Contain” implies that not everything in the Bible needs to be seen as divine revelation, so all the blood and guts, all the smiting and begetting do not have to be taken as God’s word. And “a” implies that other scriptures and experiences can also contain revelations, such the Heart Sutra, or the Koran, even though they are not specifically mentioned in the paragraph.

Second, in the next paragraph, reference is made to God, ... “who will finally restore the whole family of mankind to holiness and happiness.” OK, today we would be more gender-inclusive in the language, but the idea is there: the “whole family” is included. There are no outcasts or ne’er do wells.

And third, conditions for fellowship or membership in a local society or parish were very open and rather loosely circumscribed. But this would eventually lead to funding issues!

When we look a bit closer at the statement that humans will “finally” be restored to holiness and happiness after death, meaning “will be saved,” what exactly did they mean by “finally?” Well, there were lots of disagreements about that in the decades after the Winchester Profession. All were in agreement that there was no hell where some end up roasting in eternal damnation. Ne’er do wells would not go to Hell. Hell NO. But that’s where the agreement ended.

Some universalists like Hoseah Ballou thought that the soul would experience immediate salvation upon death, because sin is limited to earth. That makes a lot of cosmological sense.

But others (most, actually) thought that the soul would be “disciplined” and “educated in the period following death. After a finite time—which could be very long—the soul would then be ready for eternal holiness and happiness.

Still others—like John Murray who is considered a “founder” of American Universalism, thought that everyone in the world is already saved—similar to some Buddhist ideas and also the early Christian saying that the Kingdom of heaven is in us—and that most will continue to be miserable after death, until they are reconciled to God. He called this reconciliation “restoration.”

Later Universalists who described the transformation after death would be called **Restorationists**. Those who believed in free will reasoned that a soul cannot be fully restored until it “wants” to be saved, and as souls can be very stubborn indeed, this may take as much as 100,000 years. So, the believers in a period of discipline after death—a sort of purgatory in all but name—did not believe that all consequences of human sins are already dealt with on this earth.

So, there was a lot of bickering, arguing and anarchy in the ranks of Universalists which, when taken together with their dislike of hierarchical bureaucracy and the concomitant difficulty of raising funds made it difficult to achieve large numbers of members. The universal possibilities for all were being eroded and diminished by all this strife.

Another important dimension of universalists’ thinking appeared in a document that was signed in Philadelphia in 1790, called the Articles of Religion and Plan for Government. Its third chapter contained a number of recommendations, including one that called for putting an end to all wars, and another one that called for the abolition of slavery. But this last recommendation did not go all the way, as it recommended the GRADUAL abolition of slavery. So again, disagreements ensued about the meaning of “gradual.” Yet, it was an early expression of this position.

In Michigan, there is a long Universalist congregational history. In my internship congregation in Lansing, that history goes back to the middle of the 19th century, when Lansing was still called a “village”. John Sanford, a newspaper publisher from Ann Arbor, started the Lansing Universalist Society in

1849, nearly 175 years ago. And the merger with the Unitarian part of their history happened in 1957, four years before the national merger of the two denominations. Interestingly, at that time the church was called the Universalist Unitarian Church. The same was the case in Champaign IL, where the name of the joint church also was Universalist Unitarian Church. After the national merger, the names were reversed. By the time of the national merger, the Universalist congregation members made up only a rather small fraction of the total.

What is the relevance of this story for us today? There are several things it points to, for our combined UU religion overall and for any particular congregation.

For one thing, Universalist ideas of inclusivity and possibility remain very much present in our covenantal UU principles, beginning with the first principle of “The inherent worth and dignity of every person,” and the seventh principle of “Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part,” meaning all of us humans, and all other sentient and non-sentient beings. And today we also have the ongoing reminder to widen the circle of concern, that is, making for more inclusiveness of all and perhaps adopting an eight principle that calls for actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions. That includes all types of oppression, universally so.

Another thing this history points to is that religious groups do not survive indefinitely with lofty ideals but without solid organizational structures and fundraising. As congregations are moving into their annual stewardship drives, this serves as a constant reminder.

And finally, as UU’s, we are a people who continuously embrace universal possibilities. Let us nourish those Universalist roots. May we make it so.