

UU Ancestors: Hosea Ballou

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Unitarianism and Universalism arise out of the Protestant Christian tradition. Although we welcome many theologies and religious traditions, our roots are unmistakably Protestant. Like it or not. The history of this church comes from the Unitarian half of our dual heritage. The other stream is Universalism—the notion that all men and women are going to be saved. And so I thought as a good Palm Sunday sermon we could explore one of our Unitarian Universalist ancestors. I like to do this about once a year. Appropriately we will be talking about Hosea Ballou; a key figure in the growth of Universalism and a theologian who was very interested in salvation. Granted, this is not a doctrine that we wrestle with much these days, but even if you don't agree with Hosea Ballou's Christian theology, his wrestling with the themes of Easter can be informative. By knowing our past, we gain a greater sense of our heritage and religious identity.

As Unitarian Universalists we do not share a theology, however we do share a history, a living religious tradition. In a moment in our

history when we sometimes struggle to articulate what we believe it helps to remember how others have struggled with the same spiritual issues we do. Of course the results are not the same and may not be exactly relevant all of the time, but they demonstrate a depth of thought and sincerity that we would do well to emulate. Perhaps no other early Universalist other than John Murray best exemplifies that struggle.

Hosea Ballou was a very colorful character. He was a young man when he became a minister, which was not unusual in those days, lived to a ripe old age, and died as the most revered person within his religious movement. But he had a very sharp wit, sort of the Yogi Bera of the Universalist Church then. Someone once asked him, “What would you do with a man who died stinking of sin and crime?” Ballou replied, “Well I should think it a good plan to bury him!” He was a New England farmer who came from very humble beginnings. Later in life when he became the minister of the Second Universalist Church in Boston Massachusetts, the Unitarian ministers in town would look down their noses at Hosea Ballou because he spoke with a sort of country accent. He sounded like a hillbilly to their refined Harvard ears, and with some notable exceptions like Theodore Parker, the Unitarians did not take him or his ideas very seriously. Despite a number of theological similarities with the Unitarians, the Universalists were seen as uneducated lower class farmers. This more than anything else separated our two mother denominations for so long. Without that class

difference, it is possible that the two denominations most critical of conservative Calvinism might have merged a century before they did.

Hosea Ballou was born in Richmond New Hampshire on April 30 1771, the youngest of eleven children. He died in Boston on June 7 1852 at the age of 81. His father was a Calvinist minister and a farmer. Back then ministers who did not work the land for their livelihood along with everyone else were viewed as lazy. Ballou's mother died when he was less than two years old. The result was that his father and older siblings raised him. Hosea was very close to his father who really acted as both father and mother to him. Ernest Cassara, easily the most prolific and knowledgeable scholar on Hosea Ballou, writes in his biography that Ballou's ideas about God as a loving and benevolent father were surly influenced by the affectionate relationship he had with his own father as a child.

As young Hosea approached adulthood, he had a conversion experience to the Calvinist religion. At roughly the same time, a man named Caleb Rich came through New Hampshire and began preaching the dangerous heresy of universal salvation. Universalism was thought to be a dangerous idea because if everyone went to heaven, then no one would be afraid of burning in hell for their evil actions. Without the threat of eternal damnation then moral anarchy would result, according to the orthodox critics. Had I been raised a UU, I am sure I would have used this argument when I was a boy. I don't need to get up to go to

church on Sunday morning because I am already saved. Surely, the orthodox critic would say, such a lack of guilt would encourage everything from illicit behavior to poor pledging in the annual canvass!

Caleb Rich held a big revival in town, which expanded his movement. Some of Ballou's cousins were converted to Universalism at this time. Hosea at an early age exhibited a knack for debate and argumentation particularly on religious issues. So he engaged his relatives and others in trying to dissuade them away from Universalism. He was so bothered by their arguments and examples in the Bible that one day he arranged to visit with a Calvinist minister named Elder Brown to help him figure this out. He pointed out Romans 5:18 as a key Universalist text. It reads "Therefore as by the offence of one judgment came upon all people to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all people unto justification of life." In other words Paul seems to say that Jesus died for everyone's sins not just those of the elect. Elder Brown launched into his standard stump speech on fire and brimstone, in a loud voice to the young Ballou. Unfortunately the Elder failed to answer the question. When Ballou pointed this out to him, Elder Brown got angry and Ballou's friends had to pull him away from the man. Shortly thereafter Ballou converted to Universalism following his cousins and brothers.

Now of course his father Maturian Ballou, being a Calvinist minister, was none too happy about so many of his relatives becoming

Universalists. However, he grew to tolerate Universalism probably because of his close relationship with his children. As Cassara tells the story, Ballou's father once caught him reading a book tainted by the Universalist heresy. He informed his son that he would not tolerate any book in his house that was about Universalism. Sort of a variation on the standard parent speech you all have no doubt received or perhaps given at some point. A few days later Maturian saw his son Hosea reading a book out by the woodpile next to the house. He confronts the boy. "What book are you reading?" Very respectfully Hosea responds, "A Universalist book." His father grumbles a bit and watches his son slid the book into the woodpile again and walk away. So Maturian sneaks over to the woodpile to find the offending text and destroy it. He slides the book out from under the logs. It was the Bible.

The Bible was of seminal importance to Hosea Ballou. He believed that it was supremely authoritative and any religious idea that was to rightly be considered Christian must be in harmony with its stories and statements. However he was not a biblical literalist. Ballou was perhaps a bit ahead of his time in that he tried to read the Bible in its own context, taking into consideration the intent and genre of the author. He understood symbolism. Joseph Campbell might say that Ballou read the Bible as mythology in the best sense of the word; as a sacred story that could feed and enrich the soul; not as a history book.

Ballou was a very nuanced thinker. In addition to relying very heavily upon the Bible he was also influenced by Ethan Allen who claimed that reason was needed to understand religion. Whereas Allen used reason to disprove religious ideas, Ballou used it to create a more authentic expression of religion. In this sense he was doing exactly the same thing William Ellery Channing was doing for the Unitarians in reading the Bible with one's mind in addition to the heart. Reason and common sense were Ballou's favorite tools in argument and debate. He loved to set philosophical traps for his interlocutors. He would get his opponent agreeing with the most seemingly obvious and innocuous statements only to find that they had fully conceded their position to universal salvation. Ballou stood in the tradition of Socrates in this regard.

Reading Ballou's pamphlets, one gets a good feeling for how his theology evolved by arguing it out with ministers from conservative denominations. Ballou is one of those people that had the Internet been around in his day, he would be flaming people in chat rooms, posting incendiary messages on his blog, and shooting off e-mails in all capital letters. But his tone was not so much mean, as it was witty and sarcastic. These days we might call him "snarky."

Sometimes he turned his debating mind on other Universalists. Ballou, interestingly enough, was a unitarian in the sense that he did not believe in the trinity. This put him at odds with other Universalists most

notably John Murray. Ballou once said of the trinity that it was infinity multiplied by three. To him and his hearers this was absurd to the point of being humorous.

And yet despite his reliance upon reason, Ballou was something of an anti-intellectual. Here again we see the class divide come into play. He had little formal education, though enough to supplement his ministry and farming with being a headmaster at a local school part time. He too was suspicious of places like Harvard that seemed to dissuade people from a biblical religion. He believed that ministers received their training by studying at the feet of another minister. In fact the Universalists did not build any seminaries or theological schools until after Ballou died. In his later years Ballou's anti-seminary feelings were in the minority among the Universalists, but out of respect to him they did not build any. You see in the prime of his career, after John Murray died, Ballou was sort of the Godfather of the Universalists.

One of the first people to study for the ministry under Ballou was Nathaniel Stacy from Dana Vermont. One of my favorite Ballou stories is when his young apprentice preaches his first sermon. Cassara relates to us the story:

“Ballou obviously believed that one learns by doing; or so it would appear from the experience of the young men who studied theology with him over the years. Long before they thought they were ready, they found themselves in the pulpit. One Sunday morning in November 1802, when Ballou was to

preach in Dana [Vermont], he came to Stacy with his hand on his head complaining of a violent headache and saying that he could not possibly preach. Would Nathaniel fill in for him? Stacy protested that the sermons he had been writing were all at home. After much protest, he agreed to preach his first sermon, but he was not at all confident of success.... Yet he preached a fairly acceptable sermon—and thereafter heard no more about a headache. As a matter of fact, Ballou ‘preached like an Apostle’ at the afternoon service. Stacy never could get him to admit or deny that he had feigned his headache.”

The UUA frowns on such treatment of interns these days. I am sure the congregation was none too appreciative either!

Unitarian Universalism has famously been dubbed the “Faith of the free.” Freedom of conscious is a hallmark; some might say a chestnut, of Unitarian Universalist values. Would it surprise you then to learn that Hosea Ballou, one of the pillars of our tradition, believed in determinism? That is the idea that there is no free will as such. God is infinite in power and presence and therefore in charge of everything. The infinite nature of God is an important concept for Ballou. His God, however, was an all-loving, all-forgiving dictator running the universe. God wills all things in the world for the purpose of “happifying” [sic] all of its creation. What might appear to mere mortals as suffering or evil was in fact part of a divine scheme to ultimately bring about some greater good of which we are unaware. Ballou would admit that in this

sense God is the author, or the source, of sin. It is on this doctrine that Ballou perhaps comes most in conflict with our modern understanding of Unitarian Universalist religion. Frankly, a lot of his contemporaries had problems with determinism too.

In 1805 Hosea Ballou wrote A Treatise on Atonement. It was the pinnacle of his theology, and is the result of years of reading, preaching, and arguing. It proved to be the gold standard in Universalist theology for the next century. It is truly one of the classics of the Unitarian Universalist tradition and liberal religion in general. In it Ballou explains how universal salvation works. First one must understand that human sin is limited; it is finite in scope. All of us desire happiness and work towards being happy in the best way we can. When we get it right, then good things happen and we are blessed. When we are misguided or don't understand our own situation correctly then we mess up and the result is sin. Adam was a human.

God, on the other hand according to Ballou, is an infinite and supreme being that loves perfectly and unconditionally. How can the action of one person undo the will of an omnipotent deity? His answer is that it can't. Our sin is limited and God's love is unlimited. Therefore God is not wrathful toward humanity, and there is no need for us to be justified to God as Milton says. Although God may not have a problem, we humans do! We are confused sometimes, sin, and make a mess of our lives. God is all-loving and compassionate, and so Jesus came to

teach humans how not to live in sin, but to love each other. As I said before Ballou did not believe that Jesus was a part of the trinity, but like the Unitarians, that he was a man whose moral teaching should be followed. The point of Christianity is love. Jesus teaches us to love each other as he has loved us, and to love God in a similar way. This means that for Ballou and the Universalists, the crucifixion and resurrection is not the defining moment in the life of Jesus. Rather the Sermon on the Mount and Christmas are the two events in the life of Jesus that have the most meaning for them. The early Universalists revered Sermon for its ethical teachings, and Christmas because it represents God love for humanity. God expresses that love by sending his son to earth. Universalists would often dedicate buildings and ordain ministers on Christmas Day.

Well as I said before, much of Ballou's theology and the issues that he was primarily concerned about may not be ones we share. So what does Hosea Ballou have to teach us Unitarian Universalists today? A lot I think. Perhaps the most important is the need to balance reason and common sense in religion with the mythological and the traditional approach to religion that feeds both heart and mind. I think at certain points in UU history, and even in the history of Christianity and other religions, there are different emphases on the heart versus the head. Ballou manages to value reason because it leads to an authentic expression of religion but he also takes tradition seriously. He is

creative and nuanced in a way that is refreshing in our time of quick sound bites at the expense of well-thought out ideas. For all of his reliance upon reason, debate, and forensic skill, he is basically preaching a gospel of love. A love that is personal and relational. But he also preaches that the universe itself is the source of ultimate love, unconditionally, to all of us. It is not hostile, as Calvin would have it, but rather welcomes us all as children of the world despite our shortcomings.

May we too seek to balance love and reason; concern for the other and concern for ourselves. May we see the examples of others and seek to improve ourselves. And may we always cherish the legacy of the men and women who have come before us and given us the great gift of liberal religion. Amen Blessed Be.