

# **Two Centuries of Universalism**

**a reflection  
by Rev. Bill Gupton**

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Heritage Universalist Unitarian Church  
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On the highway between Columbus and Cincinnati, in the middle of a large cornfield, stand two huge billboards. Depending on which direction you're heading – south or north – you see a different message.

Heading north, the billboards offer the largest rendition of the Ten Commandments I've ever seen – or ever hope to see!

And heading south – perhaps the irony is not unintentional! – the message is much simpler. There, on the first billboard, is the question, "If you died today, where would you spend eternity?" Drive on another few hundred yards and you get the intended answer, in three giant words, with letters outlined in glowing, red-orange flames: "Hell is Real."

Well, let me begin today by thanking the anonymous I-71 farmer for caring enough about me, and my eternal soul, to spend the time and the money erecting this particular bit of edification – one that adds a certain quirkiness to the aesthetic quality of that drive I often make between the Queen City and the Capital City.

I'd like to tell that concerned citizen, if he were listening, that I agree with him – Hell is, indeed real. It's just the location of it that he's gotten wrong. Hell is very real – right here on Earth – for people who live in fear. People like that farmer, I imagine, who live in fear of an angry God – an angry God that exists in exactly the same place that hell-on-earth exists – in the mind of the beholder.

As a Universalist minister, the message I am preaching today is simple: The only place there is a Hell is in people's minds, and in this lifetime. Mine is not a new message – but 200 years ago, back when the United States was a young nation, and Calvinist fire-and-brimstone was the oratorical coin of the realm for preachers everywhere, this was a relatively new idea. A dangerous idea. One with radical implications.

Last Sunday, I told you about a brand new book – a revolutionary religious tract by Matthew Fox called “A New Reformation.” (By the way, we'll be showing Matthew Fox's recent speech at Xavier University as part of our September Wonderful Wednesday program next week).

Today, though, I want to share with you another revolutionary book – one that was first published 200 years ago, in 1805. Unless you have been studying Unitarian Universalism in some depth, you have probably never heard of “A Treatise on Atonement.” But this book, written by an itinerant preacher named Hosea Ballou, is one of the main reasons we are gathered here this morning. Because if it wasn't for Ballou, and the way in which he both explicated and expanded the new doctrine of Universalism in America, there almost certainly would never have been a group of hardy, independent-thinking, so-called “Western pioneers” who – having settled in the outpost town of Cincinnati – chose, in 1827, to assemble to worship a different kind of God, in a congregation they called the First Universalist Society of Cincinnati.

Heritage Church is the descendant of that congregation – and we are the religious descendants of those early Universalists, who, against all odds, and against the prevailing norms of the day – chose to find, in their Bible, evidence of a loving, compassionate God. And it is we who – today – in the face of all odds and the prevailing norms of our own time – including billboards such as the one on I-71, and preachers such as Pat Robertson – it is we who choose to find, not only in the Bible, but in all sacred writings, in the whole of Nature, in the words and deeds of prophetic women and men of all ages – our own evidence of a loving, compassionate Creator.

We know we are swimming against the tide. Imagine how much more so for good ol' Hosea Ballou!

Ballou was born in 1771 in a small farming community in New Hampshire, the son of a Calvinist preacher. The youngest of 11 children, his life's path

was determined, at least in his mind, by the untimely death of his mother, who died when he was but two years old. “I do not remember her,” he wrote, but even though she was not there, physically, “I know that her compassion and goodness embraced me – then, and always.”

Ballou’s feelings about his mother became, in many respects, his theology. He believed in a compassionate, embracing presence – an unconditional love such as the one he imagined his mother held for her children – an image that stood in stark contrast to judging, demanding presence of his real-life father, the man who raised Ballou, the man who was, in many ways, representative of the “other” kind of God – the God against which young Hosea rebelled, the God preached about in most churches – in Ballou’s day, and our own. The image of the Divine of which Matthew Fox has said, “An angry, punitive Father God is not worth honoring – but is, in fact, a false god.”

At an early age, Hosea Ballou reached a similar conclusion. By the time he was a teenager, Ballou was having heated theological debates with his father – in the process developing the kind of argumentation, bolstered by the use of simple parables, that would define his own preaching style in the years to come.

Ballou writes of one occasion, when he was about 16, in which he played what I consider one of the greatest jokes ever played by a son on his uptight father. It was a joke that made a very important point.

In the course of one of their dinner-table arguments, Hosea asked his father, “Suppose I had the power to create a creature – a creature who could suffer ultimate, and eternal, misery. Would I, then, be a Creator worthy of reverence?”

His father, who for some time now had suspected young Hosea of having come under the influence of Universalist writings such as those by John Murray, burst up from the table and demanded: “Where did you get that kind of idea? Have you been reading something that would put such thoughts in your head?”

Hosea, in all humility, admitted that yes, he had.

“And where,” demanded his father, “do you keep that book? I shall burn it immediately.”

Hosea quietly led his father outside, to the woodpile, where he pointed and said, “There is where I keep it.”

Mr. Ballou strode over to the woodpile, looked behind it, and pulled out a book. The Bible...

Obviously, Hosea Ballou was a force to be reckoned with – in his own home, and later, on the highways and byways of New England, and beyond. Ballou had memorably demonstrated to his father the Biblical basis of the idea of universal salvation – the idea that all souls, not just some souls, are returned to their Source. (By the way, have you ever stopped to think that the name “All Souls,” which is one of the most common names for a UU church in America today, derives from, and summarizes, in two beautiful words, the entire doctrine of Universalism?)

Soon enough, Ballou took to the road, to preach his own, ever-evolving version of Universalism. His style – a compelling mixture of self-taught Biblical scholarship and down-home parables – drew bigger and bigger crowds, and eventually, a congregation was created in Boston so that he could reach as large an audience as possible.

Here is an example of how the country boy-turned-city preacher chose to teach his followers about Universalism:

“Suppose,” he preached, “that a well-to-do father has a successful farm, and enough food to feed all ten of his children. But, for some reason, he chooses only to feed five. Perhaps he has been offended by the others, or is angry at them – and so, he refuses to feed them. Would such a father be looked upon with kindness by his neighbors, much less by his children?”

Here’s another Ballou parable:

“Suppose,” he said, “my father gives me a farm. Of course, I am well pleased – but what he does not tell me in the giving, is that there was a large lien on the property. Soon, the banker comes, and demands my mortgage payment. I, of course, cannot afford the payment, and so, I lose the farm. I will leave it to the listener to determine whether my father had been kind to me, or unkind.”

This latter story gets at the issue of predestination, as promoted by the Calvinists of the day – a doctrine that Ballou railed against, over and over, in the early part of his career. Having rejected the Calvinism of his own earthly father, Ballou relished in reminding his listeners of the unmitigated cruelty of any Creator, any God, who would condemn a portion of his (or her) creation to misery – particularly if they were powerless to escape that misery.

But as his preaching evolved, Ballou moved on from the paper tiger that was Calvinism, that was predestination – from arguing against the existence of the “Hell” that roadside billboardists continue to proclaim, even today – and began to expand on the very Universalism that had given him spiritual sanctuary earlier in his life. In the process, Hosea Ballou presaged the merger of Universalism with Unitarianism, and began to build the kind of church in which we worship today – a church where spirituality and reason, where the heart and the head, are equal partners in the religious enterprise.

For it was Ballou’s insistence on the use of reason – on applying our human, and, he would say, God-given, intellect, to the consideration of religious belief – that set him apart from most of his Universalist peers in the early 19th century. And it was Ballou’s great work of genius, “A Treatise on Atonement,” that demonstrated – in my opinion, for the first time – generations before it occurred on a denominational level, how one might, with intellectual integrity, be a Universalist Unitarian (or, for that matter, a Unitarian Universalist, if you choose to take the grammatical approach and see “Unitarian” as an adjective modifying Universalist).

At any rate, prior to Hosea Ballou, prior to the “Treatise on Atonement,” Universalism was a decidedly trinitarian religion, having accepted as a given the idea that Jesus was God incarnate. Along with that particular piece of doctrinal idolatry came the idea that humanity, because of the so-called “original sin” of Adam, was estranged from its Creator – and that the offended party, God, must somehow be appeased in order to reconcile the relationship. Thus, the Christian idea of atonement – that the death of Jesus was required to reconcile God with humanity.

All this made no sense whatsoever to Hosea Ballou. Having cut his theological teeth at the dinner table with his father – and since, having cut his ties with the dominant Calvinism of the era – Ballou, like all the other good religious thinkers we celebrate in our tradition, simply could not find

enough justification in the Bible for either the idea of the Trinity, or the idea of the atonement.

Quite the opposite, in fact: He found, in the Gospels, considerable evidence of the humanity of Jesus (most especially, in Jesus' own words and actions, rather than the commentary of others about him). And so, Hosea Ballou gradually came to the Unitarian position about Jesus – writing and preaching to support the idea that God is one, not three parts, and that the human being Jesus was not Divine – or at least, no more so than the rest of us.

Furthermore, rather than base his theology on what he called the “terrible theological error” of “original sin,” Ballou began to write, and to preach, about what Matthew Fox today calls “original blessing” – the idea that we come from a loving Creator, and are held in a loving, cosmic embrace from the moment of our creation, throughout our lives, and on into whatever afterlife there may be.

Therefore, Ballou came to see Jesus not as reconciling an offended God with humanity, but rather as reconciling humanity with God. Jesus, he said, was the ultimate example, the living parable, prefiguring what he called the “ultimate restoration of all souls with their Creator.” To Hosea Ballou, the only Hell that was real – in a Universe created by a loving God – was the one men and women make for themselves, here on Earth.

Ballou's Universalism – focused, as it was, on the positive, rather than the negative – on compassion, rather than fear; on original blessing, rather than original sin – grew increasingly popular, spreading quickly and taking root particularly in what was then the “West” (in places such as Ohio). By the time of his death in 1852 in Boston, the Universalism Ballou had developed was the fastest-growing form of religious expression in America.

Here in Cincinnati, we are the inheritors of that legacy. We are the only surviving Universalist congregation among the four UU churches inside I-275. This year – as we mark the 200th anniversary of the publication of “A Treatise on Atonement,” as we mark the 20th anniversary of this, our new church building – let us take pride in the fact that – like Hosea Ballou himself – we have become a people who honor both the head and the heart in our religion, who come from many paths to form one church – united, universal, free.

May it be so.

Amen.