

## UNIVERSALISM REVIVED?

**Minister's Reflections by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper**

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Waynesboro (VA)

May 15, 2011

Rob Bell is the charismatic pastor of the Mars Hill Bible Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, which attracts 7,000 people to its services every Sunday. In 2007 the church put on an art exhibit about the search for peace in a broken world. "An artist in the show had included a quotation from Mohandas Gandhi. Hardly a controversial touch, one would have thought. But one would have been wrong. A visitor to the exhibit had stuck a note next to the Gandhi quotation [that read]: 'Reality check: He's in hell.' Bell was struck. *Really?* he recalls thinking. *Gandhi's in hell?* [Jon Meachem, "Is Hell Dead?" *Time*, Gandhi, 4/25/2011] Gandhi, who led the people of India in their peaceful struggle for liberation from British rule. Gandhi, who inspired Martin Luther King, Jr. and millions of others to use nonviolent methods in their quest for freedom and dignity. **This remarkable human being is now suffering in hell?**

For Rob Bell, this episode helped inspire him to write a bestselling book titled *Love Wins: A Book about Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*. This book confronts what I have been calling in my monthly sermon series the **exclusivist** version of Christianity, which proclaims that only those who profess Jesus as their personal savior will be granted eternal life. All others, including Gandhi, are doomed to hell. After all, Gandhi was quoted as saying, "I am a Muslim and a Hindu and a Christian and a Jew, and so are all of you." And elsewhere Gandhi said, "I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. **Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.**" Uh oh!

Rob Bell is part of a rising generation of Christian leaders who have begun to seriously question some of the central tenets of exclusivist Christianity, particularly its preoccupation with personal salvation in the afterlife, its insensitivity to suffering in this life, and its disrespect for the wisdom found in other spiritual traditions. He asks, "Of all the billions of people who have ever lived, will only a select number 'make it to a better place' and every single other person suffer in torment and punishment forever? Is this acceptable to God? Has God created millions of people over tens of thousands of years who are going to spend eternity in anguish? Can God do this, or even allow this, and still claim to be a loving God? . . . What kind of faith is that? Or more important: What kind of God is that?" [pp. 2-3]

As you might imagine, Rob Bell's book created quite a stir among conservative Christians. "Albert Mohler Jr., president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, says Bell's book is 'theologically disastrous. Any of us should be concerned when a matter of theological importance is played with in a subversive way.' In North Carolina, a young pastor was fired by his church for endorsing the book. The traditionalist reaction is understandable, for Bell's arguments about heaven and hell raise doubts about the core of the evangelical worldview, changing the common understanding of salvation so much that Christianity becomes more of an ethical habit of mind than a faith based on divine revelation. 'When you adopt universalism and erase the distinction between the church and the world,' says Mohler, 'then you don't need the

church, and you don't need Christ, and you don't need the cross.'" [Jon Meacham, "Is Hell Dead?" *Time*, April 25, 2011]

The controversy about what is the core message of Christianity has a long and deep history—a history that lies at the very foundation of our Unitarian Universalist faith tradition. During the first 300 years of Christianity, there were many different and often conflicting views about who Jesus was and what his life and teachings really meant. As David Bumbaugh writes in his history of our movement, "There is some reason to believe that significant portions of the early church embraced the view that Christ came to call all people to harmony with the God from whom they had been alienated. [David Bumbaugh, *Unitarian Universalism: A Narrative History*, pp. 9-10] As UU minister Fredric Muir explains, "Universalism says that love is at the basis of all relationships: love between us, between each person and their God. Love is at the heart of the religious experience. Universalism says that this message of love and salvation can be shared by every person no matter who they are and that this is such good news that it is incumbent on us to share it every opportunity we get." [Frederic John Muir, *Heretics' Faith*, p. 209]

The original Universalists were mainly concerned about the fate of the human soul after death. In the centuries since then, the focus has shifted from the afterlife to **this** life and **this** world. In America, Universalists earned a reputation as champions of social justice and equality. Benjamin Rush, a physician and signer of the Declaration of Independence, was an early staunch opponent of slavery, argued for the abolition of the death penalty, advocated for better education for women, supported free public schools, was a pioneer in the humane treatment of the mentally ill. Clara Barton, a nurse who became known as the "Angel of the Battlefield" during the Civil War, was a peace activist and founder of the American Red Cross. Olympia Brown was the first woman to be ordained by an American denomination (in 1863) and was a leader of the women's suffrage movement. Rev. Joseph Jordan was the first African American to be ordained by a denomination (in 1889).

The list could go on, but I hope you get the idea that Universalists in America have a long history of being on the forefront of social change and social justice—all in the name of an all-embracing love. As UU historian David Robinson says, "[The Universalists] were beginning to see that the term *Universalist* could denote the universal community of all men and women and the necessity of working toward the secular realization of that community through peace and justice on earth." [*The Unitarians and the Universalists*, p. 6] In the late 1800s and early 1900s, Universalists were heavily involved in what came to be known as the Social Gospel movement, which attempted to apply the Christian principles of compassion and healing to a wide range of social problems. In the words of Gandhi, "There are people in the world so hungry, that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread."

While many Unitarians were embracing other world religions under the influence of the Transcendentalists in the early 1800s, most Universalists held fast to their roots in the Christian faith well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1935 the general meeting of the Universalist Church of America adopted the following statement of faith:

The bond of fellowship in this church shall be a common purpose to do the will of God as Jesus revealed it and to cooperate in establishing the Kingdom for which he lived and died. To that end we avow our faith in:

God as Eternal and All-conquering Love,  
 The spiritual leadership of Jesus,  
 The supreme worth of every human personality,  
 The authority of truth, known or to be known,  
 And in the power of men [sic] of good will and sacrificial spirit to overcome all evil and progressively to establish the Kingdom of God. [quoted in Bumbaugh, pp. 177-78]

During the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Universalist Church was one of the largest denominations in America. However, by the time the Universalists finally merged with the Unitarians in 1961, their numbers had shrunk to around 50,000. **What happened?** The short answer is: two world wars and evangelical Christianity. The savagery and enormous loss of life in the two world wars undermined the Universalists' confidence in the transformative power of love and good will to eradicate suffering and warfare. Christian fundamentalism arose as a reaction against the Social Gospel movement. Instead of focusing on social justice, the fundamentalists concentrate on personal sin and salvation. For them, the heart of the Christian experience is acknowledging your sinfulness, seeking forgiveness, and "telling God that you accept Jesus, you believe Jesus died on the cross to pay the price for your sins, and you want to go to heaven when you die." [Bell, p. 5] The stakes are high, but the solution is simple. In the biting words of Jesus Seminar founder Robert Funk, "It is like a trip to McDonald's, where the menu is fixed, everything is cheap, and patience is not required. . . . Americans often don't want religion unless it is handed to them on a platter, effort free, sacrifice free, but not fat free." [*Honest to Jesus*, pp. 309-10]

Like Universalism, the most popular form of evangelical Christianity offers the possibility of salvation for all. But there are important differences. Conversion-centered Christianity revolves around **belief rather than behavior**. If only you have the right beliefs, you will be saved, and those who don't have the right beliefs will be damned to eternal punishment. There is no corresponding demand to follow the example of Jesus in his compassionate response to suffering and his radical inclusiveness of people who were outcasts: lepers, prostitutes, Samaritans, tax collectors. Jesus' scorn was directed not toward sinners but toward the self-righteous. When I read about Jesus' contempt for the Pharisees in his time, I think of the smug self-righteousness of modern-day Pharisees like Pat Robertson.

I admire evangelical Christian leaders like Rob Bell and Jim Wallis, who dare to challenge the selfishness, exclusiveness, and insensitivity to suffering that all too often substitute for genuine Christian living. Rob Bell insists that he is **not** a Universalist and that he continues to believe that Jesus is the unequivocal savior of all humanity. For him, Jesus is the embodiment not of God's exclusiveness but God's **inclusiveness**. At the end of his book, he says, "Love is why I have written this book, and love is what I want to leave you with. May you experience this vast, expansive, infinite, indestructible love that has been yours all along. May you discover that this love is as wide as the sky and as small as the cracks in your heart no one else knows about. And may you know, deep in your bones, that love wins." [p. 198] After reading Rob Bell's book, a prominent evangelical preacher named John Piper (**no relation!**) tweeted to his followers, "Farewell Rob Bell." If **Ed** Piper were tweeting a message, I would say, "Welcome, Rob Bell!"