

The New Universalism

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There is a change happening in the Evangelical movement these days. Perhaps you were not aware of this; I suspect it is not an area where most of you keep abreast of the latest trends. How common it is to have in our minds the image we have grown so used to: the right-wing preacher screaming about hellfire and brimstone, convinced of his own salvation and putting the fear of damnation into his hearers. Or perhaps it is the image of the eighties televangelist telling little old ladies at home to send him their social security checks because God will kill him if he doesn't raise the next million dollars. That million dollars of course would go to right-wing political causes and politicians. Or perhaps you have seen the newest incarnation of this archetype: the power of positive thinking, if you can dream it God will give it to you. This is has come to be known as the prosperity gospel of folks like Joel Osteen. Basically it is the modern equivalent of believing in the Great Pumpkin—if you have enough sincerity and blind faith then God will grant you all you wish.

Thankfully though, there is yet a new form of evangelical that is emerging; one that would perhaps surprise a number of Unitarian Universalists. Some evangelical ministers are coming to see that prosperity and damnation are not in fact the totality of the Christian message. Jesus, they note, talked a great deal more about helping the poor than about condemning the homosexual. Pretty easy since Jesus never talked about homosexuality. This new breed of evangelicals are taking seriously issues like poverty and the environment. Bill Hybels, the Senior Minister of Willowcreek, the mega church in suburban Chicago, has begun preaching about the importance of saving the earth as well as the soul. Rick Warren, and especially his wife, have made helping orphans and AIDS victims in Africa an important part of their ministry, both personally and through Saddleback Church in Orange County California.

And it isn't just social justice where minds are being changed. It's in theology too. I remember when I was a boy growing up in the United Church of Christ hearing a guest minister preach at our church. Mine was a liberal Christian upbringing and was very UU in the sense that questioning was encouraged and people acknowledged that there was a difference of belief among them. Granted it was still within a Christian context, but the creationists and the folks who believed in evolution knew about each other and talked to each other across their differences.

I am not sure I ever really heard a good solid fire and brimstone sermon until I got to college.

Enter our guest minister. He was a short, stout man, who had a pleasant face and a kind demeanor. It's funny the stories one remembers from sermons isn't it? I remember he told the story about a fellow in his church that he didn't get along with. The two of them just didn't see eye to eye, and this man became something of an antagonist to his ministry. Every time this fellow would speak it was to be confrontational, and the minister would get defensive just at the very sight of this man.

That is until one Sunday when they were giving out communion. The person who was fighting with this minister was one of the lay people handing out the bread and wine. There was a moment when the minister gave this man the bread and realized that it was not true that his enemy was a sinner and he was a saint. Rather they were both sinners and in need of the salvation that Christ brought, just as Paul had described in our reading this morning. In that moment the minister was able to forgive himself and the other man because he realized that we are all sinners.

I have a very distinct memory of my reaction to this sermon, perhaps because it was one of my first theological reflections. I thought, "Well that was a nice story and all, but that whole thing about how we are all sinners. I don't buy that. I am not a sinner." And right then I

had rather innocently rejected what was and is pretty much the foundation of Christianity. That theological turn, that twist that I made to reject the notion that I was an unloved and unlovable being was a turn toward Universalism, although I hadn't worked all that out at the time. And in fact it is the same theological turn that some of the evangelical ministers like Rob Bell and Carlton Pearson have made in the past couple of years.

In his book Love Wins, Rob Bell makes a classic Universalist argument. I like to think of Universalism as a kind of old fashioned balancing scales, like the kind that lady justice holds in the famous statue. One side of the scale is human sin, and on the other side is God's love and mercy. The Universalist argument is simply that while human beings may sin an awful lot, that sin is still finite. God, on the other hand has infinite love and forgiveness, thus the scales always tip in that direction. With all of our finite sin overcome by infinite mercy, we are saved.

Of course back when Universalism was being spread throughout the land it would come into contact with more orthodox Christians who, inspired by Paul in the book of Romans, would say that Jesus came to save us. Why would he come to earth and be crucified if we were already saved? Seems kind of pointless, they would argue. Rob Bell and others counter with this simple observation: Jesus came to inspire us, to show us what it would look like to live a life infused with love,

forgiveness and understanding. It would not be sentimental or easy. It would be a life of fierce confrontation at times. But at the end of the day Jesus came to teach us and to help us feel grateful to God for his mercy.

It is impossible to worship a God one is truly afraid of. The wrathful deities of the Old Testament and of Greek mythology are hard candidates to back. Perhaps in those moments of history where one has felt like the perennial loser with no means of exacting vengeance for the wrongs committed against you, such a wrathful God may be a comfort. God will get them at the end of history since he obviously isn't doing so now. But even then I find it a tough sell. The God of vengeance and death is a morally inferior being. Universalism has a God that surpasses our ability to forgive, to love, to give life and creativity to the universe. Universalism preaches about a God that is capable of loving and sending into heaven the worst of us—people we would send to the gas chamber and think nothing of it. How is that possible? I can't tell you for sure since I don't possess infinite love and forgiveness myself. But if I were to worship a God, I would want to worship one that was better than I am, not worse.

And so our friend Rob Bell worked his way from staunch Calvinist into a new Universalism. In our modern reading this morning, we heard about Carlton Pearson's similar journey. Pearson is a powerful African American preacher who had his own megachurch in the making in Tulsa Oklahoma. He was a protégé of Oral Roberts himself. The two saw

each other as father and son. But as time went on Pearson had a spiritual awakening that lead him toward the belief that all are saved. Soon people left his church, and he was *persona non grata* in the evangelical community in Oklahoma. Eventually his church merged with All Souls Tulsa, the local Unitarian Universalist church. You may have read about this in the UU World about a year or two ago. Pearson preaches there on occasion, and a small number of his former congregation has joined the mostly white UUs.

Pearson believes that God is in us. That God somehow speaks through us, and in some way we ourselves are God. It is through institutional religion that we have come to objectify God as some being out there in the world. A being like other beings as Tillich says. This is wrong. According to Pearson we are not humans having a spiritual experience but spirits having a human experience. Although it might sound a bit new-agey to our modern ears, this is actually not that far off from what Emerson and the early Transcendentalists used to teach. Emerson may have called it the “Oversoul” instead of God, but a lot of the same features are there: its immanence within the human soul, it’s mystery, the critique of institutional religion, and the emphasis on experience over and against orthodoxy and doctrine. It seems that everything old is new again!

Funny how Universalism which by the mid-twentieth century was fading into obscurity with many of its seminaries and other institutions

being sold or going bankrupt, has made a comeback. In many ways the Universalists were motivated to merge with the Unitarians as a survival technique. We might be putting them in the same category as the Shakers in the history of American religion had merger not occurred. Yet although they lost the battle, they are winning the war of ideas fifty years hence. What an amazing legacy.

How can this be? Regardless of the moral argument or the classical arguments that the old Universalists like Hosea Ballou or John Murray might make, what would convince someone like Rob Bell or Carlton Pearson to become Universalists since they believe that the Bible is the literal word of God? Well take a look at that passage from Paul again. At first blush it looks bad for our friends the Universalists who emphasize Jesus' teachings and deemphasize his salvific power. But watch this line from that scripture: "Consequently, just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people." That is right. Paul just said that Adam's fall brought sin to all people, and Jesus brings salvation to all people. Paul, and especially Paul in Romans, is the darling of the fire and brimstone crowd. But right there staring you in the face is the so-called literal word of God in which Paul proclaims that all are saved. It almost floats right past you, but there it is.

One of the many things I would do if I could go back in time, would be to point out this passage to the minister who preached to us

that day when I was young. For you see there are lots of things that could have been used as common ground between this preacher and his antagonist. It could have been the spirit of brotherhood, a delight in praising the same God, or it could have been something as simple as basking in the infinite love of Jesus. Of course I am using terms that a Christian minister might have preached. We Unitarian Universalists can expand our list to include such theological ideas as the inherent worth and dignity of every person, the interdependent web of which we are all a part, or more classic terms such as Buddha-nature or the Ground of All Being or that we are all children of God as Gandhi would say. Any of these ideas connect us to the other, even and especially the other that we have demonized as our enemy. For while our love and forgiveness may never be infinite, we can at least try to expand it a little further than we thought we ever could. That would include our antagonists, enemies, and other so called evil doers.

Of course our theological ideas are just that; ideas. They are pointless if we do nothing about them. If all we are interested in is coming up with a nice set of ideas then Unitarian Universalism would be a philosophy, a salon or a debate club. If we are a religion, and if we are to become the religion of the 21st century as President Peter Morales calls us to be, then those pretty ideas have to make a real difference in our lives and especially the lives of others. It is wonderful for the new Universalism to preach to us that we should be grateful for the gift of

infinite love and forgiveness. I am sure that is a healing message for people who have been tormented by the fear of going to hell for most of their lives. But for me, it has to be more than that. It has to compel us to do something different with our lives than we would have otherwise. Conveniently, gratitude is the theme for this month of November. One of the exercises for this month's spiritual homework, the *Renew Beyond* you see at the bottom of the insert, is to try the spiritual practice of gratitude for the entire month. Like most spiritual practices it is absurdly simple to describe and yet very powerful to experience. It is this: say thank you to everyone. And I mean everyone—including the people you may overlook or forget about like the girl who bags your groceries or the fellow who cleans the office at night. Say thank you even when you don't mean it. Say thank you to people who make you mad, who annoy you, to people you would rather see them go away. Say thank you to them anyway.

Is this false, inauthentic, even a lie? In sense, yes it is. What you may find is that at first you may not actually feel grateful to these people. But eventually, like that little persistent stream that carved out the Grand Canyon, this small practice will start to transform you. You will see the actions of others as more meaningful and significant if you thank them for even the smallest task. To say thank you to the face of your worst enemy may cause you to think, "What is it that has me

hooked here? How can I let it go?" Sometimes you have to fake it to make it.

The new Universalism teaches us that we should respond to God not out of fear of damnation, but out of gratitude for his love. Regardless of whether or not you would take the same theological route to get there, I think that is a pretty good place to be: greeting the entire world with gratitude. It is after all the best prayer there is.

May we always be living lives of gratitude, love, and mercy. May we not be moved by fear and bigotry. Let us proclaim the truth in love until we are together again. Amen Blessed Be.