

“Thoughts on Universalism”

19 February 2012

I’ve titled this talk “thoughts on Universalism” mainly because I couldn’t think of a simple way to unify all of the different threads and ideas that run through the larger category of universalism. In fact, I couldn’t even think of a simple way to define the term. It’s one of those words I always took for granted without really thinking about the meaning. Instead of a true definition, I had a sort of vague assumption that, since I was a Unitarian Universalist, Universalism must just be a loosely defined faith with ideas of everyone in the universe being inherently worthy, and maybe even good. Oh, and after an RE lesson on the origins of the UU church, I added in the concept of universal salvation. We learned that the Universalists of way back when believed in a God who would save everyone regardless of things like creed and good works. Of course, I didn’t see much of that line of thought in the modern UU church, so I sort of filed it away as historical context. So all of this is a long way of saying that, despite growing up in a church with Universalist in the name, by the time I agreed to give a talk on the subject, I still had no clear way to define it.

So, like any casual researcher of today, I turned to a source of universal knowledge for inspiration: Wikipedia. According to this “highly reliable” source, universalism “refers to religious, theological, and philosophical concepts with universal application or applicability.” While I’m not sure that this definition really clears the matter up, it does demonstrate just how broad this topic is. Bearing this broadness in mind, I wanted to talk about a few different aspects of universalism like what it can mean generally, and how I’ve come to fit my own perspective into this framework.

When I was younger, I thought that the term “universalist” essentially belonged to UUs. It was basically just a synonym for Unitarian, a way to shorten the mouthful of the church I went to. In fact, I had no idea until fairly recently that one of my favorite childhood authors, Madeline L’Engle, was known for her belief in universal salvation. She is perhaps best known for writing *A Wrinkle in Time*, which, to my mind at least, has become a science fiction classic. She also wrote many other books for children that typically dealt with themes like love and connection to one another. Given how thoughtful and, frankly, uplifting I found a lot of her stories, I was pretty surprised when my favorite source, Wikipedia, informed me that some Christian bookstores actually refused to carry her books because of her belief that “All will be redeemed in God's fullness of time, all, not just the small portion of the population who have been given the grace to know and accept Christ”. Her idea that God’s love and redemption extends beyond members of any one particular faith earned her a Universalist label. Of course, her emphasis on God and acceptance of Christ was certainly different from the idea of universalism that I associated with my upbringing as a UU. It was a rather mind-opening experience when I learned that it was possible to be both deeply Christian and a Universalist. Of course, this complicates the concept of universalism. Since Christianity is hardly a universal system of belief, is it possible to for a discussion of universal redemption to focus so specifically on the Christian concept of God? Is it okay for a person to cover everyone with God’s love, even if those they cover do not share the same belief in God and might not wish to be covered by it? In other words, does a Christian Universalist have the right to speak for non-Christians when it comes to God’s love? These questions probably have different answers for every person who asks them, which is, for me, one of the main

challenges of universalism: it is probably not the same thing for everyone, which makes it non-universal.

One of the topics that gets discussed quite a bit when it comes to universalism is morality, which is a topic that became surprisingly personal for me a few years ago and actually triggered a minor crisis in faith. Up until then, I would have expected any big questioning of my beliefs to come up through some huge personal crisis, major world catastrophe, or similarly dramatic circumstances. Instead, it happened one day in a college class called “Power, Identity, and Resistance” that mostly focused on major economic theories. For this session, though, we were reading Immanuel Kant and discussing his ideas on universal morality. The basic conclusion of my class was that, according to Kant, morality is universal across all humanity, and that moral action basically meant not doing anything to hurt anyone else. This idea seemed simple and likeable enough to me at first, but the more I thought about it, the more I couldn’t get my mind off the grey areas. I mean, people hurt each other all the time, sometimes without even knowing it. Maybe they inadvertently dismiss someone’s efforts or taste. Maybe they end a relationship. Maybe they accidentally slam the door on someone’s hand. Are these actions inherently immoral? Is the person who commits them an immoral person, or a moral person who commits an immoral act? I just couldn’t bring myself to accept such a strict interpretation of goodness. Despite these questions, the real crisis in faith didn’t happen until I called my mom and started telling her about the class. I told her we were reading Kant, and she said, “oh yeah, I think the UUs claim him.” And that’s when I didn’t know what to think. How could this philosophy that seemed so contrary to the flexible thinking that I grew up with be part of the religious tradition that raised me?

I spent the next few years thinking about this question without ever really finding an answer. Well, not the *whole* few years, but the question did stick with me. I decided I didn't like that class all that much, and I avoided reading anything else by Kant. And despite the times I thought about it, I never did fully decide how to reconcile this split. I kept coming back to the question of whether or not morality can be truly universally defined. While it may seem so logical, so *right*, to define morality as not harming other people, the definition of acceptable exceptions seems far from universal. For example, some faiths and individuals object to military service, while others view it as a morally just. And here in Wyoming, a lot of us love our steak, while the Jains of India believe that vegetarianism is part of the practice of non-violence. It may seem like these differences are only splits along the edges of morality or disagreements about the details instead of the whole, but I do believe that they are important. While the overall messages of nonviolence and good actions towards others do indeed seem to be reflected in moral codes throughout the world, it's important to recognize that our perception of "universal" might not be the same as someone else's.

So even though I've struggled with these questions for quite some time now, I still consider them a work in progress. In fact, I think I chose this topic for a talk partially in the hopes that writing this would help move me towards a better understanding of universal morality and universalism. And, in a way, it has. I'm starting to realize that I don't necessarily think that believing in universal morality is entirely at odds with accepting relativism. Essentially, I believe that uncountable definitions of morality do exist, and they are often slightly different from, or even at odds with, one another. But I also believe that morality is universal simply because it exists everywhere. People might disagree about how to get there, but everyone is trying to live a just, moral life, and the features of what

this kind of life looks like are remarkably similar across cultures. For me, the diversity demonstrates the universality.

I find this connection between diversity and universality more and more the more I look. I grew up UU, which meant that I got a fairly broad introduction to various strains of faith. But I still grew up in a predominately Christian area of a predominately Christian nation. It's only been in the last few years that I've begun to interact more with different faiths and learn more about the differences and connections between them. And the more I do, the more I find that some of the same ideas I grew to identify with here are present elsewhere. One quote that sounded familiar to me is "Christian, Jew, Muslim, shaman, Zoroastrian, stone, ground, mountain, river, each has a secret way of being with the mystery, unique and not to be judged". That quote comes all the way from the 13th century, when it was written by Rumi, a Sufi Muslim poet and theologian.

Similar ideas can be found in Hinduism. Another quote that really resonated for me comes from Gandhi. He said, "'After long study and experience, I have come to the conclusion that [1] all religions are true; [2] all religions have some error in them; [3] all religions are almost as dear to me as my own Hinduism, in as much as all human beings should be as dear to one as one's own close relatives. My own veneration for other faiths is the same as that for my own faith; therefore no thought of conversion is possible.'" I was pretty happy to find this quote because I think it sums up what I've been struggling to articulate when it comes to my own ideas. How is it possible for something to be simultaneously true and untrue? Can something be universally true if it is broken down into all sorts of different versions and subversions? Ultimately, I hope that the answer is yes. There may be

no universally agreed-upon idea of what is true or moral, but there is a universal quest to understand these issues.

This relationship between universality and particularity has actually come to mean a lot to me lately. It amazes me that all across the world, people strive and hope and behave in remarkably similar ways, and at the same time, there's endless room for uniqueness. Every culture is distinct, and every individual within a culture is different from every one else. And yet, a person from 16th century provincial China could probably relate just fine with someone from 23rd century Rio de Janeiro because people are people. It may sound a little bit silly, but I think this contradiction is beautiful. It shows how much possibility there is in the world that this dilemma can make sense. There is room in the universe to be simultaneously connected to everyone else through sameness and totally, uniquely individual. It amazes me.

I'd like to end by sharing a story I found on the website of the New York State Convention of Universalists. This is a group that describes one of its purposes as promoting "the growth of the Unitarian Universalist movement generally, and to preserve, nurture and enhance the Universalist tradition within the movement". They seem to be a subset of UUs who identify with the Universalist background of the UU movement. The story I liked is attributed to an author named Anne Gertrude Sneller. She wrote:

"On a Sunday morning the bells of the three churches in the village called all to come to meeting, for the church was still spoken of as the meetinghouse. The bells did not interfere with one another; whichever bell started ringing first would pause after two or three minutes and let the others take up the

summons. All three bells had individual tones easily identified. The loungers on the hotel steps, who never went to church, not only recognized the notes of each, but were able to interpret what they said. According to their insight, the Methodist bell shouted ‘Repent! Repent!’ The Presbyterian bell urged ‘Church time!’ Church time!’ Only the Universalist bell held out a cheerful promise. ‘No hell! No hell!’ it said. The loungers felt safe in staying where they were.”

This story leapt out at me not so much because I totally agreed with the lesson, but because I found a sort of secondary moral that really resonates for me. I think her main implication here is supposed to be that the Universalist church is the only one (at least in the fictional village) that welcomes everyone and provides optimism to both followers and passers-by. For me, though, the real inspiration is in the beginning of the story, when she describes the religious life of the town. Even though there are three different religions present, they all interact with each other respectfully, allowing each other’s bells to finish before they ring their own. The different churches all have different bells and different messages, but they all share the common goal of worship, and they all allow each other to carry out this goal in their own way. This is ultimately what I hope universalism can be and achieve. Although everyone has a different way of navigating life, and a different set of beliefs to guide them -- whether it is a religion, a set of spiritual principles, or atheism – we ultimately share similar goals and experiences.

So in the end, I’m not sure that the question of how I view universalism has an easy answer. After all, there does seem to be some set of goals and values that are universally applicable. The trouble is, not everyone agrees on the exact list of values, or just how to apply them in everyday life. And even if we all share

common goals of nonviolence and being “good,” are these truly universal ideas if they are implemented differently by different people? Does the underlying goal prove universalism, or do the varying interpretations disprove it? Ultimately, I like to think that my personal answer is both, but maybe that’s just because I have a hard time making decisions. Maybe it’s time I finally read some more Kant.