

Universalism: Roots and Current Practices

By: Michelle Brown

Capital Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Victoria
Sunday, August 9, 2015

This morning's homily has been a wonderful learning experience for me. It required me to learn a great deal about our faith that was new to me, and it is a pleasure to have this opportunity to share it with you as well.

In the roughly 18 years I have been a Unitarian Universalist, I have heard numerous speakers address our history, most of them dealing with our Unitarian heritage.

The anti-trinitarian names are somewhat familiar to us:

— Michael Servetus, burned at the stake in Geneva in 1553, having been condemned by both a Catholic court and the Council of Geneva

— Francis David, the founder of Unitarianism in Transylvania who died in prison 26 years after the death of Servetus

— the chemist Joseph Priestly, discoverer of oxygen, who had to flee Europe for Philadelphia two centuries later, in 1791, for his promotion of Unitarianism in England

— and William Ellery Channing whose articulation of American Unitarian theology led, in 1825, to the establishment of the first American Unitarian denomination, the First Unitarian Church of Baltimore.

Today, however, our focus is our less frequently mentioned heritage: the Universalist side of Unitarian Universalism. We'll look at the early doctrine of Universalism as it was expressed by Hosea Ballou in the early 1800s - what I call the "all saved" version of Universalism - and then move forward to the mid-20th century redefinition of Universalism by Kenneth Patton and his 15-year long "experiment" in the 1950s and early 60s to create a "new religion" one that drew from a diversity of wisdom traditions. What I call the "all faiths" approach to Universalism.

If you picked up an order of service, you probably found one of these inside. Does anyone need one? [see end note]

We're going to start with him. We're going to ask two questions: Who was this guy? And what was he thinking?

Actually, before we get to the guy in the photograph, Hosea Ballou, I want to talk about that second question for a minute, the “what was he thinking” question, to reflect for a moment on the various ways the thinking and writing of others affects us.

Sometimes writers are able to express ideas you feel, yourself, to be true, but could not, yourself, have articulated. Andrew Solomon is a thinker whose writing on queerness had that effect for me. I know other people who have had a similar experience with Christopher Hitchens’ writing on atheism.

To read the work of such thinkers is restorative, sometimes even emboldening.

Another kind of thinking we seek out is thinking that helps ease our sense of confusion. We love it when people explain things to us. Like the banking system. Or neuroplasticity. So we read people like Malcolm Gladwell. Or the writing of people who can not only explain what’s going on, but can envision an alternate future. Naomi Klein.

Sometimes we seek out the thinking of others as a means of managing our own, everyday thoughts. Like reading Pema Chodron every day at lunch when you’re going through a divorce. Or following Anne Lamott on Facebook.

And then there are the monumental thinkers, the people who affect not only us, but also our society. Martin Luther King Jr.

And other thinkers who affect not only our society, but our age. Gandhi. Thích Nhất Hạnh.

And lastly, there are thinkers who affect the ages. Socrates. Shakespeare. Confucius. Einstein.

I invite you to keep this spirit of intellectual searching and social meaning making in mind as we turn to the life and ideas of Hosea Ballou, a writer who had a great influence on American society, but who also intended his writing, and his preaching, to bring comfort and inspiration.

Who was Hosea Ballou, the person called the Father of Universalism? What was *he* thinking?

Before we meet the man himself, let’s position him within his age. Born in America in 1771, he begins to articulate his theological ideas at 19 years of age. The American Revolution is freshly over, George Washington is president, people are wearing bifocals and eating commercially made ice cream.

Ballou is the son of a Baptist preacher, carrying all the burdens we can imagine a PK, or preacher’s kid, carrying.

That the household is Baptist is an important consideration in understanding Ballou. The Baptist denomination emerged fairly early in the Reformation, less than 100 years after Martin Luther

posted his 95 thesis in 1517. Like the Catholics of the age, as well as the early Lutherans, and all follows of John Calvin's Reformed Christianity, the early Baptists believed in two important doctrines: original sin and predestination. There was a place, a physical location, called hell. Had it not been for the sacrificial death of Jesus, thanks to original sin, every one would end up in hell.

By conquering death, Jesus the man becomes Jesus the Christ and eternal torment in hell is no longer everyone's ultimate fate. Some will be saved.

For those of you who, like me, do not believe in hell as a concrete phenomenon, the concept of hell can seem quite strange. The question changes from a mild, curious wondering what folks were thinking and becomes instead an incredulous "*What were they thinking?*"

But hell was something people were convinced existed. It was one of those "stubbornly persistent ideas."

To avoid hell required *belief* in Christian salvation, thus the imperative to convert as many people as possible. But even then, the Christian faith offered no guarantees. According to the doctrine of predestination, unless your name was on a list established by God before even creation, you were doomed. All your Christian faith would bring you was the joy of godliness during your lifetime. Your fate after death was unknowable all would be revealed as the "sheep" were separated from the "goats" on Judgement Day. By becoming a Christian, you moved from the hopelessly damned, to the possibly damned but hopeful.

Hosea Ballou's father preached in this tradition. The young Hosea himself was described as being untainted by the rival doctrine of Arminianism¹, which stated that ALL Christians were saved. Rather than the doctrine of predestination, these Christians embraced a doctrine of "Christian Universalism" and established a Christian denomination by that name, the Universalist Church. For these folks, if you believed, and demonstrated that belief by being baptized, you were in with God and on your way to heaven.

Ballou's father would have none of it. And neither would Ballou, but in a dramatically different way. At 19, he came to reject his father's idea that some Christians were going to hell². But he didn't stop there. Hosea Ball also rejected the Arminian idea that non-Christians everywhere were going to hell.

Hosea Ballou rejected the idea of hell outright.

¹ Whittemore, *Life of Rev. Hosea Ballou, Section VI*

² <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/36936/36946-h/36946-h.html>

Hosea Ballou arrived at *his* version of Universalism - the Universalist doctrine that all human beings, without exception, would be blessed in the afterlife - through the same means Micheal Servetus used to arrive at Unitarianism: study of the Bible. And, like Servetus, Ballou's rational mind rejected not only hell, but also the belief "Christ as the Son of God was also, at the same time, his own Father."³

Ballou's conversion to the two doctrines of "Universalism, universal salvation for all, and Unitarianism, the unity of the Godhead rather than a Triune God as Father, Son, and Holy Ghosts,"⁴ released him from the fear of a wrathful God that pervaded Christianity of the time and enabled him to devote his life to writing and preaching a message of atonement. An atonement that brought humankind not only to holiness, but happiness.

It is, in fact, Ballou's writing on happiness, and his theory that it is a drive to achieve happiness that motivates our actions for good and for ill, for which he is best known. The materials on Ballou published by the UUA put it this way:

Ballou believed human emotions prompt us to moral or immoral actions, so we are invited to strengthen the emotions that reap happiness for self and others. He believed we have a God-given right to be happy. God is love, Ballou insisted, and when we feel this love we are happy.⁵

Over the years, Ballou's version of Universalism came to be embraced throughout the denomination. By the time the Universalists and the Unitarians were contemplating the merger of the two denominations in the mid-20th century, the Universalist Great Avowal read as follows:

The Bond of Fellowship in The Universalist Church shall be a common purpose to do the will of God as Jesus revealed it and to cooperate in establishing the Kingdom for which he lived and died. To that end, we avow our faith in God as Eternal and All-Conquering Love, in the spiritual leadership of Jesus, in the supreme worth of every human personality, in the authority of truth known or to be known, and in the power of men of good will and sacrificial spirit to overcome all evil and progressively establish the kingdom of God.⁶

In his 1953 treatise on Universalism, Robert Cummins, the general superintendent of the Universalist Church of America, had this to say about the Great Avowal:

³ <http://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/adults/movesus/workshop3/282532.shtml>

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ <http://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/adults/movesus/workshop3/282521.shtml>

⁶ Cummins www.pacificuu.org/publ/univ/writings/cummins_uca.html

“... the agreement between us is comparable to the agreement between scientists. Beliefs held by scientists are not prescribed. Scientific truth issues from the use of the scientific method: laboratory testing and experimentation; unhampered and unbiased research. *All we insist upon is that our beliefs do not result from revelation; nor are they essential either to our personal salvation or to the life of our Church.* [emphasis added] They are inferences, fruit of the scientific method as applied to religion. They are, as they should be, *working hypotheses*, used as hypotheses are used in every other department of living, as tools by use of which we are aided in our growth toward the state of all-round maturity for which the privilege of life was given us for which we are intended.⁷

Eight years later, when the Unitarians and Universalists merged their denominations, they agreed they would be guided by six principles, the first of which was: To strengthen one another in a free and disciplined search for truth as the foundation of our religious fellowship, wording that echoes the words of Robert Cummins and that continues to be reflected in the principles we affirm and promote today.

When reading Cummins’ treatise this week, I was struck as well by this paragraph:

[The Universalist] starts with the assumption that religion *is* man’s natural environment, is native to him, not foreign. A man may have a special kind of religious experience, or he may go through life without it; but religion, as such, is a permanent attribute of his nature. There is no distinction as among us between believers and unbelievers, redeemed and lost. To us, that sort of thing is not an act of faith, or a particular relationship into which one enters of his own volition. We build on the assumption man is religious, in much the same sense he is gregarious, needs shelter, clothing, food, falls in love, marries, and begets children, or enters into any other of the thousand and one perfectly natural and normal relationships of life. And it would seem the social sciences substantiate this assumption.⁸

Indeed, in his 2006 book, *The Happiness Hypothesis*, the psychologist Jonathan Haidt discusses the human feeling of “elevation,” describing it as a sensation as visceral and intense as disgust, the feeling which Haidt has studied most extensively. According to Haidt, this fundamental human attribute, the capacity to feel elevation, underpins much of what humans consider spiritual and religious experience and plays an essential role in human moral development.⁹ What seemed apparent to Cummins in the mid-20th century is being proven out by scientists researching religious experience today.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Haidt, 2006, 193-200

The last facet of Universalism I want to include is a brief look at Kenneth Patton's 15-year religious experiment at the Charles Street Meeting House in Boston, from 1949 to 1964. Bold and visionary, Kenneth Patton's efforts continue to reverberate in Unitarian Universalism today.

A poet and artist, Kenneth Patton was an inspired and inspiring intellect. Raised in a strict Methodist household, he became a humanist while pursuing his divinity degree at the University of Chicago.

His passion for the arts profoundly influenced his ministry. In 1949, Patton took a position at a newly founded Universalist congregation, the Charles Street Meeting House. Ballou's Universalist doctrine that a loving God would not condemn anyone to hell had by now been embraced by other Christian denominations and the Charles Street project was intended to revitalize the Universalist presence in the city.

Patton did more than revitalize Universalism. He reinvented it.

Patton's vision was that by incorporating the artistic traditions of a diversity of world religions, the Charles Street Meeting House would be the starting ground of a new religion, a "religion for one world."¹⁰

The experiment failed, but the legacy lives on. The congregation amassed an impressive art collection, some of which can be seen at the Starr King School for the Ministry in Berkeley, California.

Kenneth Patton was a prolific writer and lyricist and he played an important role in the development of the new hymnal used after the merger, in 1961, of the Unitarian and Universalist denominations.

While a new religion did not come to pass, I suspect it is Patton's vision of a new Universalism that inspires the Unitarian Universalist traditions of incorporating diverse religious symbolism into our architecture, decorations, and adornments; of emphasizing the importance of understanding world religions through religious education; and of allowing space for the exploration of a diversity of religious practice, both within our services and as adjuncts to mainstream Unitarian Universalist practice.

Indeed, while the front of today's order of service features the two symbols of our founding faiths, the Universalist offset cross in a circle and the Unitarian flaming chalice, the photograph captures only a quarter of a large mural spanning the width of the proscenium of the First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque. The other three quarters are adorned with symbols from the Egyptian ankh to the Zoroastrian vase of fire.

¹⁰ <http://uudb.org/articles/kennethpatton.html>

Our hymnal includes songs from Hinduism, Sufism, and Judaism and readings from St. Francis of Assisi to Lao-Tse.

This is a tradition and heritage to be treasured and celebrated. But I want also to include a caution from a friend of mine, the UU theologian Stefan Jonasson:

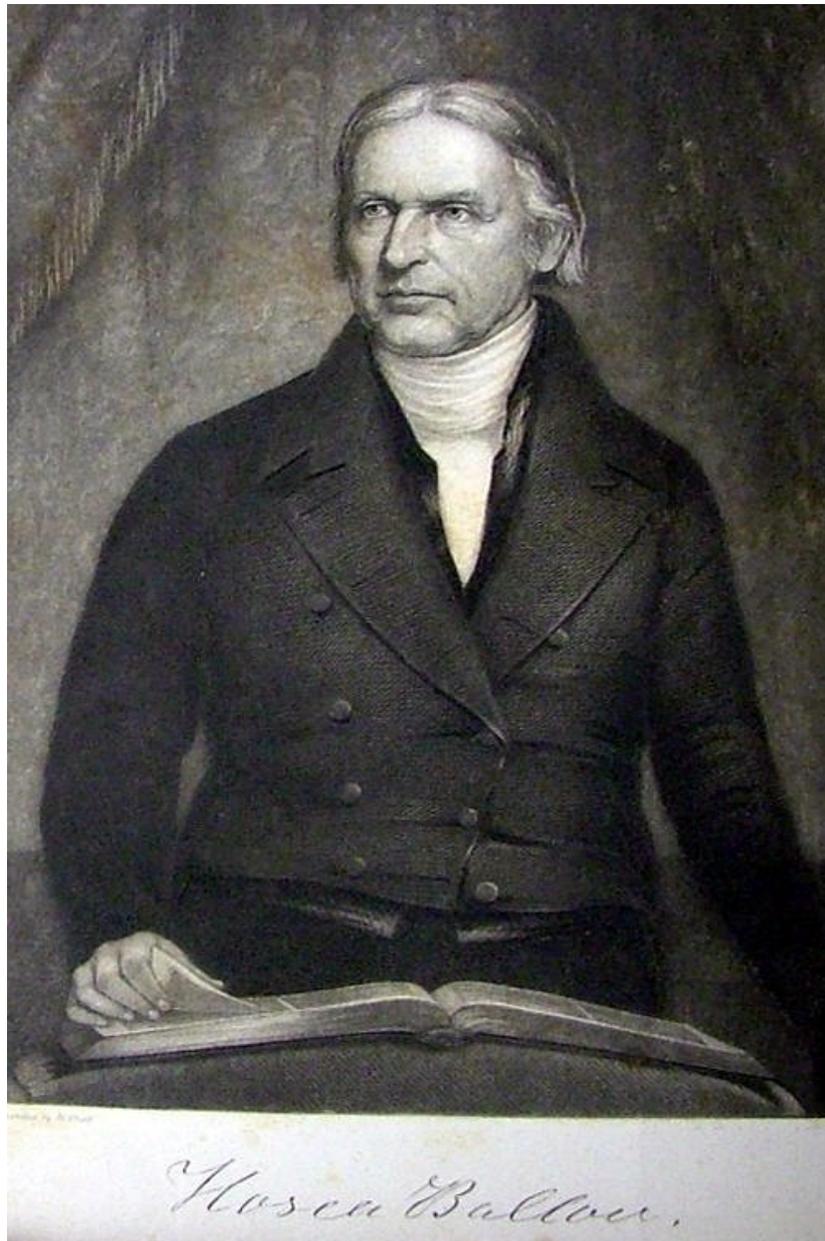
It's a mistaken Universalism that believes all things. I love our capacity to integrate truth from diverse sources and to find wisdom in all of the world's major spiritual traditions, which is clearly part of the genius of Unitarian Universalism. But we cannot be everything to everyone everywhere and every time! Some things are simply unbelievable and no amount of sentiment or goodwill can change that.¹¹

Jonasson summarized the core teachings of our Universalist heritage as follows:

- 1) that whatever else God may be or not be, God is love and that even if we reject belief in God at all, we can still believe in the power of love;
- 2) that no individual or tradition possess the whole truth, but that each grasps a piece of what is true, perhaps several such pieces;
- 3) that all people are somehow sacred, whether we call this an inner divinity or simply human dignity; and
- 4) that the same fate, whatever it may be, awaits us all.¹²

¹¹ Jonasson, *My Universalist Epiphany*, 4

¹² *Ibid.*



Photographer unknown, www.preteristarchive.com/ARTchive/Portraits/hyper/ballou2.jpg

Bibliography

Bailey, Donald A. *Religious Explorations: History, Theology & Spiritual Values*. Altona, AB; Friesens, 2013: 132-148

Behee, Rev. Wells E. "History of Universalism." 1-19. Accessed August 7, 2015. universals-church.org/universalist_history.htm

Cleary, Maryell. "Kenneth Leo Patton" posted April 30 2001. <http://uudb.org/articles/kennethpatton.html>. Accessed August 7, 2015.

Cummins, Robert. "The Universalist Church of America." 1-12. Accessed August 7, 2015. pacific.org/publ/univ/writings/cummins_uca.html.

Haidt, Jonathan. *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom*. Basic Books, 2006.

Harper, Dan. "Do all religions share a common thread?: A clear-eyed understanding of our religious differences may be the best home for promoting cooperation among different religions." *Bookshelf* (2010). uuworld.org/articles/religion-common-thread, 1-12. Accessed August 8, 2015.

Jonasson, Rev. Stefan M. "My Universalist Epiphany" *Sermon at First Universalist Church of Winnipeg*. Sunday April 13, 2014.

MacCulloch, Diarmaid. *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years*. Viking, 2010

Whittemore, Rev. Thomas. *The life of Rev. Hosea Ballou, 1854, Section VL He Joins the Baptist Church*