

Friends & Universalist Christianity

by Donne Hayden

In today's bulletin is a quotation from the great Quaker historian, Howard Brinton, who said:

The Quaker "heresies" include Universalism, Deism, and Mysticism. Universalism holds that men of all religions can be saved if they follow whatever light they have. Deism holds that there is one God but that we are not entirely dependent upon holy scriptures to discover what he says to men. This means that we can find proof of God's existence by reason as well as by revelation. Mysticism holds that we can know God directly and immediately, and that we can receive his revelations inwardly.

—Howard Brinton, "The Religious Philosophy of Friends"

Someone remarked recently that we at Cincinnati Friends seem to have fallen into universalism. Actually, I think we embrace universalism at many levels, and even though more traditional Christians disapprove, most of us probably wouldn't consider it a "fall" at all.

So exactly what is this Universalism, this Quaker "heresy" that led to much persecution in the early days? To understand Universalism (with a capital "U"), it is necessary to first what Universalism is NOT. With its focus on sin and its consequences, for instance, Paul's and

Augustine's versions of Christianity, which have dominated orthodox thought through the ages, are NOT Universalism.¹

Paul understood sin to be a congenital condition—all human beings were born sinful simply by virtue of being born human. Everything we do—even apparently “good” acts—are tainted by our humanity. According to Paul, human beings are simply incapable of doing anything but sin, and we can do nothing to gain God's favor because God sees through all our actions.

This emphasis on human sinfulness might not have prevailed if it hadn't been picked up and elaborated on by Augustine in the 4th century, a couple of hundred years after Paul wrote his letters to various fledgling Christian communities around the Mediterranean. Augustine was enormously influential in early Christianity, and his explanation of Original Sin—based on his understanding of Paul's teachings—gained acceptance as a doctrine in the newly forming faith.

Augustine's doctrine of Original Sin came from the following idea in Paul's *Letter to the Romans*.

[12] Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned-- [13] for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. [14] Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam . . . If, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one

¹ “Christianity, thanks largely to Paul and Augustine” produced “the most negative view of human nature found in any religion.” (Paul Alan Laughlin, *Remedial Christianity*, page 155)

man Jesus Christ. [18] Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness* leads to justification and life for all men. [19] For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. [20]*

This idea that humanity fell into sin through one man—Adam—and then was saved by one man—Christ—has been the foundation of Christian thought. Augustine explained that Original Sin got passed along from generation to generation via the soul, which a child “somehow acquired” from his or her parents. Once acquired by being born, Original Sin prevailed—human beings could do nothing but sin. Augustine allowed some freedom of will, but only in the *degree of sin* a human chose to commit.

Naturally, punishment was required for such sinners, and thus Christian thought developed its unique vision of Hell, again, based on Paul’s descriptions of a “literal hell as the destiny of the unrighteous.” For instance, these verses in 2 Thessalonians (7-9):

*And to you who are troubled rest with us, when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels,
In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ:
Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power;*

Before Christianity, in fact, no such place as Hell existed. The ancient Jews had the concept of *Sheol*, which was not a place of punishment, but simply a grave or burial pit, or the place where the dead went, and this included all the dead—good and bad, rich and poor. By the time Jesus lived, Jewish thought had been influenced by Zoroastrianism, which had “a clear concept of hell and of a demonic god or spirit to oversee it” (Laughlin 166). In the New Testament, when Jesus refers to “hell,” the word translated as “hell” is the Greek word,

Gehenna, “which was the site of the smoldering garbage dump near Jerusalem, a place where the abominable practice of child sacrifice had often been carried out” (Laughlin 166).

One historian suggests that the Augustinian view prevailed in Christianity “largely for political reasons: it made the rites and rituals of the Church seem indispensable and those who administered them powerful. To put it bluntly: it kept the clergy employed” (Laughlin 163). The threat of hell and eternal damnation gave the Church a good deal of power. It also necessitated a “sufficiently radical” doctrine that would allow people to “overcome . . . this seemingly hopeless condition of sin,” and that doctrine was the “atoning death of the Son of God” (163).

Augustine’s view was debated during his lifetime by other thinkers with less pessimistic views of humanity. For instance, a British monk named Pelagius argued that Augustine’s “limited free will made God an ogre” (Laughlin 160). What kind of God would require obedience to laws by creatures congenitally incapable of obeying? Instead, Pelagius argued, if God expected humans to be good, it must be because it was possible for them to be so. Pelagius insisted that human beings could, through an effort of will, be good or “righteous.” Pelagius lost the argument, however; he was, and still is, labeled a heretic by the Christian church.

Long before Augustine, Paul’s teaching about Original Sin was already part of Christian thought, but earlier Christian writers largely ignored it and focused on more positive views of humanity. Clement and Origen, for instance, “believed their own spiritual essence to be the inner presence of God.” They “taught that humanity was meant for perfection, which could be achieved through the exercise of free will because of the *deification of humanity* effected by the incarnation of Jesus” (Laughlin, 162). Laughlin says, however, that “in nearly every case in which the conservative Augustinian position has been challenged by a liberal Pelagian stance,

the former has ‘won’ the debate, at least in the eyes of ‘mainstream’ Christianity (Catholic and Protestant), and at least until the twentieth century” (164).

Through two millennia, Christianity has maintained this view of human beings as all born sinners, destined to go to hell, saved only by acknowledging that God required and accepted the death of his Son, Jesus Christ, in lieu of punishment for their sins. Throughout those two millennia, those who disagreed with this view were likely to suffer greatly for doing so.

In more modern times, liberal Protestants

have questioned the idea of hell on two grounds. First the very notion of a nether world of punishment and suffering beneath the earth . . . is incompatible with our modern scientific worldview. Second, the idea that an infinitely, or even relatively, merciful and compassionate God would create a realm of cruel, vindictive, tortuous, and . . . eternal punishment seems totally incongruous and incredible” (Laughlin, 166).

Rejecting the idea of hell, however, does not require rejecting the idea of God—we need not reject the Holy, the great Mystery, the sacred, the divine, the Light—all these seem to me to be **more** believable with the idea of hell removed.

So I’ve been thinking about Universalism this past week. For one thing, I received my issue of a monthly publication called *The Universalist Herald*, which is, according to its masthead, “the oldest continuously published liberal religious magazine in North America.” In this issue, Bill Baughan, a retired minister, expresses a concern about his denomination echoes a similar concern I have about liberal Quakerism, which I’ll get to in a minute. To address the concern, Baughan considers “Rewriting the 7 Principles” commonly found in Unitarian Universalist churches throughout the country.

Having been a minister in a small UU church before I came to Cincinnati Friends Meeting, I know the 7 Principles and have long been irritated by them—not because I disagree with what they *say*, but because of the language. I can't imagine anyone would disagree with the *sentiments* they express, i.e.,

We believe in:
The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

One UU minister says of the seven principles that, formed as they were by discussion groups in various UU churches, they “became the *defacto* creed of a new religion called Unitarian Universalism, a religion that never before existed anywhere and to which no one of any note in history had ever belonged.” (Rev. Davidson Loehr, quoted by Baughan) The language of the 7 Principles reflects *religion by committee*—language so generic, abstract and general that understanding it is like trying to find solid footing on a floor of marshmallows. You know there's a floor there somewhere, but everywhere you step it's squishy. (This reaction probably comes from my background as a teacher of writing and literature and from knowing the superior power of metaphor over abstraction.)

Back to Reverend Baughan's suggestion that the UUs rewrite their seven principles.

“Something happened,” he writes, *“when [the Universalists and the Unitarians] merged into one in 1961. In some or many of our Unitarian Universalist churches and fellowships, God hardly ever even receives “Honorable Mention,” and the idea of worship is replaced in some places by lectures on . . . topics such as photos from someone's trip to China.”*

For 136 years, [he says] from 1825 until the 1961 merger, Unitarians had always said they believed in God and worshipped God.

For 168 years, from 1793 until the 1961 merger, Universalists had always said they believed in God and worshipped God. Universalists said, "God Is Love."

*In the past half-century since the 1961 merger, freedom **OF** religion has too often been misinterpreted as freedom **FROM** religion. Freedom from creeds, doctrines, or rituals does not have to mean freedom from sacred meanings.*

I have noticed the same trend in liberal Quaker meetings; for instance, in one of our sister meetings in Cincinnati, some people get downright *irate* if anyone uses the words "God" or "Jesus." Many who are open to discussions about *every other religion* on the planet are made uncomfortable by references to God and Jesus from their own cultural tradition. While I understand all the "baggage" some people carry from their experiences with the dogmatic and intolerant, it does seem a shame to throw out the baby with the bath water. *SOMETHING* in Christianity has spoken through millennia to a broad swath of humanity; surely we should mine the faith for the pure ore it contains, ignoring the fool's gold some claim to have found.

I'm not alone in my concern about such denial of faith among Friends. Two years ago I attended an "Experiments in Light" workshop in Richmond, Indiana where most of the participants were from FGC unprogrammed meetings. In a large discussion group near the end of the three days, one woman from New England said she was concerned that people were joining Friends meetings without knowing what (if anything) Quakers believe. She quoted one young woman who said she liked being a Quaker because "you don't have to believe anything."

That is simply not true. You may certainly *attend* and *be welcome at* a Quaker meeting while not believing anything, but can you really be a Quaker or a Friend if you believe in nothing? From the beginning Quakers challenged many beliefs in orthodox Christianity, but like the Universalists and the Unitarians, earlier generations of Friends *did* always believe in God,

and though they may have used different language, the early Friends were definitely grounded in Christianity. Their faith was based on the teachings of Jesus and belief in the presence of the Inner Christ, a/k/a the Inner Light, the Inner Guide, the Inner Teacher. It is disheartening to know that the uninformed think that you don't have to believe anything to be a Friend. In fact, the beliefs of early Friends were different enough from beliefs of other Christians to be considered *heresy*, and Friends in previous generations suffered serious persecution, even death, for what they believed.