AN OVERVIEW OF UU HISTORY

Presentation for Universalist Convocation 2016

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Richard Trudeau (rjtrudeau@verizon.net)

● Forget ancient & European predecessors;

Unitarianism & Universalism American-grown, principally by New Englanders, in late 1700s

● Reactions to Calvinism

● Challenged by the religious left

CALVINISM

Not a denomination; a theology within most of New England’s Protestant churches, 1600s, 1700s

● *God.* An absolute monarch, experienced through nature (“God’s other book”), on whom we are totally dependent.

● *Salvation.* God has judged all humans deserving of hell, but is “loving”—has been persuaded by Jesus to let some (the “elect”) into heaven anyway. Your fate is predestined: If you are slated for hell, there is nothing you can do to earn your way into heaven. (Why do good? Folk belief: The elect are more capable of doing good than the damned.)

● *Humanity*. The saved and the damned. (Folk belief: The saved are only a small percentage.)

Universalism and Unitarianism were both reactions to Calvinism.

[[CONTEXT (optional)

● In America Universalism is the older movement, by thirty to forty years. What became the Universalist Church of America was founded in 1793; the original American Unitarian Association, in 1825 (and that was like one of our “related” groups).

● In New England, Universalism developed mainly in the hill country of central New England, an area that was then frontier. Unitarianism developed in long-established settlements around Boston.

● Universalists were generally from a less-privileged social class than Unitarians. Hosea Ballou, who was the principal Universalist leader for more than forty years, was born in a log cabin in Richmond, New Hampshire, and had less than two years’ formal education. William Ellery Channing, his Unitarian counterpart, was born to an aristocratic family in Newport, Rhode Island, and was sent to Harvard.

● Universalism developed among lay people. Unitarianism originated among Harvard-educated clergy.

● The first Universalists were *come outers* who walked out of their home congregations and started new, liberal congregations. In this way their experience was like that of many UUs today. The first Unitarians were *stay inners* whose congregations were gradually guided by their ministers into a liberal direction.

● Universalists had to build their own new meetinghouses. Unitarians inherited buildings that had been built by the town and were maintained at public expense. (Church & state not separated in Massachusetts until 1833.)]]

EARLY UNITARIANISM

Focus: 1815 (just accepted name, unorganized).

● *God.* Less like a monarch, more like the U.S. president—an executor of laws to which he also was subject. Moral laws are natural laws, discoverable by human intelligence. (“We venerate not the loftiness of God’s throne, but the equity and goodness in which it is established” –W.E. Channing, “Unitarian Christianity,” 1819.)

● *Salvation.* Predestination unfair. “Salvation by character.” (A return to the viewpoint of Catholicism.)

● *Humanity.* The saved and the damned.

Unitarians rejected Calvinism’s view of salvation, modified Calvinism’s view of God, and kept Calvinism’s view of humanity.

“Unitarian” name (bestowed by opponents) a misnomer.

EARLY UNIVERSALISM

Focus: 1780 (just accepted name, unorganized).

● *God.* An absolute monarch, experienced through nature (“God’s other book”), on whom we are totally dependent.

● *Salvation.* God elects to save everyone. “God is love” (1 John 4:12a,16b). “Salvation *irrespective* of character.” (Why do good? It’s the way to be happy in this life.\* Churches exist to teach this subtle truth.)

● *Humanity.* A community of moral equals, bound by ties of mutual concern.

Universalists rejected Calvinism’s view of humanity, modified Calvinism’s view of salvation, and kept Calvinism’s view of God.

“Universalist” name (bestowed by opponents) accurate.

[[\*(optional) “An American is travelling in Europe; he meets, in the street, a young and beautiful *fair, bathed in tears,* her *breast swollen with grief,* and her *countenance perfectly sad.* His heart, fraught with the *keenest sensibility,* is moved compassionately to inquire the cause of her *grief;* he is informed that her father, in a late sickness, became indebted to his physician twenty guineas, for which he was that hour committed to gaol, when he had but partially recovered his health. Our traveler no sooner hears the story, than he advances the twenty guineas to discharge the debt ... As our traveler did not expect any *pecuniary reward,* either *directly,* or *indirectly,* his *charity* is called *disinterested benevolence.* But, strictly speaking, he was greatly *interested;* he was *interested* in the *afflictions* of *father* and *child;* their *relief* was his *object,* and *charity* his *passion.* Now did he not act for his own happiness? Yes, as much as ever a man did in life.” – Hosea Ballou, *A Treatise on Atonement* (Randolph, VT: Sereno Wright, 1805), 42.]]

[[WORLD RELIGIONS (optional)

By the 1820s both Unitarians and Universalists developed an interest in world religions. Unitarian ministers were highly-educated and became acquainted with eastern religious texts as soon as translations appeared. Though Universalist ministers were not highly-educated, interest flowed from their theology: since God loves everybody, including people on the other side of the world who have never heard of Jesus or Moses, God must have sent other teachers (like Buddha and Lao-Tzu) to them. In 1946 Universalists adopted a new symbol expressing this: the off-center cross.]]

[[NATURE AS SPIRITUAL PATH (optional)

Both Universalists and Unitarians inherited the Protestant idea of nature as “God’s other book.” While Universalists never lost touch with this idea, in part because on the frontier they experienced nature as more immediate and powerful, for a time highly-educated Unitarian leaders de-emphasized the idea because they found it superstitious—a consequence of God’s disappearance from scientific books (beginning with Laplace’s *Méchanique Céleste* in 1799). Due largely to the writings of Emerson and Thoreau, Unitarians re-embraced the idea in the late 1800s.]]

UNITARIANISM CHALLENGED

FROM THE LEFT

1865: National Conference of Unitarian Churches—first Unitarian organization of churches; Christian statement of purpose (“Lord Jesus Christ”)

1867: Free Religious Association secedes

1890s: Schism ends. National Conference, American Unitarian Association merge, take name of latter, adopt new statement of purpose that makes slight, non-committal reference to Christianity, leading historian Earl Morse Wilbur to later explain the essence of Unitarianism as “freedom, reason, tolerance” ( = the spirit of many of today’s Seven Principles)

UNIVERSALISM CHALLENGED

FROM THE LEFT

Humanist writings 1910s. Universalists embrace both humanism and liberal Christianity:

*Washington-Andover Declaration of Faith* (1935/1953):

We avow our faith in

● God as eternal and all-conquering love;

● the spiritual leadership of Jesus;

● the supreme worth of every human personality; [ = today’s First Principle]

● the authority of truth, known or to be known; and

● the power of [people] of good will and sacrificial spirit to overcome all evil and progressively establish the kingdom of God.

Neither this nor any other statement shall be imposed as a creedal test.

CONSOLIDATION 1960-61

New UUs: 83% Unitarians, 17% Universalists.

Tension: Unitarians tended not to investigate Universalism; Universalists felt their religion was being stolen from them.

Commonalities: freedom of belief, First & Seventh Principles, social justice work, world religions

[[SHORT REFERENCES (optional)

Part One of: Cassara, Ernest. *Universalism in America: A Documentary History of a Liberal Faith*

Wright, Conrad, editor. *A Stream of Light: A Short History of American Unitarianism*

Trudeau, Richard (ahem). *Universalism 101: An Introduction for Leaders of Unitarian Universalist Congregations*]]