

UNIVERSALISM—A BRIEF SUMMARY OF ITS HERITAGE

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I started doing Medieval Studies research in the early 1970s with the idea of finding the roots and history of Unitarian belief—and that certainly happened—but everywhere I turned, from the earliest Christian Fathers up through the Dark Ages, Middle Ages, Reformation, Enlightenment, to our own day, I kept uncovering Universalist ideas, too. Universalism—even in its narrowest definition of “disbelief in permanent damnation”—is very old, pre-Christian. It’s in Buddhist theology, in certain kinds of Hinduism, Sikh and Jain belief, and in Judaism, because the kindling of it in Christianity came from the Bible, such as the gospel of John, Chapter 14, Verse 2: Quote:

"In my father's house are many mansions. I go there to prepare a place for you." (The Grammar in Greek implies “all, not "some" of you. Not "you who happen to believe." Just "you." “Us.”) That was enough for those early Christians, many of whom were mystics, and who saw in their visions a God of ultimate love. The basic Universalist belief is mystical, that God’s love and justice, while it might set up a temporary place like Purgatory for reformation of character, could not include brutal eternal punishment. An Anglican theologian, discussing Juliane of Norwich, whose 14th century visions led her to doubt the existence of hell, wrote that the mark of the true mystic is the conviction that everything in the universe will somehow turn out joyously.

So mystical philosophy is one source. In fact, mysticism has incorporated Universalist theology all along, though it’s had to go underground to avoid persecution. Universalist mystics have included early Church Fathers, especially the Christian Neoplatonists like Origen, Clement of Alexandria, Pelagius (who was a thoroughgoing religious liberal), and even one who was canonized, St John Cassian. Most of them, however, were branded heretics.

In the 9th century, John Scotus Eriugena, the first important European philosopher since classical times, was a nature mystic and a Universalist. We can move on through the Middle Ages to 13th and 14th century Franciscan friars like Ramon Lull and William of Ockham, then to Juliane of Norwich. The Reformation attracted another Franciscan, Sebastiano Castello, who inspired Universalism in France, Switzerland, Germany, the Low Countries, and England, and helped kindle what is called the Radical Reformation, which always yearned for congregationalism and economic leveling, and, by and large, was mystical and pacifist.

So Universalism has three mainstreams. Mysticism is one. The second is rationalism--creative cutting-edge scholarship--and that isn't contradictory at all. Many philosophers of ideas have understood that mystical belief tends to lead to free-thinking, simply because a mystical experience--an epiphany--is a personal experience beyond anyone's control, and thus helps develop individuality. Some of the same people mentioned as mystics were important philosophers.

The third mainstream of Universalism is economic and social justice. Unitarians were drawn to these ideas, too—both our branches share a similar heritage—but all three of these sources, after the English Revolution of the 17th century, came together dynamically in the person of an Englishman named Gerrard Winstanley, the leader of one of the most radical movements of his day, or any day, a socialist squatters pacifist army of farmers he called the True Levelers—meaning economic and social levelers. Others called them the Diggers, because they were poor landless people who took over private property, lived on the land and farmed it communally.

It's no accident that both branches of our church emerge out of the well-named Radical Reformation, and that doesn't mean just “religiously” radical. Some of the Dunkards who emigrated to Germantown were theological Universalists, but they were also social radicals, electing their ministers and resisting German military service as pacifists. Many were poor, like those who were converted in England and America, by socialists like Winstanley and preachers like George de Benneville, John Murray, and Hosea Ballou.

At the beginning of the 19th century, Universalism in New England really took off. The new Bill of Rights permitted the teaching of radical theology and rationalism, while economic disparities and slavery awoke the old urge for social justice. While Unitarians were discussing liberal politics in their Boston Brahmin security, the impoverished Universalists were tilling their stony New England farms and talking of what they could do to bring about absolute separation of church and state, and more economic opportunity for those at the bottom end of the social ladder.

I'm proud to call myself both a Unitarian and a Universalist, and when we hear Frank tell the story of one Philadelphia Universalist, I know we will all be prouder than ever.