

# **Universalism: History, Theology, and Practice**

NOTE: DRAFT SYLLABUS, FINAL VERSION MAY DIFFER IN SOME DETAILS

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## **Course Description:**

Universalism was smaller than Unitarianism at the time of merger, and thus has often been overshadowed within the Unitarian-Universalist movement. Nonetheless, it is the older of the two traditions, was larger for much of its history, was more effective in reaching rural and lower class communities while also having a presence among the urban elite, and played a significant role in advancing religious freedom and women's rights in North America; it also contributed to the struggles against slavery, poverty, and other major problems in society. This course will help contemporary Unitarian-Universalists appreciate better the heritage of their Universalist ancestors and discern how Universalism lives on within and beyond the combined denomination; for non-UU students, it highlights a major but neglected portion of liberal church history in modern times. Topics of study will include early Christian universalism, universalist ideas among the Unitarians, the creation and history of the Universalist Church of America, legal and social persecution of Universalists, universalist themes within other major religions, Universalist engagement with the Social Gospel and modern science, and more. Our approach will focus on three key areas: history (the evolution of Universalism and the factors contributing to its change), theology (the beliefs and attitudes of Universalists as they seek for truth), and practice (the religious activities of Universalists as they live their liberal religion).

## **Learning Outcomes:**

Students will learn about how universalism has manifested and changed in many different contexts, from the ancient world to the present day, within and outside of Christianity, with particular emphasis on the historical evolution of the Universalist Church of America over more than two centuries. They will come away with a greater understanding of Universalism's development, major figures, intra- and inter-denominational conflicts, impact on North American society, institutional structures, primary forms of praxis, and current role in various religions, especially Unitarian-Universalism. This will result in the ability to draw on the Universalist tradition for the benefit of themselves and their congregations, to more accurately represent the Universalist heritage within Unitarian-Universalism, and to engage in dialogue with modern-day universalists within and beyond the UU denomination.

## **Format and Approach:**

This course is divided into 14 thematic units, roughly ordered by chronology. Students will read selections from and about Universalists (particular emphasis is placed on primary source selections), each of which will be introduced by the instructor in an opening lecture. They will then post a reflection that considers study questions posed by the instructor and raises their own questions and observations. These reflections should be posted no later than Thursday of each week. Students will also comment each week on other students' papers, which will help further class discussion, augmented by the instructor's additional comments and follow-up posts to student queries. The course will culminate in a final project, which has two options. Based on their experiences in this class, each student may choose to draft a church service, including the text of a full-length sermon, that introduces Universalism to a UU congregation that is unfamiliar with this aspect of their denominational roots, or in the case of non-UU seminarians, that introduces Universalism as a theological impulse or historical sect to a congregation of their denomination. Option two is to produce an original research paper of appropriate length on an aspect of Universalism instead. Projects that look at Universalism in a historical context are especially favored, but there may be other acceptable approaches too, so feel free to ask if you've got an idea you want to pursue. Marking for the course is based on weekly participation and the final writing project, which is due May 20.

### **Texts:**

There are four books that students are expected to acquire, either through purchase or library borrowing. These are:

*Universalism in America: A Documentary History of a Liberal Faith*, ed. by Ernest Cassara. Boston: Skinner House Books, 1997 (ISBN 9780933840218, \$20)

*The Larger Faith: A Short History of American Universalism*, by Charles A. Howe. Boston: Skinner House Books, 1993 (ISBN 9781558963085, \$16)

*The Cathedral of the World: A Universalist Theology*, by Forrest Church. Boston: Beacon Press, 2009 (ISBN 9780807073230, \$25)

*If Grace is True: Why God Will Save Every Person*, by Philip Gulley and James Mulholland. New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003 (ISBN 9780062517050, \$15)

The reading load expected for this course is approximately 100 pages/week (sometimes less, sometimes more, though never an outrageous amount). These four books are easy to acquire (the UUA bookstore carries several of them), and in particular cheap used copies can often be found. I recommend using the AddAll service for used books ([used.addall.com](http://used.addall.com)), and students may know of other good resources. The other readings fall into three categories: 1) resources that are short excerpts or out of print, which I will provide to you as pdf files, 2) resources that can be acquired via your student SKSM library account, using databases such as ATLA or JSTOR, and 3) resources that students will need to acquire for themselves, perhaps through inter-library loan to your local seminary, public library, or other institution. It should go without saying that students are expected to do all the reading, every week.

In addition to the syllabus assignments, each unit includes a posted lecture by the instructor. Students should read this lecture prior to doing the syllabus readings.

### **Reading Schedule:**

#### **Week 1 (Feb 3-9): Biblical and Early Christian Universalism**

-“Universalism in the History of Christianity,” by Morwenna Ludlow. In *Universal Salvation? The Current Debate*, ed. by Robin A. Parry and Christopher H. Partridge. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004: 191-215.

-“Quotes Suggestive of Universalism in the Bible,” by Jeff Wilson.

-*Every Knee Should Bow: Biblical Rationales for Universal Salvation in Early Christian Thought*, by Steven R. Harmon, Dallas: University Press of America, 2003: 19-39, 49-60, 68-70, 83-98, 108-110, 125-129.

#### **Week 2 (Feb 10-16): Forerunners to Denominational Universalism**

-“The Life and Trance of George de Benneville.” *Journal of the Universalist Historical Society*, vol. 2 (1960-61): 71-87.

-“The Puritan Roots of American Universalism,” by Kenneth R. Morris. *Scottish Journal of Theology*, vol. 44, no. 4 (1991): 457-487.

-“Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” by Jonathan Edwards.

-*Universalism in America: A Documentary History of a Liberal Faith: 77-93.*

#### **Week 3 (Feb 17-23): The founding of Universalism in North America**

-*The Larger Hope, Volume 1: The First Century of the Universalist Church in America, 1770-1870*, by Russell E. Miller. Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1979: 3-49, 53-75.

-*Universalism in America: A Documentary History of a Liberal Faith: 55-77 .*

#### **Week 4 (Feb 24-Mar 2): Maturation and Internal Controversy**

-*The Larger Faith: A Short History of American Universalism: 17-32.*

-*Universalism in America: A Documentary History of a Liberal Faith: 95-105.*

-*Voice to Universalists*, by Hosea Ballou. Boston: J.M. Usher, 1849: 78-108.

-*Universalism in America: A Documentary History of a Liberal Faith*: 148-164.

- *The Larger Faith: A Short History of American Universalism*: 33-46.

#### Week 5 (Mar 3-9): Universalism in Practice

-*The Universalist Movement in America, 1770-1880*, by Ann Lee Bressler. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001: 31-37.

-*Elite: Uncovering Classism in Unitarian Universalist History*, by Mark W. Harris. Boston: Skinner Books, 2011: 55-76.

-“Discussion at Honesdale, PA,” by Thomas Jefferson Sawyer. *Universalist Union*, vol. 7, no. 6 (Saturday, Dec. 25, 1841): 84-87.

-“Baptism on the Universalist Frontier,” by Lewis Perry. *Journal of Unitarian Universalist History*, vol. 29 (2003): 3-18.

-*The Plain Guide to Universalism: Designed to Lead Inquirers to the Belief of That Doctrine, and Believers to the Practice of It*, by Thomas Whittemore. Boston: Thomas Whittemore, 1842: 340-346.

- *A Book of Prayer for the Church and the Home; With Selections from the Psalms, and a Collection of Hymns*. Boston: N.E. Universalist Publishing House, 1866: 31-45, 79-80, 97-103, 137-171.

#### Week 6 (Mar 10-16): Universalist Women

- *Standing Before Us: Unitarian Universalist Women and Social Reform, 1776-1936*, ed. by Dorothy May Emerson. Boston: Skinner House Books, 2000: 19-22, 35-40, 78-83, 149-158, 199-206, 246-254, 386-389, 413-439, 441-445, 447-466

#### Week 7 (Mar 17-23): Social Effects of Universalism

-“Benjamin Rush: Religion and Social Activism,” by Weldon S. Crowley. *Religion in Life*, vol. 43, no. 2 (Summer 1974): 227-237.

-“The Nonresistance Philosophy of Adin Ballou (1803-1890),” by Stephen A. White. *Brethren Life and Thought*, vol. 24 (Spring 1979): 103-112.

-*The Larger Hope, Volume 1*: 487-513, 574-630.

#### Week 8 (Mar 24-30): Spring Recess

-no assigned reading

Week 9 (Mar 31-Apr 6): Universalist Missions

-“A Southern Woman’s Place in the Pulpit: Althalia Johnson Irwin Hears the Call of Universalism,” by Martha Williamson Rimmer. *Journal of Unitarian Universalist History*, vol. 30 (2005): 71-97.

-*The Larger Hope, Volume 2: The Second Century of the Universalist Church in America, 1870-1970*. By Russell E. Miller. Boston: Unitarian Universalist Society, 1979: 341-371, 379-399, 412-446.

Week 10 (Apr 7-13): The Rise of Christian Humanism

-“Progressive Changes in Universalist Thought,” by Marion D. Shutter. *The Arena*, vol. 14, no. 1 (Sept 1895): 1-11 (unpaginated).

-*Which Way? A Study of Universalists and Universalism*, by Lewis B. Fisher. Boston: Universalist Publishing House, 1921: 4, 9-22, 122-127.

-“The Social Implications of Universalism,” by Clarence R. Skinner. *Journal of the Universalist Historical Society*, vol. 5 (1964-65): 79-88.

-*Universalism in America*: 246-249

-“Explanatory,” by Clarence R. Skinner. *A Free Pulpit in Action*. Edited by Clarence R. Skinner. Boston: Community Church of Boston, 1931: 1-17.

-*The Tao of Universalism: The Thoughts, Teachings, and Writings of Dr. John Murray Atwood*. Edited by John Stewart MacPhee. New York: Vantage Press, 1989: 3-9, 31-41, 46-57, 89-92, 111-121, 151-155.

Week 11 (Apr 14-20): Expanding the Circle

-“New Wine and Old Bottles,” by Brainard Gibbons. *The Christian Leader*, vol. 131 (Nov 1949): 403-404.

-*Religion Can Make Sense*. By Clinton Lee Scott. Boston: Universalist Publishing House, 1949: 1-14, 29-32, 37-41, 47-51, 62-65, 70-74, 118-122, 147-156.

-*A Religion for One World: Art and Symbols for a Universal Religion*, by Kenneth L. Patton. Boston: Beacon Press, 1964: 271-337.

Week 12 (Apr 21-27): Moving Toward Consolidation

-*The Larger Hope, Volume 1*: 794-812, 833-841.

-*The Larger Hope, Volume 2*: 533-552, 583-589, 648-665.

-*Tao of Universalism*: 159-162.

-*The Larger Hope, Volume 2*: 648-665.

-*The Premise and the Promise: The Story of the Unitarian Universalist Association*, by Warren R. Ross. Boston: Skinner House Books, 2001: 13-28.

Week 13 (Apr 28-May 4): Other Universalists

-“Universalism Among the Early Brethren,” by James Alexander. *Brethren Life and Thought*. Vol. 32 (Winter 1987): 25-31.

-“Universal Salvation in the Eschatology of Sergius Bulgakov,” by Paul Gavrilyuk. *Journal of Theological Studies*, new series 57, no. 1 (April 2006): 110-132.

-*In the Hands of a Happy God: The “No-Hellers” of Central Appalachia*, by Howard Dorgan. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997: 122-144.

-*The Buddha’s Wish for the World*, by Koshin Ohtani. New York: American Buddhist Studies Center, 2009: 117-127.

Week 14 (May 5-11): Rise of Evangelical Universalism

-“The Gospel of Inclusion,” by Kimberly French. *UU World*, vol. 23, iss. 3 (Fall 2009): 26-32.

-*If Grace is True: Why God Will Save Every Person*: 1-47.

-*The Evangelical Universalist*, by Gregory MacDonald. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2006: 1-4, 133-155.

-*Razing Hell: Rethinking Everything You’ve Been Taught About God’s Wrath and Judgment*, by Sharon Baker. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010: xi-xvi, 111-124, 177-181.

Week 15 (May 12-18): Continuing Presence of Universalism Within UUism

- *The Larger Faith: A Short History of American Universalism*: 127-138.

- *The Cathedral of the World*: xv-xvii, 120-180.

- "Answering the Religious Right with the Big Heart of Universalism," by Scott W. Alexander. *Salted with Fire: Unitarian Universalist Strategies for Sharing Faith and Growing Congregations*. Edited by Scott W. Alexander. Boston: Skinner House Books, 1994: 31-41.

- "Universalism Lives On..." *The Gospel of Universalism: Hope, Courage, and the Love of God*, by Tom Owen-Towle. Boston: Skinner House Books, 1993: 24-26, 54-55, 61-63.

- "Universalism: A Path With Heart," by Carolyn Owen-Towle. *The Universalist Heritage: Keynote Addresses on Universalist History, Ethics, and Theology, 1976-1992*. Edited by Harold H. Burkart. Syracuse: The New York State Convention of Universalists, 1993: 184-193.

- "Dragged Kicking and Screaming Into Heaven," by Mark D. Morrison-Reed (unpublished): 1-5 (unpaginated).