

## “Not Hell But Hope and Courage: Universalism”

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"We believe in God, a just, helpful and caring community. We affirm to promote the welfare of the environment and support for a just economic, social and spiritual connection that will lead to build an open mind for a holistic life. We affirm to uphold an equal and peaceful relationship to every person and to every religion because we are here as one big family."<sup>1</sup>

If not for the affirmation of God - as many Unitarian Universalist congregations welcome and include atheists - this Unitarian Universalist Church of the Philippines mission statement could be the mission of many Unitarian Universalist communities. For example, as named on every order-of-service, we at the Winchester Unitarian Society gather for “spiritual growth, social transformation, and environmental responsibility.” Thus, while separated by great distance and cultural divides of race and wealth, this community and the UU Church of the Philippines are bound together in philosophical sympathy, both striving for evolution of the human spirit, social harmony and care for the earth we call home.

As this congregation is part of the Unitarian Universalist family, through membership in the UUA we are bound to the UU Church of the Philippines. And thus we are bound to the story of its founder, Toribio Quimada.

Quimada was one of fourteen children in a devout Catholic family. The Catholicism in their region prohibited the faithful from reading the Bible, a privilege reserved for priests. Young Quimada was very religious, his faith grounded in belief in a loving God. He longed to read the Bible to better understand how a compassionate God could condemn any soul.

When his family faced economic hardship, they moved closer to extended family in another region in the Philippines who were Protestants. Through this connection, Toribio Quimada first read the Bible for himself and eventually became Protestant, a conversion which led to religious leadership. The Iglesia

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<sup>1</sup> <https://uupcc.org/partnerships/country/philippines>

Universal de Kristo eventually ordained Quimada and he became minister to seven congregations.

These communities were desperate for religious material they could not afford so Quimada reached out churches in other countries for assistance. He looked up the word “Universal” in a directory of American congregations and found a Universalist church in Wisconsin. When his letter was returned, he tried again, this time reaching out to a Universalist church in our area, in Gloucester. They received Quimada’s request and connected him with the Universalist Service Committee who supplied hymnals, Bibles and Sunday School curricula.

Because Quimada sought help from a Universalist community – and because he did not give thirty percent of his income to headquarters – the Iglesia Universal excommunicated him in 1954.

This challenge to Quimada’s leadership did not stop him from proclaiming his message of God’s love. After excommunication, Quimada and nine Philippine congregations became Universalist and were recognized by the American Universalist church.

After receiving a college degree, Quimada’s ministry took an activist turn as he advocated for the rights of poor farmers in his region. Despite his humanitarian efforts, Quimada was a social outcast, his pursuit of elected office thwarted by his theology. As named in a UU curriculum, “The opposition’s slogan ‘If you vote for Quimada you will become a Universalist’ caused great terror in an area dominated by corrupt government and the authoritarianism of the Catholic Church.”<sup>2</sup>

Quimada eventually gave his life in service to his dangerous beliefs as assassins burned his home and church to the ground. His family narrowly escaped. They eventually resumed leading the church in the wake of Quimada’s martyrdom. It continues to this day, a sustaining ministry by and for people struggling to endure. As Fred Muir, an American ambassador to the UUs in the Philippines, observes “the Philippines is a nation of people who live with a kind of material poverty unparalleled in the United States...The peasants who cannot eat three meals a day,

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/adults/river/workshop6/175855.shtml>

ask, 'Is there God in the world?'...For them, poverty and oppression are not only economic and political questions, but theological as well."<sup>3</sup>

I tell this story as it was not too long ago that I did not know this story. I did not know the inspiring story of Toribio Quimada perhaps because it took place so far away.

But I know there are other stories of faith that I – and many others – know well. There are sites in our area - the Unitarian “holy land” or as one friend calls Boston, “the Stations of the Chalice,” - that people of many walks of life come to experience: Thoreau’s cabin at Walden, the pulpit where Emerson delivered his “Divinity School Address,” the crypt at King’s Chapel. All these historic places are linked by one thing, Unitarianism. Though the Unitarians and Universalists merged in 1961, Universalist sites and figures and stories play a quieter role in the American imagination. But, as Toribio Quimada’s story makes clear, the Universalist tradition is no less meaningful nor important than any other.

I tell Quimada’s story so it can be known. I also tell this story as this congregation, the Winchester Unitarian Society, can authentically claim Quimada’s life, ministry and legacy as part of who we are through membership in the Unitarian Universalist Association. And, yet, our affinity with all that Universalism represents is absent from our name and hence who we are.

After worship, our governing board will facilitate an open conversation about the name of the Winchester Unitarian Society. This question arises as we attract people from many communities beyond Winchester. Should the name reflect our region or our values in lieu of the town in which we gather? We are also invited to consider whether “Society” is the most authentic way to describe this faith community. And we are left to wonder if “Unitarian” is a full and accurate reflection of our spiritual identity. What is gained and what is lost by not claiming Universalism, more than fifty years after the Unitarians and the Universalists became one?

These traditions merged as both had a similar view of human nature and the divine but there are distinctions between the two. Unitarians are defined by affirmation of Jesus’ humanity or, put another way, the possibility of all human

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<sup>3</sup> <https://uupcc.org/Sermons/A-Sermon-and-Reflections-On-The-Philippines>

beings becoming teachers, healers and prophets. Universalists are defined by belief in a benevolent God, so merciful that all are received in love, no matter one's actions in life. As Unitarians rejected the divinity of Jesus, Universalists rejected the very idea of Hell.

Thomas Starr King famously articulated the distinctions this way: "The Universalists believe that God is too good to damn [humanity], while the Unitarians believe that [humanity] is too good to be damned by God." Forrest Church illustrates the differences with a bit more poetry: "Unitarianism proclaims that we spring from a common source; Universalism, that we share a common destiny."<sup>4</sup> And, as Richard Gilbert recalls, his minister Max Coots once answered the question "What Is a Unitarian Universalist Church?" by speaking to the questioning spirit defining both traditions: "We make no claim of being exclusive keepers of a special revelation nor presume to have all the answers by which to provide a fire escape for those who fear hell, or an automatic passport to those in hopes of Heaven. Where two or three of us are gathered together, I only know for certain that coffee will be served."<sup>5</sup>

I long to make a deep dive into Universalist history but I also believe in a succinct sermon so I now just offer some highlights that define this denomination.

The curriculum "Remembering Universalism Into Life" by Raymond Nasemann and Elizabeth Strong cites the treatise, "On First Principles," written by early Christian theologian Origen in 225, as an early religious statement affirming universal salvation. Universalism was then named a Christian heresy in 544.<sup>6</sup>

Moving ahead in time, while Universalism was preached in the colonies in the 1600's, it was eventually driven out for its radical nature. But then affirmation universal salvation was imported from England. This was first through the emigration of George de Benneville and then John Murray, who helped found the first Universalist church in America in Gloucester in 1779.

It was quite an accomplishment to establish a Universalist church as universal salvation was still a dangerous idea. In one famous incident, enemies of Murray

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<sup>4</sup> <http://archive.uuworld.org/2001/05/feature1.html>

<sup>5</sup> [http://nyscu.org/AM\\_brochures/2009/2009\\_Gilbert\\_keynote.pdf](http://nyscu.org/AM_brochures/2009/2009_Gilbert_keynote.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> [http://nyscu.org/Publications/Remember\\_Universalism.pdf](http://nyscu.org/Publications/Remember_Universalism.pdf)

and his message threw a rock into a church where he was preaching. Thankfully, it did not hit the preacher. Murray then picked up the stone and said, "This argument...is solid and weighty, but it is neither rational nor convincing." When the crowd encouraged him to stop preaching so he would be safe, Murray replied, "Not all the stones in Boston shall shut my mouth, or stop me from testifying what I believe to be true."<sup>7</sup>

Not long after Murray's emigration, Hosea Ballou was born in New Hampshire. Son of a Baptist minister, young Ballou was influenced by a neighboring minister, Caleb Rich, who preached universal salvation. As the story goes, one day Hosea's father asked him what he was reading. When Hosea said it was a book on Universalism, his father exploded, saying that Universalist books were forbidden from their house. Forlorn, young Hosea brought his book to the woodpile. When his father went to the pile later, he noticed that the Universalist book Hosea discarded was the New Testament.<sup>8</sup>

Hosea Ballou went on to be considered the "father" of American Universalism, in part through writing his theological work "A Treatise on Atonement." Ballou distinguished himself from other Universalists as some, the Restorationists, believed that souls endured some time in an ethereal purgatory but were eventually welcomed into Heaven while Ballou, an Ultra-Universalist, rejected any notion of divine punishment.

Hosea was not the only Ballou to proclaim the message of Universalism. Among others, his third cousin, Adin Ballou, was an ardent pacifist and abolitionist and, as he believed his radical Christian views prevented him from being subject to any government, co-founder of Hopedale, a socialist community. This utopian commune eventually failed but became a congregation and the namesake for the town of Hopedale, Massachusetts.

In the late 1800's, Universalists became the sixth largest denomination in America.<sup>9</sup> But, in time, perhaps they were victims of their own success as other Christian confessions softened their stance on original sin and predestination. As Universalism became a less distinct theology, its numbers waned.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.danielharper.org/story44.htm>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.harvardsquarelibrary.org/biographies/hosea-ballou/>

<sup>9</sup> Scott, Clinton Lee. "The Universalist Church of America: A Short History." 26.

But this does not mean that Universalists stopped innovation in religious thought. As Lewis Beals Fisher observed, “Universalists are often asked...where they stand...we do not stand at all; we move.”

One development in Universalism was an explicit engagement with social issues. A leader in this endeavor was Clarence Skinner. He held a fervent belief that there should be no divide between religious ethics and civic engagement. To this end, he founded the Community Church of Boston, a non-denominational congregation, humanist in its theology and deeply committed to social justice work, a church that described as Communist.<sup>10</sup>

Universalist activism finds its roots in classic Universalist theology. If one believes that all will be saved then, by extension, one must see that all are worthy of love. Another famous story about Hosea Ballou was the time he rode horseback with a Baptist colleague. On the long journey, the two men began talking theology. The Baptist preacher said that, without the threat of damnation, there was nothing stopping him from robbing and abusing him. To which Ballou replied, “If you were a Universalist, the idea would never occur to you.”<sup>11</sup>

Returning to Unitarian and Universalist distinctions, historian Dan McKanan defines Unitarians as intellectual radicals, focused on individual virtue and personal evolution, while Universalists set their sights on collective empowerment. Perhaps, McKanan wonders, Universalism is less visible in the broader culture as expressions of Universalist faith blend in with more secular, civil rights movements.<sup>12</sup>

Universalists also “moved” by transcending Christianity. If all are saved then other religions are not a threat to salvation and can enhance one’s spiritual life. This ethos was perhaps best exemplified by the Charles Street Meetinghouse, founded by Kenneth Patton. This congregation on Beacon Hill worshipped in a round sanctuary - illustrated with images of the universe and adorned with symbols of the world’s religions - from the 1940’s to the 1970’s. A contemporary of Patton, Robert Cummins, affirmed that “Universalism cannot be limited either to Protestantism or to Christianity, not without denying its very name. Ours is a world fellowship...For so long as Universalism is...not partialism, the fellowship

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<sup>10</sup> Parsons, Janet. “Visions of Universalism,” September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/stories-universalist-history>

<sup>12</sup> [http://nyscu.org/AM\\_brochures/2011/2011\\_McKanan\\_keynote.pdf](http://nyscu.org/AM_brochures/2011/2011_McKanan_keynote.pdf)

bearing its name must succeed in making it unmistakably clear that all are welcome: theist and humanist, unitarian and trinitarian, (people of all color). A circumscribed Universalism is unthinkable.”<sup>13</sup>

As I consider the history of Universalism, I marvel at the strangely dangerous idea of universal salvation and – as our own times are defined by hostility towards immigrants, wariness to name the truth that Black Lives Matter and antagonism towards queer people of all kinds – how dangerous it still is. I am reminded of how challenging it can be to see one another through the gaze of a loving God and how humbling to imagine being regarded with such care. Universalism threatens the closed mind and the cold heart, helping us find heaven in this life through an ethos of openness, generosity, justice and love.

As I began with a statement of belief, I conclude with another by Richard Gilbert – a UU minister raised Universalist – summarizing his review of Universalist history. He affirms, in part:

We avow our faith in an indifferent, but benign, Cosmos;  
An interdependent web of existence of which we are a part;  
A creative impulse that pervades the universe,  
Manifest on earth as nature,  
Over time as history,  
And in humanity as love;

The spiritual leadership of all the great prophets of the human spirit who lived in love for justice;  
The church universal composed of all the generations...  
In the priesthood of all believers who care for one another;  
In the prophethood of all believers who seek the reign of righteousness.  
In the free and disciplined search for truth in religious community;  
In the authority of truth known or to be known;  
In the inherent worth of each human being...  
In the power of people of good will and sacrificial spirit to build the Beloved Community of Earth.

And let the people say “Amen.”

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<sup>13</sup> Parsons, Janet.