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:


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

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

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

**Week 4 (Feb 24-Mar 2): Maturation and Internal Controversy**
Week 5 (Mar 3-9): Universalism in Practice


Week 6 (Mar 10-16): Universalist Women

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


- 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


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


- *Universalism in America*: 246-249


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


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

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


-Tao of Universalism: 159-162.


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


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


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


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


