

Salvation by Character

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Easter presents a unique challenge for Unitarian Universalists. The roots of our tradition are Protestant Christian of course, but even Unitarian Christianity does not mesh well with the Easter story. It is a faith informed by reason rather than belief in miracles. Still less does the doctrine of salvation sit well with most Unitarian Universalists these days. Of course the Universalists began their existence as a group who believed that everyone is saved. Yet even these Universalists at their most Christian were no fans of the death and resurrection of Christ. For both Unitarians and Universalists historically it is Jesus' life and ministry, rather than his passion, death and resurrection, that has inspired us.

This poses an interesting concept: is it possible to conceive of salvation without Easter? As I said, the Universalists came up with a resounding yes. The Unitarians were a bit more subtle about things. But I am getting ahead of the story. First we must examine how this idea of salvation came about in the first place.

As is true of many Christian doctrines, theories of salvation find their origins in the Ancient Christian world. I would call this Faith versus Works round one. An Irish monk by the name of Palegius believed that the way one gets into heaven is by doing good deeds. It was a pretty straightforward notion really; not unlike Hindu belief in karma. Score enough brownie points and God will let you into heaven.

On the other side of the debate was the North African bishop Augustine. Augustine was a prolific writer, teacher, and theologian who seemed to have relished getting into debates with people. Many of his writings are very famous, and influence Western thought in profound ways. Augustine disagreed with Palegius, and taught that there is nothing one can do to earn salvation. It is a gift given to us by God which we do not earn and can never earn. Augustine himself had lead a very sinful life, and in his confessions he reveals how powerless he was over his addictions and tendencies to sin. Therefore only God, not humanity, can overcome this hurdle. Eventually Augustine's view prevailed as the official teaching of the Ancient Christian Church. It is interesting to wonder what would have happened if Pelagius had won. His version of Christianity was not so different from Judaism, whereas Augustine's theology symbolized a significant break with Jewish thought and practice.

Well if some of that sounded familiar, it is because in the fifteenth century a German monk, in an Augustinian monastery, picked up this

line of reasoning in round two of Faith versus Works. Martin Luther was disgusted by the Catholic Church's practice of selling lay indulgences. Basically this was a practice in which people who wanted to ensure that they would be going to heaven would make a donation to the Catholic Church. In return they would receive a little certificate guaranteeing that they would be entering the pearly gates. The Pope at the time was building St. Peter's Basilica and was a bit strapped for cash. I am sure this idea must have come from a Capital Campaign consultant somewhere. Its lousy theology but brilliant fundraising!

Luther argued that this was completely contrary to anything taught in the Bible or by Augustine and questioned the authority of the church's teachings. His argument was that all of us are inherently sinful. There is nothing that can be done of our own account by our own will to change this. Luther started almost all of his writings with a reflection on original sin because it sets up the next part of his argument so well. Therefore the only way out, the only way to be saved, is by faith in Jesus as the son of God and his actual resurrection. This is not an action one can take but a gift, grace, given to us. Thus the teachings in Matthew 5 and the Sermon on the Mount are there to show us how unattainable Jesus' teachings are. We can never measure up and therefore we are all sinful and in need of grace.

Round three of Faith versus Works occurs in the Enlightenment with our ancestor William Ellery Channing. Channing switched this

around by denying Luther's premise that we are all inherently sinful. He ruined the set up. Without the doctrine of original sin there was nothing to motivate us to seek salvation only in the death and resurrection of Christ. Instead Channing and other Unitarians like Theodore Parker, would say that Jesus' teachings, particularly Matthew 5, are the basis of the religious life. Rather than acting as a demoralizing teaching as the Sermon on the Mount is to Luther, it inspires Channing as an ideal that we can strive toward. Later Unitarians, influenced by the theory of evolution and the idea that we are always getting better, came to believe that this ethical ideal of moral perfection was an attainable state. James Freeman Clarke was among them. Rather than the kingdom of God being external, he said, it is inside each of us; it is a state of mind and heart.

Clarke called this idea "Salvation by Character." Channing's name for it was "Self-Culture." Nowadays we would call this something like "spiritual growth" or better yet "spiritual maturity." As such, it is not the old idea of Pelagius or anything close to selling lay indulgences. Salvation by Character is not simply about doing good works, it is about becoming a better person. This is a subtle yet important difference. As James Freeman Clarke points out in quoting Jesus, there is an inner dimension to Salvation by Character. Good works are not done to score points to impress God. Even Luther would correctly point out; God won't be too impressed by our little bundle of good works. No, doing

good things transforms the one doing them. It alters your inner sensibilities making you more aware and empathetic to the needs of people around you. Soon you have a higher regard for yourself. So that not only are you helping people through your good actions, but you are also gaining self-esteem, improving your relationships with others, breaking bad habits, and in general improving your life. This is “salvation” in a very pragmatic sense. “Let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works.”

In many ways Channing’s view of “Self Culture” and Clarke’s notion of “Salvation by Character” share a lot of commonalities with Eastern philosophies and practices. Salvation by Character has a strong “mindfulness” quality to it, even if Channing didn’t really teach meditation. But he did teach a sort of intellectual reflection on yourself and how you live. He felt that through education one could “awaken,” so to speak, to your own true nature. Thus it was possible to improve yourself through reason and discipline. A friend of mine, who is a minister and a scholar of Emerson, felt so strongly about this affinity between Salvation by Character and Eastern religion that he went to Plum Village in France to study under Thich Nhat Hanh for a month.

Probably the best example of salvation by character that I can think of comes to us from a holiday movie. Forgive me, for it is not an Easter movie but rather a movie about Groundhog’s Day. Yes that one! Believe it or not, but the movie Groundhog’s Day starring Bill Murray

and Andy McDowell is the subject of a tremendous amount of religious commentary. No theologian in their right mind takes Ghostbusters seriously, but serious members of the clergy and the academy, from multiple traditions and religions, always talk about that movie Groundhog's Day.

For those of you who don't know what I am talking about the premise is thus. Bill Murray is a weatherman stuck in Punksatawnee Pennsylvania covering annual sighting of the groundhog. He is also a first class jerk: he treats his co-workers badly, he is a self-centered diva, arrogant, and lecherous. He spends much of his time hitting on his co-worker, Andy McDowell, who is utterly disgusted by him. When he finds himself stuck in town overnight because of a blizzard, he awakens to an interesting discovery: he is reliving the same day over and over again. No matter what he does he can't help but wake up the next morning on February 2nd in Punksatawnee Pennsylvania.

At first Bill Murray takes advantage of the situation. He can order whatever he wants and it is never charged to his credit card. Sex, food, stealing money, none of it has consequences for him. He tries to learn as much about Andy McDowell as possible so as to seduce her. He tries day after day, to no avail. Finally he gets depressed by experiencing the same events over and over and attempts suicide. But even killing himself does not stop him from waking up again the next morning in his hotel room. Many Hindus and Buddhists point to this movie as an

example of the suffering that continuous rebirth can bring: repeating our old bad habits and desires over and over, always being trapped in a prison of our own making.

Finally Murray decides to try new things. He takes up piano lessons and ice sculpture. He learns where and when people need help, and so runs errands catching a boy falling out of a tree, saving the mayor from choking, or changing a flat tire. Jewish commentators have pointed to this as an example of mitzvah: doing good works. But Bill Murray is not saved when he starts to do good works. He finally breaks the cycle of waking up each day in the same place when he becomes a good person. It is only when these good deeds are not meant to impress a woman, or so that he might exploit someone, or even for the person he helped. No he is freed from his own private hell when he does good things for their own sake; when he himself is transformed by the happiness he brings to other people. As James Freeman Clarke points out, the kingdom of God is within, not external to us. That is salvation by character; good works done for their own sake.

The problem with the Faith versus Works debate is that it is too linear. This is not an either/or proposition. It is rather a cyclical process. So when one does something good, reflect on this action. What does it mean? What significance does it hold for you? By answering these questions we might slightly alter our beliefs. We might for example begin to understand the suffering of another person better.

Serving food at a homeless shelter makes one more aware of the plight of the homeless, and by reflecting on this experience; makes us more sensitive to their suffering. We then might become more aware of various social or economic systems that keep people impoverished, thereby expanding our belief system. Thus in addition to serving people food, now perhaps you write letters to your congressman or woman, or lobby the state legislature. Or take a more modest approach and simply talk to that stranger you might have otherwise passed by or overlooked. In each case, a new good deed emanated from one's inner transformation. This process of action, reflection, new action, and transformation, continuously builds upon itself, and as a result we grow, evolve, and mature the spiritual side of ourselves. In nineteenth century language we might say we "expand our character." Whatever you call it, you are helping others and in a very profound and sophisticated way, you are helping yourself at the same time. That is a form of salvation I can get behind anytime.

But what of the afterlife, you might ask? What about those folks who are dying and are afraid and need comfort? Surely there is some assurance of salvation for them. This is a good point. The Unitarian doctrine of Salvation by Character is a rather this-worldly form of salvation. Perhaps they left theories of heaven up to their Universalist neighbors. At any rate, many folks do get concerned about getting all of their theological ducks in a row before passing on from this life.

My good friend David Owen-O'Quill tells the story of when he was a hospice chaplain. Dave and I were roommates in seminary, and these days he is in the process of starting his own church on the north side of Chicago. But back when we were students he did a stint as a chaplain for hospice patients in a very rural area. He would meet people who were facing the end of their lives, and often they would be forced to come face to face with what it all meant. Many of these folks had not thought about their lives in this way before; so few of us do I guess.

Now these were people who had all kinds of different religious beliefs. When he started ministering to these people Dave figured that the ones who would be the most calm and serene in the face of their impending death would be the ones with a clear sense of the afterlife. You know that believed that they would see their loved ones in heaven or that they would get all of the ice cream they could eat. You know, they would have something to look forward to. But as it turns out this was not the case.

The people who were most afraid of dying, who had the most anxiety about the whole experience, were the ones who had what Dave called a "vicarious faith." What he meant were people whose beliefs were borrowed from someone else. They were taught something in Sunday school or church and they just sort of went along with it in an unreflective way. Yet when they came to the end of their life, they found that this borrowed faith did not hold up too well.

On the other hand, the folks who met death with a modicum of peace and serenity were people who had wrestled with their faith. They may very well have thought they were going to see their families in the afterlife, but that belief was one they arrived at themselves. They had asked questions of their beliefs, they had doubted them, and as a result had a quiet confidence in what they believed. In most cases I am sure these were not the most systematic or sophisticated theologies ever created by academic standards. But it belonged to them. And their faith sustained them in their waning days; the ultimate test.

I don't know if you believe in salvation by character or by faith or by work or by none of the above. But whatever you believe, make it your own. Ask questions of your faith. Doubting is not bad, is it a healthy thing to do, and leads to that quiet confidence. Regardless of what you believe, make it your own.

May we have the courage to doubt and gain confidence in what comes out of the other side of our doubt. May we strive ever to develop our personal spiritual growth as well as helping others along the way. And may we this Easter recognize salvation however we may define it. Amen Blessed Be.