

Clarence Skinner: Universalist Prophet

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By Rev. Dr. Joshua Snyder

At one point Universalism was the fourth largest denomination in the United States. So claims the historian Charles Howe in his seminal history of Universalism in the 19th Century. It is hard to judge the validity of this claim, but it seems that at one point in the 19th Century, Universalism was a force to be reckoned with.

In those days the good news that Universalism brought to people was very simple. God is a loving God. Despite the threat of eternal damnation as a payback for sin, we need not be afraid. God was all loving and all forgiving even of the most heinous of crimes. Heaven is guaranteed, they said.

Of course all of this comes out of a very Protestant framework. Beginning with Martin Luther, the Protestants were obsessed with the idea of salvation. How do you know you are saved? That question lay at the center of Protestant thought, and perhaps still does to some extent. The best Protestant preachers and theologians of the Nineteenth Century proclaimed that salvation was for a very few, and damnation was the

destiny for most. In their eyes the land was filled with the wicked. “It is all downhill from here!” they thought to themselves. How often is one generation sure that the end is nigh as soon and the upcoming generation takes over? You can go as far back as ancient Egypt to read such lamentations!

And so during the Nineteenth Century many of these hellfire and brimstone preachers would ride from town to town holding these elaborate revivals. In some cases the whole town would come out for days at a time to hear a particular preacher recount in obsessive detail about how all of them were going to hell lest they repent their sinful ways and return to the path of the Lord. And as soon as they would leave, the Universalists would come in. They too would set up a tent and begin preaching. They knew that everyone in town was now afraid for their eternal souls, or at the very least the souls of their sinful children, and they were looking for some relief and hope. And that is exactly what they would find in the good news of Universalism. God is not the angry wrathful deity they had heard about last week. God is love, and Jesus came to preach and live according to love. So we can do good things in this life, because we can rest assured that the next life is taken care of.

So Universalism grew in a symbiotic relationship with its hellfire and brimstone neighbors. This little set up worked pretty well too, until about the turn of the twentieth century. The historian Gary Dorrien

describes how denominations like the Presbyterians and the Methodists began to change their tune and their tone. Instead of preaching eternal damnation, and scaring the daylights out of people, like they were supposed to, those denominations began to shift toward a more progressive, and in some cases Universalist message. Soon the Methodists and Presbyterians were also teaching that you could be assured of going to heaven and that we should focus instead on the plight of the poor and other this worldly problems. As a result they stopped alienating the liberals in their midst. In turn those liberals stayed Methodist or Presbyterian and felt no need to leave their churches for the more friendly confines of Universalism. Without these other denominations preaching and scaring people away with their theory of salvation, Universalism began to decline in the early twentieth century.

This was the state of Universalism when Clarence Skinner came onto the scene. Skinner was born a Universalist from a long lineage of Universalists. His grandfather, great-grandfather, and great uncle had all been Universalist ministers before him. A gifted student, Skinner was Phi Beta Kappa. He attended St. Lawrence University, which was a Universalist school. There he met his wife Anna. After graduating he was the assistant Minister at what is now Fourth Universalist Church in New York City. After a couple of years he moved on to serve his own church in Mt. Vernon New York.

At this early stage of his career, Skinner was a gifted preacher and social activist. He was interested in a new form of Christian thinking, what we now refer to as the “Social Gospel.” The Social Gospel was an approach to Christian faith that encouraged people to get involved in local social justice problems. On this side of the Civil Right era, such activity seems normal, if not mundane. However in years prior to the First World War, cities were burgeoning with a heavy influx of people both from the country and immigrants from other nations. Many of problems and challenges we associate with urban life in America were just beginning to show themselves. This included poverty, hunger, labor issues, and racism. What did Christianity have to say to people suffering from such oppression? What did it say to people who witnessed that oppression? These were the driving questions that provoked the Social Gospel.

And as the newly appointed professor of Applied Christianity at Crane Theological School at Tufts University, those questions provoked Skinner too. He was new to academia. He had only been a minister for eight years, and didn’t have a graduate degree. But he had been so active and so eloquent in his writings regarding the need for religious people to take an active part in social issues that he earned his appointment as professor. And it was from this position as professor and then later Dean of Crane Theological School that Skinner would prove

to be arguably the most influential Universalist writer and theologian of the twentieth century.

It is right around this time that World War One occurs. We heard from our story the social tension that surrounded that war on the home front in America. A similar story could be told among the Unitarians. They ostracized John Haynes Holmes and the Community Church of New York for taking a pacifist stance. Meanwhile the rest of the Unitarian denomination voted at General Assemble to endorse American involvement in World War One, and if you didn't like it, then you were out of the denomination. One of the very few times such a vote has happened. But I will save John Haynes Holmes for another year. Suffice it to say, World War One was a very divisive issue for liberals at the time.

You see ever since evolution was introduced to the public, religious liberals latched onto it with both hands. Of course we are all evolving, they thought. Given time and energy everything will progress to the good. Hence the term "Progressives." All we need is more freedom, and more reason and everything will work out – it is literally the natural law of humankind. Or so the narrative went. World War One was the nightmare that popped that particular bubble. For it was Europe's sons who used that splendid freedom that they had cultivated through generations of civilization, to create political alliances that drew strict battle lines. And it was reason that figured out how to create

ingenious devices like tanks, and howitzers, and mustard gas, and trenches. There is nothing inevitable about freedom and reason; they don't always lead to the good.

In his essay "Will Truth Make Us Free?" Skinner writes:

"We know that war is wasteful, antiquated, self-defeating and destructive of human values. Yet literally millions of men, women and children are being torn into bloody shreds of flesh, and millions more will be offered to this Moloch. Does our knowledge of the wickedness of war make us free from its ravages? Far from it!"

This leads us to ask the Social Gospel question of Universalism: "What does Universalism have to say to us in the face of such unspeakable horror?" Skinner began to take a broader view of religion that his Universalist ancestors had. Instead of focusing on the issue of salvation within that very narrow Protestant framework, Skinner began to think more globally. It was sectarian thinking that had led to World War One. Everyone thought that their side in the war was right. Drawing those lines and alliances had set up the war. Skinner wanted a religion that did not encourage people to draw those lines. This is a revolutionary thought of course because religion has played a role in drawing sectarian lines in practically every war in human history! Instead, Skinner wanted to find, what he called the "Unity of Universals." What do world religions have in common? What might

they learn from each other? Is there something universal about the human condition that might be revealed in a religion that was based on such “unities?”

Universalists like Clarence Skinner, and later Ken Patton, would undertake serious study of the worlds’ religions to see if there was some truth to be gleaned from them. The thinking among these latter-day Universalists, if we can call them that, was this: it is a given that all of us are going to heaven. This includes all Christians, Jews and Muslims. Therefore it must mean that Hindus, Buddhists, and Shinto must be going to heaven too. If so then there must be something to their religious beliefs and practices that we can learn from. What might those be? While the Universalists were not the first ones to ask such questions, their interest in other religions proved to be influential. When the Universalists and the Unitarians merged in 1961, looking to the worlds’ religions as a source of our liberal heritage became part of our DNA as a religious movement. Our current sources even say as much.

Now I have to admit that some of Skinner’s thought sounds a bit naïve to modern ears. If I had written a paper in my world religion class in college asserting that all of the world religions could be united around a few universals common to all of humanity, my professors would have recovered from rolling on the floor laughing only long enough to give me an F. That is more an assertion of faith than it is of fact. I suppose it is the difference between Clarence Skinner, who is writing smack dab in

the middle of the Modern era, and those of us who have lived into this Post-Modern time. At any rate, while his grand hope of finding such universals may seem naïve, I can appreciate his desire to look for them.

I think Skinner, like his contemporary Reinhold Niebuhr, was a religious liberal who became aware of the defects of religious liberalism. Like so many of his generation, he saw the real horrors of war and not the romanticized fantasy. Evolution does not mean that we can rest assured that everything will get better on its own. Reason divorced from virtue can create the weapons of war and suffering. Freedom divorced from compassion can create the excesses of Capitalism and the oppression of the underclass. The values of reason and freedom are good in the abstract, but when applied to the real world, we need to be very careful about how we live them out. Skinner is a good corrective on this liberal naiveté.

Instead Skinner says this:

“Life is one. It cannot be successfully departmentalized. The good, the true, and the beautiful are inseparably connected. Truth must be related to the good and the beautiful. Goodness must be made beautiful and true....Any one of these cut off from the others may defeat itself. Truth is not a pure abstraction, existing in a vacuum. It is of the earth earthly. It resides in relationships and in concrete realities. In order to produce

results it must be tied into situations where tensions arise and it must become part of a complex unity.”

In other words we live in an interconnected world. Truth, beauty, goodness, and any other abstract virtue you wish to choose, is only as good as how well we live it out. Life is one. Skinner’s global view of religion is a kind of precursor to what our Principles call the Interdependent Web of life. He understood that complex differences between religions, philosophies, and even people were united by some common humanity. Today we would call this an ecological worldview. In that sense Skinner is very much in line with the mystics who also felt that there was a common reality that transcended our mundane existence. Skinner was very much ahead of his time. Unitarian Universalism would follow the trajectory he laid out and make that interdependent web of existence of which we are all a part (itself an assertion of Universalism!) the center of our theology.

Clarence Skinner was a prophet of Universalism. He saw and wrote about that mystical unity of universals that is so much the hallmark of our faith today. Our theme for the month of March is Freedom. And so I will give Skinner the last word on the topic of freedom:

“A Free Church must be an expression of free religion. The genius of Universalism is liberty...Universalists are freemen and women...If they

are true to the spirit of their faith, they pledge themselves to free humanity from the economic degradation which fetters it, body, mind and soul in this twentieth century. The logic is relentless, the implication clear. Universalism, by its very genius, is let into the great social maelstrom, because it is essentially a battle for the freedom of the common humanity.”

May it ever be so in whatever form Universalism takes in the future. Amen Blessed Be.