

With Liberty, Justice, and Salvation for All: The  
Religious and Social Ethic of Christian Universalists in  
the American Founding

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“The Universal doctrine prevails more and more in our country, particularly among persons eminent for their piety, in whom it is not a mere speculation but a new principle of action in the heart prompting to practical godliness.”

- Benjamin Rush (1745-1813)

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## Introduction

There have been few doctrines as provocative in the history of Christianity as Universalism, the belief that all people shall be saved and reconciled to Jesus Christ at the end of time. There have also been few times in history as volatile for institutional religion as America during the Revolution and early republic, due in large part to the ethos of republicanism and individualism brewing in the fledgling nation. In late eighteenth-century New England, Universalism and American republicanism converged, as the stirrings of Christian Universalism in that region grew to a point that the first Universalist denomination in history was founded. That the first Universalist denomination spawned in late eighteenth-century America was no coincidence, and it was not viewed as such by its leaders at the time. The “founding fathers of American Universalism” viewed themselves as having a unique theological and political vocation, as the founding Universalist minister John Murray explicitly connected the founding of the first Universalist denomination to “the auspicious years of peace, liberty, and free inquiry in the United States, which distinguished the administration of General Washington” in a letter to the President in 1790.<sup>1</sup> It is therefore our task to explore why these Universalist founders believed that the conviction of universal salvation suited the founding culture of America so well, examining their articulation of the doctrine in a distinctly American context.<sup>2</sup>

Little historical scholarship has been done to synthesize the theological, political, and cultural factors that contributed to the founding of American Universalism in a unified account,

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<sup>1</sup> John Murray, *The Life of Rev. John Murray, Late Minister of the Reconciliation, and Senior Pastor of the Universalists, Congregated in Boston*, ed. L.S. Everett, 6th ed. (Boston, MA: Marsh, Capen and Lyon, 1837), 240.

<sup>2</sup> Hence, this paper is not concerned with a history of Christian Universalism from the early church to the present day; for scholarship in that vein, see the two-part *A Larger Hope?* (2019), where Ilaria L.E. Ramelli’s volume traces the history of Universalism from the early church to Julian of Norwich, and Robin A. Parry’s volume does the same from the Reformation to the nineteenth century. This paper cites Parry extensively.

mostly due to the lack of academic interest in the Universalists in general. Historical study of the Universalist denomination is especially complicated due to the church's eventual 1961 merger with the Unitarians to form the modern-day Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA), a pluralist denomination.<sup>3</sup> While most Universalists had adopted a unitarian<sup>4</sup> Christology by about the 1810s, describing Universalist history with the modern UUA merger in mind obscures the early denomination's trinitarian, Christ-centered theological roots.<sup>5</sup> This paper will consider the writings of several trinitarian<sup>6</sup> Universalists during the denomination's founding (and, therefore, before the majority had embraced unitarianism), to understand the early Universalists both as distinctly Christian and American.

We will especially be examining the early Universalists' theological and social ethic to see whether it fits with Ann Lee Bressler's theory of "communal piety" and George Huntston Williams' theory of "republican Universalism." The former characterizes Universalist public piety as a corrective to the rise of individualism in New England religion in the late eighteenth century, using assurance of universal salvation to rekindle the communal bonds formed by Calvinist covenant theology.<sup>7</sup> The latter is a theme Williams says defined the Universalist

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<sup>3</sup> Russell E. Miller, *The Larger Hope: The First Century of the Universalist Church in America, 1770-1870* (Boston, MA: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1979), xxiii.

<sup>4</sup> When lowercase, "unitarian" refers to the theological doctrine in the abstract, while the capitalized "Unitarian" refers to the denominational apparatus of either the pre-merger Unitarian Church or the present-day UUA. This distinction is necessary because many members of the Universalist Church held a unitarian Christology.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Eddy, *Universalism in America: A History*, vol. II (Boston, MA: Universalist Publishing House, 1894), 104.

<sup>6</sup> We will consider the term "trinitarian" in a looser manner as a sociological identity marker, not a strict confessional definition. It is not easy to sort people into neat theological categories in the religiously volatile climate of early America, especially not for a localist, anti-creedal church like the Universalists. John Murray, for example, was fervently Calvinist and despised the ascent of unitarianism in the Universalist denomination, but his doctrine of the Trinity leaned modalist; Ernest Cassara, *Universalism in America: A Documentary History of a Liberal Faith*, 3rd ed. (Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 1997), 21; Robin A. Parry with Ilaria E. Ramelli, *A Larger Hope? Universal Salvation from the Reformation to the Nineteenth Century* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019), 155.

<sup>7</sup> Ann Lee Bressler, *The Universalist Movement in America: 1770-1880* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001), 20-21.

Church's 1870 centennial celebration, where Universalists boasted of their unique status as the "democracy of Christianity" and "church of America" which best embodied republican civic values.<sup>8</sup> For our part, we will look and decide whether Universalists in the late eighteenth century viewed themselves this way, too. Examining these two claims will allow us to discern both the theological and socio-political self-identities of Universalists at a time when these two factors mutually reinforced each other.

Ultimately, Bressler's communal piety and Williams' republicanism characterize the early Universalist movement, though the latter takes shape in a less triumphalist form than its 1870 counterpart. We find that the early American Universalists are a product of the breakdown of social confidence in the Calvinist status quo after the First Great Awakening. They adopted the best of the Calvinist tradition while addressing the Enlightenment's strongest critiques, hoping to craft a Christianity that would better kindle piety and social obligation in a New England that many thought was hopelessly lost to selfish individualism. They also believed universal salvation to be the best theological facilitator of republican values and social ethics, manifested in their public piety which situated individual liberty and assurance of salvation within an irenic communal ethic.

### **Scholarship on American Universalism**

To understand why our examination of the Universalist denomination in its trinitarian origins is necessary, let us briefly review scholarship on the topic. In short, a handful of scholars have covered American Universalism, but few of them focus on the movement's early years before its turn to unitarian Christology. The fact that the UUA sponsored the publishing of many

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<sup>8</sup> George Huntston Williams, *American Universalism*, 4th ed. (Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 2002), 5.

foundational Universalist historiographies further complicates the matter by describing early Universalism with the UUA merger in view. This is not to denigrate any of the works we will reference in this section. This paper only seeks to build on the foundations these earlier works built by addressing early American Christian Universalists from their unique perspective as Universalists, as (trinitarian) Christians, and as Americans. To understand Universalism, we must study it as part of an internal Christian dialogue with trinitarian traditionalists (especially the Calvinist establishment) to solve the social problems caused by the late eighteenth-century breakdown of New England piety, not as a schismatic unitarian sect destined to leave mainstream Christianity altogether.

Early scholarship on Universalist history tended to not focus on its pre-1810s trinitarian majority, instead devoting most of its time to comprehensive institutional history and therefore covering the church in its unitarian form which prevailed for most of its history. Universalist minister Richard Eddy wrote one of the first major academic histories of the Universalist Church in America, penning a two-volume history in 1891 and 1894. The first volume investigates the movement in the primarily trinitarian context of its founding, but Eddy wrote long after the “unitarianization” of the Universalist denomination, and his confessional loyalties are evident.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, many of the other major Universalist historiographies were all published by publishing wings of the UUA. To commemorate the bicentennial anniversary of John Murray’s arrival in America, Ernest Cassara’s *Universalism in America* (1971), George Huntston Williams’ *American Universalism* (1971), and Russell E. Miller’s *The Larger Hope* (1979) were all published by UUA publishing wings (the former two by Skinner House, and Miller’s volumes by

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<sup>9</sup> Eddy speaks of the Trinity and Christ’s vicarious atonement as “absurdities and contradictions,” despite both being held by prominent early Universalists; Eddy, *A History*, vol. II, 87.

the UUA directly).<sup>10</sup> Hence, 1970s UUA-based scholarship on Universalism analyzes the whole history of Universalism with its embrace of unitarianism and eventual merger with the Unitarian Church in mind. This perspective becomes especially apparent in Cassara's work. Cassara, biographer of the Universalist Church's leading unitarian reformer Hosea Ballou, calls early Unitarianism the "sister movement" of Universalism and names Ballou "by far the greatest thinker produced by the universalist movement," implying that the Universalists' movement towards merger with the Unitarians was inevitable.<sup>11</sup>

More recent work has paid homage to the Christian side of early Universalist identity. Stephen A. Marini's *Radical Sects of Revolutionary New England* (1982) chronicles the Universalists alongside the Free Will Baptists and Shakers as heirs to the Radical Evangelical tradition, particularly focusing on the hill country ministry of Universalist itinerant preacher Caleb Rich.<sup>12</sup> Ann Lee Bressler's *The Universalist Movement in America: 1770-1880* (2001), while mostly focusing on Universalism after unitarians became the majority, draws a clear distinction between the early Universalist and Unitarian Churches and laments the tendency of historians to "view all of the main 'liberal' religious groups through the same lens."<sup>13</sup> Finally, as Christian Universalism has enjoyed a groundswell of recent interest in both the academy and the church, Robin A. Parry penned *A Larger Hope? Universal Salvation from the Reformation to the Nineteenth Century* (2019), which devotes five chapters to the movement's passage through America.<sup>14</sup> Like the UUA-sponsored works before them, these works detail Universalism well in the context of other narratives, whether as part of rural New England evangelicalism (Marini) or

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<sup>10</sup> Williams, *American Universalism*, v.

<sup>11</sup> Cassara, *Universalism in America*, 4, 17.

<sup>12</sup> Stephen A. Marini, *Radical Sects of Revolutionary New England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 102.

<sup>13</sup> Bressler, *Universalist Movement in America*, 4, 7.

<sup>14</sup> Parry, *A Larger Hope?*, Ch. 5-9.

broader Christian Universalist confessional history (Parry). This paper only aims to learn from the findings of all the scholars we have discussed and synthesize a historiographic account focused exclusively on Universalism's early trinitarian years, a task which we may now begin.

### **A Brief History of American Universalism**

Before we begin our analysis, a review of the founding of American Universalism and its major figures is in order. Belief in universal salvation can be seen in several Protestant movements in mid-eighteenth-century America, including mystics, Dunkers, Moravians, Episcopalians, and Congregationalists.<sup>15</sup> However, we are primarily concerned with the founding of the Universalist denomination in the later part of the century and will keep our focus on the key figures and movements that shaped that formation. Richard Trudeau describes the early Universalists as “come-outers,” men and women who left their traditionalist<sup>16</sup> congregations to seek Universalist fellowship.<sup>17</sup> While the Universalist denomination formed gradually, we will follow Russell Miller's approach and date 1785 as the first appearance of Universalists as a “sect,” with the founding of the denomination in 1794.<sup>18</sup> The first Universalist congregation took shape in September 1785, when 13 representatives met in Oxford, Massachusetts to form the “Independent Christian Society, commonly called ‘Universalists’” to attempt to consolidate independent congregations of Universalist believers into one body.<sup>19</sup> However, this meeting was

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<sup>15</sup> Richard Eddy, *Universalism in America: A History*, vol. I (Boston, MA: Universalist Publishing House, 1891), Ch. 1.

<sup>16</sup> Coming up with a succinct and fitting label for those who believe the traditional doctrine of hell (i.e. eternal damnation for some) is challenging. Contemporary Universalist discourse sometimes uses “eternal conscious torment” or “infernalism,” but in seeking to avoid the verbosity of the former and the polemical undertones of the latter, we will use “traditionalism” to refer to the traditional doctrine of hell unless otherwise specified.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Trudeau, *Universalism 101: An Introduction for Leaders of Unitarian Universalist Congregations* (Charleston, SC: BookSurge Publishing, 2009), 42.

<sup>18</sup> Parry, *A Larger Hope?*, 147n.

<sup>19</sup> Eddy, *A History*, vol. I, 206.

largely a formality, as official articles of faith and a plan for church government were not created. In 1794, also in Oxford, delegates from all five New England states and New York adopted the articles drawn up four years earlier at the Philadelphia Convention and oversaw the founding of the Universalist Church of America as a legal body.<sup>20</sup>

The doctrinal roots of this early denomination were sympathetic to (though not prescriptive of) trinitarianism. Parry notes how the 1790 Articles of Faith, drafted by Benjamin Rush and adopted at the Philadelphia Convention, were carefully crafted: they were non-binding for ministers and congregations, but as a descriptive identity statement, they were Trinity-centered in outlook while still allowing for unitarianism as a viable option.<sup>21</sup> However, this trinitarian identity did not remain for long: at an 1803 convention in Winchester, New Hampshire, the Universalists adopted the Winchester Profession, which relaxed Philadelphia's trinitarian language.<sup>22</sup> By about 1817, there were only two trinitarian ministers—Paul Dean of Boston and Edward Mitchell of New York—left in the Universalist denomination.<sup>23</sup>

No figure in the Universalist Church was more important for its unitarian and rationalist turn than **Hosea Ballou (1771-1852)**. Ordained by the Universalists in 1794, Ballou was a circuit preacher responsible for much of the institutional consolidation and growth of the fledgling denomination.<sup>24</sup> More importantly for our paper, he also took several theological approaches considered controversial even by his Universalist colleagues at the time. Holding an especially conciliatory view of Enlightenment rationalism, Ballou insisted that reason ought to be the

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<sup>20</sup> Miller, *The Larger Hope*, 53-54.

<sup>21</sup> Three of the five Articles were dedicated to the "Supreme Being," "Mediator," and "Holy Ghost," affirming the "fullness of the Godhead" as dwelling "bodily" in Christ; Eddy, *A History*, vol. I, 297-98; Parry, *A Larger Hope?*, 147.

<sup>22</sup> Cassara, *Universalism in America*, 30.

<sup>23</sup> Eddy, *A History*, vol. II, 104.

<sup>24</sup> Parry, *A Larger Hope?*, 159.

primary agent in interpreting Scripture, rejecting the Trinity as irrational.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, Ballou rejected penal substitutionary atonement and the traditional Reformed doctrine of sin, each core to the Calvinist-adjacent culture and theology of the early trinitarian Universalist founders. To Ballou, sin and its effects were finite, “experienced by sinners in *this life* in the wounded conscience,” so eternal punishment could not be just.<sup>26</sup> Instead, humans lived in a “dual existence” where their identity as divine image-bearers was in tension with their sin-tempted physical bodies, and God ameliorated this tension chiefly by making people happy to eliminate the effects of sin in the here and now. His atonement theory, outlined in his seminal 1805 book *A Treatise on Atonement*, resembled the moral influence theory of Peter Abelard more than any classical Protestant, as Jesus died chiefly to lead people away from sin in this life.<sup>27</sup> As regards universal salvation, Ballou was an “ultra-Universalist” who held that there were no afterlife punishments whatsoever for anyone.<sup>28</sup> Sin was purely a physical phenomenon, so it lost its power over us when the physical body passes away.<sup>29</sup>

Ballou and the Universalists, while eventually majority unitarian, resisted a merger with the organized Unitarian denomination,<sup>30</sup> with eschatology playing a significant role.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Parry, 157.

<sup>26</sup> Parry, 163.

<sup>27</sup> Cassara, *Universalism in America*, 21; Parry, *A Larger Hope?*, 162.

<sup>28</sup> While an examination of ultra-Universalism is beyond the scope of this paper, surveys of Universalist clergy in the 1820s (after the unitarian shift) showed overwhelming support for the doctrine, a support which extended into the 1830s. This would not last long, as the “Restorationist Controversy” between ultra-Universalists and restorationists (i.e. those who held that the condemned still suffer some afterlife correction) rocked the denomination. Restorationism won over a majority of Universalists by the time Ballou died in 1852; Bressler, *Universalist Movement in America*, 42; Parry, *A Larger Hope?*, 168.

<sup>29</sup> Cassara, *Universalism in America*, 24.

<sup>30</sup> Organized Unitarianism in America began with the Congregationalist minister William Ellery Channing’s landmark “Unitarian Christianity” sermon in 1819, causing unitarian churches within Congregationalism to gradually leave that established church and eventually form the Unitarian denomination in 1825. Ballou made several efforts to build bridges with Channing but was ignored; Bressler, *Universalist Movement in America*, 1-2; Trudeau, *Universalism 101*, 41.

<sup>31</sup> Cassara, *Universalism in America*, 24.

Unitarians, spearheaded by the Boston minister William Ellery Channing, held to a doctrine of sanctification that reflected the Arminianism of many New England intelligentsia, with Channing describing the gospel as an “aid” to “human virtue.” This high faith in human progress also reflects the class differences between early nineteenth-century Universalists and Unitarians, arguably just as important in keeping these two liberal faiths from fellowship for so long.<sup>32</sup> As Trudeau labeled the Universalists a patchwork church of “come-outers” leaving traditionalist denominations, so he labeled the Unitarians “stay-inners” who reflected the demographic homogeneity of the established Congregationalist church and drifted away due to theological differences. On the other hand, the heart of Universalism was the New England hill country, an area with much greater class diversity and egalitarian values where “farm hands and bankers, mill workers and mill owners, worshiped side by side.”<sup>33</sup> These class differences are relevant for our examination of early Universalism, as Universalists could take advantage of the democratic spirit of the founding and appeal to rural New Englanders with republican egalitarianism in a way that the homogenous elite Unitarians could not.

The conditions between the two denominations changed drastically by the time of the 1961 merger, the historical reasons for which are too many and complex to elaborate on here. Regardless, despite Universalists dwarfing Unitarians in membership during much of the nineteenth century, Unitarians held a five to one advantage in membership by the time of the merger. Trudeau, himself a minister in the UUA, explains that this has drastically shifted the self-identity of the UUA (and, presumably, its historical scholarship) in a Unitarian direction.<sup>34</sup> This paper takes Trudeau’s claim one step further and examines the Universalist denomination

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<sup>32</sup> Bressler, *Universalist Movement in America*, 4-5.

<sup>33</sup> Trudeau, *Universalism 101*, 67.

<sup>34</sup> Trudeau, 9-12, 54-55.

from a theological and social perspective, free from the retrospective angle of both the Unitarian-Universalist merger *and* the “unitarianization” of the Universalist denomination post-Ballou. While Ballou and the later Universalists are fascinating in their own right, a robust examination of early Universalism should not be colored by Ballou’s anti-trinitarian rationalism or the Unitarians’ anti-Universalist Arminianism. The covenant theology that underpinned the early Universalists’ republican ethic must be understood as a product of and dialogue with a (trinitarian) Calvinist culture.

The issue then remains of choosing figures that can best represent early American Universalism. This is nearly impossible to do perfectly, as Universalists were highly decentralized and tended to bristle at tests of faith like many radical Protestants in the founding era.<sup>35</sup> A diversity of perspectives existed with regard to denominational background and the specific eschatological form of Universalism to which they held. Still, we can approximate by choosing figures that were major players in the institutional and theological construction of American Universalism, starting at the 1785 Oxford meeting. Along with nine laymen, the ministers John Murray, Elhanan Winchester, and Caleb Rich all played major roles in the building of the denomination; the fourth, former Baptist elder Adams Streeter, played a relatively smaller one.<sup>36</sup>

#### A Review of Leading Universalists

**John Murray (1741-1816)**, born in England yet considered the “father of American Universalism” by many, became a staunch disciple of a Reformed type of Universalism taught

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<sup>35</sup> Marini, *Radical Sects*, 123.

<sup>36</sup> Eddy, *A History*, vol. I, 206; Marini, *Radical Sects*, 68.

by the Welsh Methodist minister James Rely. Rely was troubled at how the penal substitutionary atonement of Jesus could be truly described as just. Isaiah 3:10-11 taught that it was wrong for the innocent to suffer on behalf of the wicked, so even if Jesus' death on the cross was a sufficient atonement for all humanity, how was it just in any serious sense? Rely's solution was to interpret the doctrine of union between Jesus and his church in a deeper, almost mystical, way. Since Jesus was joined to his church in the crucifixion by atoning for their sins, he truly became one with them so that they shared *all* in common, resembling a radical version of Martin Luther's *communicatio idiomatum*. Effectively, the church (which Rely and Murray took to mean all humanity) and Jesus became one, so it was fair to speak of the atonement being just, as Jesus "genuinely shared in [humanity's] guilt."<sup>37</sup> Murray's Relyan Universalism was a staunchly Calvinist one which left no room for human works in salvation, as he "looked back" to the atonement as sufficient for all.<sup>38</sup> He did believe in some vaguely defined form of hell or afterlife punishments, but only self-inflicted ones for people that did not place their faith in Jesus.<sup>39</sup>

In 1770, Murray sailed to America, touching down in New Jersey and preaching in a local congregation before taking up itinerant preaching, his ministry ranging from New Hampshire down to Maryland.<sup>40</sup> This preaching eventually led him to Gloucester, Massachusetts, where on Christmas Day in 1780 he dedicated the first formal Universalist meetinghouse in America, the Independent Christian Society of Gloucester, consisting of Universalists who left the local Congregationalist parish.<sup>41</sup> He was then crucial to the forming of

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<sup>37</sup> Parry, *A Larger Hope?*, 123-24.

<sup>38</sup> Williams, *American Universalism*, 3.

<sup>39</sup> Parry, *A Larger Hope?*, 169.

<sup>40</sup> Eddy, *A History*, vol. I, 132, 140.

<sup>41</sup> Marini, *Radical Sects*, 107.

the denomination as described earlier, at one point described as “the most popular preacher in the United States” as the original Congregationalist parish his congregants left would decry how the town was “infested” with “strolling mendicants” of universal salvation.<sup>42</sup>

**Elhanan Winchester (1751-1797)** rivaled Murray as the theological backbone of early American Universalism. Born in Boston, Winchester was raised Congregationalist but had a born-again experience at 19 years old, becoming Baptist. He struggled with the process of embracing universal salvation for a long time, beginning with his reading of Paul Siegvolk’s *The Everlasting Gospel*.<sup>43</sup> Eventually, after resigning himself to his room and deep prayer and study of the Scriptures, Winchester came to accept Universalism.<sup>44</sup> Unlike Murray, Winchester’s Universalism was one more in line with Universalist early church fathers like Origen, believing in hell as a purgative state that could last whatever amount of time was needed to bring the believer to repentance. As Williams says, if Murray’s Universalism “looked back” to the cross as the center of its theology, Winchester’s Universalism “looked forward” to the future restoration of all things, interpreting the hell passages of Scripture as real but only temporary.<sup>45</sup> Winchester then became a strong advocate for Universalism, eventually leaving for London in 1787 and returning to America in 1794, preaching to many different denominations.<sup>46</sup> His conservative form of Universalism appears to have been popular in the denomination’s nascent years: the

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<sup>42</sup> Miller, *The Larger Hope*, 21, 23, 28.

<sup>43</sup> Siegvolk (a pseudonym; probably the German minister Georg Klein-Nicolai) published this book in 1700, and it was later translated into English in 1753 in America. The book outlined a conventional millenarian eschatology and call to repentance, but which foresaw only a temporary, purgatorial hell and one whose final age foresaw a Universalism similar to the early church fathers. These doctrines would be formative for Winchester in his own conception of Universalism in the same way Rely was for Murray’s; Parry, *A Larger Hope?*, 90-93.

<sup>44</sup> Parry, 111-13.

<sup>45</sup> The ill-tempered Murray despised Winchester’s form of Universalism, decrying it as “Pharisaical” and removed Jesus’ resurrection as the source of salvation by having humans still pay off their debt based on their works after death; John Murray, *Some Hints Relative to the Forming of a Christian Church* (Readex: Early American Imprints, Series I: Evans; Boston, MA: Joseph Bumstead, for Benjamin Larkin, Shakespeare’s Head, Cornhill, 1791), <http://opac.newsbank.com/select/evans/23583>, 41; Williams, *American Universalism*, 3.

<sup>46</sup> Parry, *A Larger Hope?*, 114-15.

delegates to the 1790 Philadelphia Convention that drew up the trinitarian-oriented Articles of Faith consisted of a “Winchesterian” majority, with only a minority following Murray.<sup>47</sup> Hoping to rebut charges of heresy, Winchester’s Universalism also wedded tenets of both orthodox Calvinism (e.g. the full sovereignty of God in salvation) and Arminianism (e.g. the unlimited atonement of Christ) in a manner that probably contributed to its appeal in the new, doctrinally broad denomination.<sup>48</sup>

**Caleb Rich (1750-1821),**<sup>49</sup> the third delegate to Oxford we are considering, played a smaller but still significant role in the formation of American Universalism. He grew up in a Massachusetts culture imprinted by a harsh predestinarian Calvinism; in his own words, his “situation appeared more precarious than a ticket in a lottery, where there was a hundred blanks to one prize.”<sup>50</sup> Rich’s memoir reveals him having a keen sense for the mystical much more than Murray or Winchester; in the midst of religious turmoil, he claims to have witnessed an angel reveal to him that no church of his day preached the true, apostolic faith, leading him to strike out preaching and creating new societies in 1773.<sup>51</sup> His eventual embrace of Universalism led him to a heterodox form of the doctrine, being subscribed to by none of the 1790 Philadelphia Convention’s delegates.<sup>52</sup> Since humanity’s sinful nature comes only from the “earth of Adam,” Rich said, punishments deserved for that sin cannot hold when humans leave their mortal bodies

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<sup>47</sup> Marini, *Radical Sects*, 123.

<sup>48</sup> Parry, *A Larger Hope?*, 119.

<sup>49</sup> Rich’s trinitarianism is more ambiguous, as he was so anti-ecclesial and anti-tradition. However, Parry lists him among the great figures in pre-Ballou Universalism, and Marini locates his identity within the ethos of New England’s Radical Evangelicalism, so we will allow him to represent the hill country faction of Universalism; Parry, Ch. 8.

<sup>50</sup> Primary source texts have been written in modern American English for readability; Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 172.

<sup>51</sup> Hatch, *Democratization*, 40.

<sup>52</sup> Marini, *Radical Sects*, 123.

upon death. Hence, all humans were simply directed into heaven upon death.<sup>53</sup> We include Rich in our survey despite his unpopular form of the doctrine because his preaching was nevertheless integral to the early spread of Universalism and its intersection with republican civic values. If Murray and Winchester were the urban faces of early Universalism, Rich was the hero of Universalism in the New England hill country, the “numerical and cultural center” of the early movement and a model of its post-Revolution democratic ethos.<sup>54</sup>

This brings us to our final figure, not from among the Oxford delegates but nevertheless a crucial figure in early Universalism. **Benjamin Rush (1745-1813)**, a physician and Founding Father, though a Presbyterian who never served in an official ecclesial capacity, was instrumental in the formation of the Universalist denomination, helping plan the 1790 Philadelphia Convention and drafting its articles dealing with slavery and war.<sup>55</sup> Converted by hearing Winchester preach, Rush wrote that Winchester’s Universalism “embraced and reconciled my ancient Calvinistical and my newly adopted Arminian principles. From that time I have never doubted upon the subject of the salvation of all men.”<sup>56</sup> If the three Oxford delegates represented the ecclesial faces of early American Universalism, Rush provided much of its social conscience. Miller emphatically concludes that “almost every Universalist social reform impulse from anti-slavery, temperance, and prison reform in the pre-Civil War era to participation in the

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<sup>53</sup> It is no coincidence that Rich’s Universalism resembles the later “ultra-Universalism” of Ballou, as Rich was the itinerant preacher who converted Ballou; Eddy, *A History*, vol. I, 172; Parry, *A Larger Hope?*, 146.

<sup>54</sup> Marini, *Radical Sects*, 68.

<sup>55</sup> Cassara, *Universalism in America*, 16.

<sup>56</sup> Benjamin Rush, *A Memorial Containing Travels Through Life Or Sundry Incidents in the Life of Dr. Benjamin Rush, Born Dec. 24, 1745 (Old Style) Died April 19, 1813* (Google Books; Philadelphia, PA: Sign of the Ivy Leaf, 1905), <https://play.google.com/store/books/details?id=abZOAAAAMAAJ&rdid=book-abZOAAAAMAAJ&rdot=1>, 125.

Social Gospel movement of the late nineteenth century can be traced to Rush's influence," as the physician influenced pre- and post-unitarian Universalism alike.<sup>57</sup>

From there, we can begin our cultural analysis in the hopes of better understanding how Universalists both shaped and were shaped by the religious and social ethos of the American founding. Our analysis will oscillate between a narrative account of history with a theological analysis of direct writings from these early Universalist figures, learning from them as "contextual theologians" who were products of a distinctly eighteenth-century American culture.

### **The Universalists as Part of New England Calvinism**

#### The First Great Awakening

Universalists arose as a concrete movement in New England, where the lingering social effects of the mid-eighteenth century First Great Awakening on the Calvinist establishment shaped their theology and piety. The stirring preaching of the period's major revivalists like George Whitefield shifted the prevailing spiritual mood in the colonies towards one of "personal, inward, and heartfelt" religion rather than outward institutional forms, an attitude which would later prove core to the Universalist self-understanding.<sup>58</sup> Winchester and Rich were direct products of the ethos of inward piety that the Awakening ignited. Winchester wrote of the "universal benevolence of the deity" as leading to love for God, as the believer internalized the love God had for them and was led to a life of holiness.<sup>59</sup> In his analysis of divine first principles

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<sup>57</sup> Miller, *The Larger Hope*, 39.

<sup>58</sup> This institutional shock also blurred the lines between the different denominations, posing a special challenge to Congregationalist Massachusetts, as Dissenting churches like the Baptists and Methodists demanded civil liberties; Mark A. Noll, *The Old Religion in a New World: The History of North American Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 50-51.

<sup>59</sup> Elhanan Winchester, *The Universal Restoration, Exhibited in Four Dialogues between a Minister and His Friend* (Philadelphia, PA: T. Dobson, at the stone-house, no. 41, South Second-Street, 1792),

in *Four Dialogues on Universal Reconciliation*, there are few mentions of the priesthood or sacraments as leading the believer to God.

Rather, Bressler describes the realization of universal salvation as replacing the “conversion experience” in early Universalist piety.<sup>60</sup> This description allows us to see Winchester’s outline of a Universalist “conversion experience” as mirroring his own Baptist conversion during a revival.<sup>61</sup> Nathan O. Hatch describes the post-Awakening ethos of New England on the eve of the Revolution as a core part of the “democratization of American Christianity” on which he writes, and specifically names Winchester and Rich as two examples of its conversionist culture: both men “[locked] the door and [came] to grips with Scripture for [themselves],” allowing the Spirit to lead them in heterodox directions—in this case, to universal salvation.<sup>62</sup> Rich’s embrace of Universalism in particular sprang from an explicitly anti-institutional mindset. In Rich’s youth, he was anxious over his father’s (Baptist) and mother’s (Congregationalist) different religious loyalties, unsure of his eternal life. He then recalls a friend asking whether he knew *either* was the true religion, empowering him to question tradition and thereby “break the first link in the chain of superstition...[laying] aside all other means to obtain a knowledge of the truth” besides Scripture, a labor which eventually led him to universal salvation.<sup>63</sup> In short, the First Great Awakening enabled the Scripture-centered piety based on internal spirituality that was so characteristic of early Universalism.

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<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=evans;cc=evans;rgn=div1;view=toc;idno=N19247.0001.001;node=N19247.0001.001:1>, 96.

<sup>60</sup> Bressler, *Universalist Movement in America*, 9

<sup>61</sup> Parry, *A Larger Hope?*, 111.

<sup>62</sup> Hatch, *Democratization*, 42.

<sup>63</sup> Caleb Rich, “Memoir of Elder Riche,” *Candid Examiner* 2, no. 23 (April 30, 1827): 179–81, [http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?url\\_ver=Z39.88-2004&res\\_dat=xri:pqd:hnp&rft\\_val\\_fmt=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:journal&rft\\_dat=xri:pqd:PM](http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:pqd:hnp&rft_val_fmt=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:journal&rft_dat=xri:pqd:PM), 179-80.

## The Enlightenment

The Enlightenment ran parallel to the First Great Awakening as a blow to the institutional religious foundations of America as it became increasingly socially acceptable to criticize organized religion and revelation. Let us take the historian of the Enlightenment David F. May's description of the movement as a working definition: "the Enlightenment consists of all those who believe two propositions: first, that the present age is more enlightened than the past; and second, that we understand nature and man best through the use of our natural faculties."<sup>64</sup> Discerning the relation of American Universalism to the Enlightenment is a contentious issue due to the influence of Ballou, who was especially friendly to Enlightenment values. As opposed to the spiritual experiences motivating Winchester and Rich, Ballou substituted reason as the primary interpreter of Scripture.<sup>65</sup> He was influenced by Ethan Allen's blistering 1794 polemic *Reason: The Only Oracle of Man*, a defense of deism and resounding rejection of the Bible as a primary authority.<sup>66</sup> Allen, known for his Revolutionary War heroics with the Green Mountain Boys, wrote that humans' minds were similar (albeit smaller in proportion) to that of the deist clockmaker God, giving them a natural sense of morality and justice.<sup>67</sup> Allen also situated a confessionally neutral concept of "virtue" as the as highest good, making it humans' duty to use their Creator-endowed reason to discover those ethics.<sup>68</sup> Bressler describes how Ballou sought to "put reason in the service of piety," a tempered and Christianized reflection of Allen's call to put reason in the service of virtue.<sup>69</sup> While it would be ignorant to suggest the Enlightenment played

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<sup>64</sup> Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1976), xiv.

<sup>65</sup> Parry, *A Larger Hope?*, 157.

<sup>66</sup> Cassara, *Universalism in America*, 19.

<sup>67</sup> Ethan Allen, *Reason the Only Oracle of Man*. (Readex: Early American Imprints, Series I: Evans; Bennington, VT: Haswell & Russell, 1784), <http://opac.newsbank.com/select/evans/18322>, 36.

<sup>68</sup> Allen, *Reason*, 334.

<sup>69</sup> Bressler, *Universalist Movement in America*, 9.

no role in the early Universalists' confessional formation, none of the four men we consider had an epistemology that was nearly as rationalistic as Ballou's.<sup>70</sup>

Regardless, we should not deny that the Enlightenment did shape early Universalism's optimism on the amelioration of the human condition, forming an awkward tension with the moderate Calvinism of many of its founders. As Bressler notes, the Enlightenment synergized with the First Great Awakening's uplift of personal religious experiences to weaken the Calvinist establishment's monopoly on religious truth. This combination undermined the doctrine of predestination in popular consciousness and decreased anxiety over hell along with it. In the late eighteenth century, assurance that God was good and cared for humanity was not a given in the austere Calvinist culture. Hatch details how predestinarianism was known to provoke "internalized guilt and unworthiness" in lower class White people and outright hatred of the doctrine among enslaved Black people, as each saw God's sovereign election as a divine mandate for their oppression.<sup>71</sup> Universalists were then especially poised to benefit from this weakening of Calvinist "double election" at the hands of the Enlightenment's emphasis on a rational and benevolent deity.<sup>72</sup> In addition to a more optimistic outlook on God, the English deist thinkers who shaped the early eighteenth-century Enlightenment also stressed the "perfectibility of man," de-emphasizing original sin and rhetorically elevating the freedom of people to improve themselves and society.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Winchester even penned ten letters rebutting Thomas Paine's famous deist tract *The Age of Reason*, accepting some Enlightenment tenets while rejecting deism in a similar manner to second-century apologist Justin Martyr's work with Greek pagan philosophy. Natural revelation was well and good, Winchester said, but Paine was wrong in condemning Paul's writings as antithetical to natural revelation given that Paul also wrote on God's revelation in nature. Jesus' two "greatest commandments," in turn, provided a summary of all "natural revelation," and one could not interpret Jesus' ministry piecemeal; Elhanan Winchester, *Ten Letters Addressed to Mr. Paine, in Answer to His Pamphlet, Entitled The Age of Reason* (Early American Imprints, Series I: Evans; New York, NY: Samuel Campbell, no. 124, Pearl-Street, 1795), <http://opac.newsbank.com/select/evans/29909>, 4-5, 11.

<sup>71</sup> Hatch, *Democratization*, 171.

<sup>72</sup> Bressler, *Universalist Movement in America*, 14-15.

<sup>73</sup> May, *Enlightenment*, 231.

This high anthropology would spill over to America, entering public discourse on religion and civil society and becoming visible in the Universalists' ethic of human freedom exercised with responsibility. Even the staunchly anti-works-righteousness Murray wrote that "vices, of many sorts, are unnatural—they are *solely* the effect of habit."<sup>74</sup> However, it was Rush, a major education reformer, that exemplified Enlightenment optimism most. He affirmed that "natural and revealed religion always speak the same things, although the latter delivers its precepts with a louder, and more distinct voice than the former."<sup>75</sup> There are parallels here to Allen's later writing that the difference between divine and human knowledge is only one of proportionality, not kind. While respecting natural revelation, Rush thought that the buttressing of mental faculties with a holistic divine revelation through education was best for America's youth. For that reason, his treatise on why the Bible should serve as a schoolbook appeals to the "native love of truth in the human mind," likening Scripture to a straight public road to a destination and natural revelation to a winding path through the woods to the same route.<sup>76</sup>

### A Crisis in Post-Revolutionary New England

After the Revolution, the aftereffects of the First Great Awakening and the continuing influence of the Enlightenment combined to form a revised but stabilized New England identity. As May put it, "in New England in the 1780's, Enlightenment, Protestantism, and patriotism still seemed almost interchangeable terms, and New England seemed unquestionably the natural

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<sup>74</sup> Murray, *Some Hints*, 3.

<sup>75</sup> Benjamin Rush, *An Address to the Inhabitants of the British Settlements in America, Upon Slave-Keeping* (Early American Imprints, Series I: Evans; Philadelphia, PA: John Dunlap, in Market-Street, 1773), <http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/Sabin?af=RN&ae=CY102419093&srchtp=a&ste=14&locID=coll69983>, 9.

<sup>76</sup> Benjamin Rush, "A Defence of the Use of the Bible as a School Book. Addressed to the Rev. Jeremy Belknap, of Boston," essay, in *Essays, Literary, Moral & Philosophical* (Philadelphia, PA: Thomas & Samuel F. Bradford, no. 8, South Front Street, 1798), 93–113, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=evans;idno=N25938.0001.001;rgn=div2;view=text;cc=evans;node=N25938.0001.001:7.3., 96, 107-108>.

home of all three.”<sup>77</sup> The Congregationalists in Massachusetts also withstood the storm to remain the state’s established church, with disestablishment only happening instantaneously where the established church was unpopular, as with Anglicanism in Virginia.<sup>78</sup>

Despite that, the friction between the remnants of Calvinist hegemony and burgeoning religious pluralism resulted in a popular New England culture that pious Universalists and traditionalists alike saw as decadent. Historical Calvinist predestinarianism and the stress on individual conversion and security resounding from the First Great Awakening could be positive forces for social cohesion when coupled with humility over one’s condition before God and a robust communitarian ethic. However, attacks on the Calvinist institutional powers made it less likely for such an ethic to take root. Bressler details how many in the New England upper classes came to embrace Arminianism, with its emphasis on human works in cooperation with divine grace leading to a “basic individualism” which upheld human excellence and the justness of hierarchy.<sup>79</sup> Additionally, the Enlightenment sold New Englanders (and most American elites) of the positivity of market-based commerce. The idyllic vision of localism and self-denial upheld by traditional Protestant piety was fading, as the propensity of humans to create wealth through trade was now held as right and good.<sup>80</sup>

Hence, the weakening of traditional social ethics by religious pluralism and the Enlightenment resulted in what many saw as shallow moralism. Bressler mentions the disdain Universalists had for the atomism of New England culture.<sup>81</sup> The optimistic anthropology of

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<sup>77</sup> May, *Enlightenment*, 181.

<sup>78</sup> May, 179.

<sup>79</sup> Bressler, *Universalist Movement in America*, 13.

<sup>80</sup> Darren Staloff, *Hamilton, Adams, Jefferson: The Politics of Enlightenment and the American Founding* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2005), 36, 39.

<sup>81</sup> While Bressler is referring to later Universalism at the time of Ballou’s ascent, the same holds true for the late eighteenth-century Universalists, too; Bressler, *Universalist Movement in America*, 29.

Arminianism and the wealth creation of early capitalism transformed the lingering emphasis on individual security from Calvinist culture into a vice, leading people to focus on their own success and status to the detriment of their community. Salvation was effectively just a personal box to check.<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, the revolutionary ethos remained as strong as ever after the War, and “issues of freedom, equality, sovereignty, and representation” as well as religion now lay in the hands of an emboldened, independent-minded populace.<sup>83</sup> If nobody provided a religious and social ethic that could address this problem, materialism and anarchy lay on the horizon.<sup>84</sup> It is here that the Universalist movement and its discontents enter the picture.

### **Universalist Piety and Republican Values**

The Universalist response to the crisis of New England identity addresses the two hypotheses outlined in the opening paragraphs: Bressler’s theory that communal piety was the driving force for early Universalism, and Williams’ concept of “republican Universalism” being central to Universalist identity. Bressler’s communal piety theory holds true for pre- as well as post-Ballou Universalism, as the Universalists championed a theological and social ethic which balanced individual piety with public obligations, both undergirded by the doctrine of universal salvation. In turn, the patriotic republican ethos of Universalism central to the 1870 centennial celebration was indeed visible in the early republic, though in a gentler and less revanchist form.

#### The Traditionalist Backlash

Universalism was controversial on two fronts: in addition to its perception as a doctrinal heresy, many traditionalist ministers also blamed the deterioration of public morality on their

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<sup>82</sup> Bressler, 20.

<sup>83</sup> Hatch, *Democratization*, 6.

<sup>84</sup> May, *Enlightenment*, 179.

Universalist counterparts. The 1780 Massachusetts Constitution, penned by John Adams, outlined the expected social role of ministers as “public protestant teachers of piety, religion, and morality,” and to many traditionalists, universal salvation adversely affected all three.<sup>85</sup> Indeed, that same Constitution saw an explicitly anti-Universalist amendment proposed: “Good morals being necessary to the preservation of civil society; and the knowledge and belief of the being of a God, his providential government of the world, *and of a future state of rewards and punishments*, being the only true foundation of morality...” The italicized amendment was rejected after “a very long and severe debate,” but it serves as a lucid picture of the opinion held of Universalism by the religious and political establishment.<sup>86</sup> Similar cases abounded, as confessing Universalists were “debarred from giving sworn testimony, serving as witnesses, taking the oaths prescribed as part of the judicial process, or even from holding office in some states.”<sup>87</sup> As late as 1801, a Universalist named Christopher Erskine was taxed and imprisoned for religious dissent in New Hampshire.<sup>88</sup>

Universalism’s encouragement of vice undergirded many of these critiques. The spread of materialism and hyper-individualism outlined previously was pinned on Universalists, as removing the threat of eternal punishment logically gave people unchecked permission for vice in this life. Kathryn Gin Lum describes the republican structure of American government and society as making the issue of hell especially pressing: God replaced the human sovereign as the monarch who ruled over all citizens, and it was only with a just God threatening eternal punishment that a republican people could be inspired to cultivate virtue.<sup>89</sup> With Universalism,

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<sup>85</sup> Trudeau, *Universalism* 101, 12.

<sup>86</sup> Miller, *The Larger Hope*, 22-23.

<sup>87</sup> Miller, 177.

<sup>88</sup> Marini, *Radical Sects*, 125.

<sup>89</sup> Kathryn Gin Lum, *Damned Nation: Hell in America from the Revolution to Reconstruction* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), 29.

citizens were left with all the luxuries of a republican government with none of the checks on their propensity for anarchy.

As early as 1783, the First Presbytery of the Eastward published *Bath-Kol: A Voice from the Wilderness*, an anti-Universalist polemic attributed to a traditionalist Presbyterian minister also named John Murray.<sup>90</sup> The tract warns against increasing “immorality” tied to “the growing declension from the pure doctrines of grace,” establishing that social order and Calvinist soteriology still held together in the traditionalist Murray’s eyes.<sup>91</sup> He did not mince words in challenging Universalism directly, comparing it to the words of the serpent in Eden: “the truth of the threatening which God himself had expressly delivered in Paradise, the destroyer dared, in the same Paradise, as expressly to deny. ‘Ye shall not surely die, though God has said you shall,’ was the first sermon on this subject; it was delivered by the original author of the doctrine.”<sup>92</sup> Universalism was the world’s oldest heresy, the instrument of the Fall that led to separation from God and social decay. Like Universalists, traditionalists wanted to see a strong republican ethic flourish, but they held that universal salvation would inevitably destroy republican liberty’s potential to produce a virtuous citizenry. Calvinist clergy especially flocked to Lum’s notion of God as the republican monarch, holding that failure to submit to God’s moral law was a sure sign that one was damned, which also functioned as a check on social evils.<sup>93</sup> If the Universalist movement won the hearts and minds of enough Americans, this check was removed.

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<sup>90</sup> Lum, *Damned Nation*, 247n39.

<sup>91</sup> First Presbytery of the Eastward, *Bath-Kol: A Voice from the Wilderness* (Thomson Gale; Boston, MA: N. Coverly, 1783), [https://go-gale-com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/ps/i.do?p=SABN&u=duke\\_perkins&id=GALE|CY0102824858&v=2.1&it=r](https://go-gale-com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/ps/i.do?p=SABN&u=duke_perkins&id=GALE|CY0102824858&v=2.1&it=r), 2.

<sup>92</sup> First Presbytery of the Eastward, *Bath-Kol*, 171.

<sup>93</sup> Lum, *Damned Nation*, 29.

## Communal Piety: The Universalist Response

The Universalists responded with a reformist (as opposed to radical or accommodationist) communal ethic. They realized that the rise in individual rights and the free market economy were here to stay, and merely sought to hold together a virtuous republican citizenry that could absorb both of these.

In short, Universalists claimed that universal salvation was the optimal religious doctrine to complement republicanism, ensuring love of God and neighbor. Rush straightforwardly declared in a 1791 letter to Winchester that “the Universal doctrine prevails more and more in our country, particularly among persons eminent for their piety, in whom it is not a mere speculation but a new principle of action in the heart prompting to practical godliness.”<sup>94</sup> It is especially of note that Universalism is not only appealing to pious persons, but that it is *precisely because* of their Universalism that they are led to pious actions. To Rush, the love that Universalism would inspire in one’s heart for all people as fellow creatures of God would be enough to prompt one to good works, echoing Bressler’s theory that acceptance of universal salvation effectively replaced the born-again experience as the driving force of one’s piety. Republican government was the “best [repository] of the gospel,” and Universalism had an almost magnetic power to provide the social cohesion that republicanism required.<sup>95</sup> Universalism was a “celestial magnet,” a “polar truth” which “leads to truths upon all subjects,” and the liberty one wished for all people under republicanism would slowly lead to a desire for all to be saved.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Benjamin Rush, *Letters of Benjamin Rush*, ed. L.H. Butterfield, vol. I (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1951), 582.

<sup>95</sup> Rush, *Letters*, 584, 611.

<sup>96</sup> Rush, 584, 612.

Universalist preachers held to this ethic, believing that Universalism was uniquely poised to provide the communal sense of obligation for America in keeping with Williams' "republican Universalism" theory. In a letter Murray co-wrote to George Washington, he boldly proclaimed that "the peculiar doctrine which we [Universalists] hold is not less friendly to the order and happiness of society, than it is essential to the perfection of the Deity," explicitly connecting the foundation of the first Universalist denomination to the culture of liberty in the early republic.<sup>97</sup> Murray agreed with traditionalist critics that one's view of God and divine justice would inevitably influence their social ethic, but he had an alternate view of how that theology should look. His Universalism was one in which Jesus had fully accomplished the redemption on the cross, and people were strictly saved by faith alone apart from any works. However, Murray had no patience for accusations of antinomianism, explaining that while people may not save themselves, they still have duties "as the saved," which can be "pleasing to God" and "profitable unto men."<sup>98</sup> He built on the classical Reformed separation of justification and sanctification, combined with an Enlightenment Lockean insistence that coerced virtue was not virtue at all, whether by governments *or* by the traditional doctrine of hell.

Caleb Rich's "Memoir" also explains the special love for all people provoked by Universalism, turning the traditionalist accusation of licentiousness back on them. He received a revelation that, just as every stone in a master builder's structure had an intentional purpose in the builder's design, Rich (and every other person) had an immutable place in God's redemptive plan. Rich reports feeling unspeakable gratitude followed by "an unusual love for every person

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<sup>97</sup> Murray, *Life*, 240.

<sup>98</sup> Murray, *Some Hints*, 29.

as those who before appeared hateful to me now appeared as lovely as my best friends.”<sup>99</sup> The image of social cohesion and the implications it had for a republic in an identity crisis are especially powerful here: all the stones in Rich’s builder’s structure hold together, all reliant on one another and on God. By understanding one’s place in that structure, one could participate fully in the community with a full sense of duty and gratitude, a sort of Universalist covenant theology. By contrast, traditionalism separated humanity into two camps and gave that separation a teleological finality. Rich inverts a metaphor one might imagine a traditionalist using, naming Universalism as the “straight gate and narrow way which leads to life” and expressing sadness at “the doctrine that led to a belief in endless punishment without affecting any reformation in the punished but centered in revenge.”<sup>100</sup> Far from eternal punishment inspiring morality, it promoted angry and vengeful feelings towards one’s neighbors. In summary, the Universalists took the covenant theology of the prevailing Calvinist culture and the Enlightenment optimism about the “perfectibility of man,” universalizing the former and recentering the latter on God.<sup>101</sup>

### Congregational Piety: “Calvinism Improved” and the Universal Covenant

Moving from the polemical to the practical, we may now examine how Universalists implemented their vision of communal piety at the local level. The Universalists embraced their role as an ameliorated Calvinism at a time when the old Calvinism’s influence was weakened. The First Great Awakening’s imprint in Universalist thought is especially evident in how their

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<sup>99</sup> Rich’s “Memoir” was published across several issues of one journal, the *Candid Examiner*. Only the first (April 30) issue has clear page numbers, so digital page numbers will be used for all others; Caleb Rich, “Memoir of Elder Riche,” *Candid Examiner* 2, no. 24 (May 14, 1827): 1-5, [http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?url\\_ver=Z39.88-2004&res\\_dat=xri:pqd:hnp&rft\\_val\\_fmt=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:journal&rft\\_dat=xri:pqd:PM, 1](http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:pqd:hnp&rft_val_fmt=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:journal&rft_dat=xri:pqd:PM, 1).

<sup>100</sup> Caleb Rich, “Memoir of Elder Riche,” *Candid Examiner* 2, no. 25 (May 28, 1827): 1-5, [http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?url\\_ver=Z39.88-2004&res\\_dat=xri:pqd:hnp&rft\\_val\\_fmt=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:journal&rft\\_dat=xri:pqd:PM, 2](http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:pqd:hnp&rft_val_fmt=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:journal&rft_dat=xri:pqd:PM, 2).

<sup>101</sup> May, *Enlightenment*, 231.

covenant theology resembled that of Jonathan Edwards. Edwards broke from Calvinist orthodoxy in his insistence that humans had only a moral, not natural, inability to repent. Instead, “a being ‘drives toward a goal, which is union with other beings,’” disqualifying purely individualized notions of election and affirming his vision of the good society as “ideally an organic whole, in which persons treated each other as fellow members of the body of Christ.”<sup>102</sup>

The Universalists took this organic vision of society and endowed it with a universal scope wherein the local community served as a light to the world. The 1779 Articles of Association for the Gloucester congregation that Murray founded used covenantal language, as God chose “a people for himself, giving them his fear, and revealing to them his secret...[revealing] to babes what he hath hid from the wise and prudent.”<sup>103</sup> The Gloucester congregation’s minoritarian view of themselves affirmed their duty to “let our light shine before men, that they may see our good works” and be led to God, expecting to suffer persecution in the process.<sup>104</sup> The language of “[letting] our light shine before men” is conventional covenant language dating back to John Winthrop’s famous “city on a hill,” only buttressed with Universalists’ ability to look on their neighbors as equal heirs with an assured place in God’s kingdom.

Hence, though Universalists did not believe that only other Universalists could be good citizens, they clearly thought themselves poised to contribute to republican society in a special way. Rush compared republican government to John the Baptist, “[making the Lord’s] paths straight” by allowing humans to live freely and choose virtue, and as mentioned before, he hoped

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<sup>102</sup> Bressler, *Universalist Movement in America*, 11.

<sup>103</sup> Eddy, *A History*, vol. I, 175.

<sup>104</sup> Eddy, 176-77.

that the concern for one's fellow citizenry would at least allow one to hope for Universalism.<sup>105</sup> Murray also affirmed Edwards' and Rush's organic vision of society in his 1795 Thanksgiving sermon, mixing governmental and biblical language as Rush did. Murray's Calvinism was palpable, as he emphasizes the sovereignty of God as the source of America's sustenance: the United States were "planted here by the hands of the Most High," who protected its people from ruin.<sup>106</sup> While all enjoyed the protection of God, though, nobody could be made fully thankful for God's blessings "until he be made fully sensible of his obligations to the Savior of sinners," and none of his congregants found it possible to be thankful "for a being appointed to endless sorrow" before embracing Universalism.<sup>107</sup> As was explained before, Murray held that this firm gratitude would flow over to a recognition of and action on one's duties "as the saved," recognizing their duty to *all* their neighbors.<sup>108</sup>

Oppositely, Universalists held that traditionalist Calvinist covenant theology was hopelessly anti-egalitarian. An omnipotent God who only saved a fraction of people ran counter to the principles of egalitarianism that Universalists hoped would buoy the republic. Joseph Huntington, author of the Universalist tract bluntly named *Calvinism Improved*, condemned the traditionalist doctrines of election as leading the Christian believer to act like the Pharisee of Luke 18, thanking God "that I am not like other men." Rush similarly explained that if Universalism was the natural faith of republicanism, traditionalist Calvinism was the natural faith of absolutist monarchism.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Rush, *Letters*, 611.

<sup>106</sup> John Murray, "Thanksgiving Sermon," essay, in *Letters, and Sketches of Sermons*, vol. 3 (HathiTrust; Boston, MA: Joshua Belcher, 1813), 365–83, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.32044054739826&seq=1>, 372.

<sup>107</sup> Murray, "Thanksgiving Sermon," 367.

<sup>108</sup> Murray, *Some Hints*, 29.

<sup>109</sup> Bressler, *Universalist Movement in America*, 19.

Huntington's and Rush's worldview owes a large amount to the Universalists' notion of common salvation. Rich understood the common nature of election and salvation to be part and parcel of his conversion to Universalism. Hearing a preacher explain that Zion was barren like Sarah for 4,000 years until the resurrection of Jesus, Rich realized that "the whole human family was as much born in [Jesus] as they fell in Adam," and so they were all "justified to eternal life in the second Adam as they were condemned to death in the first."<sup>110</sup> Rich's naming of the whole human family as elect together does not merely conceive of humanity a sum of individuals which happened to be universal. Indeed, one person cannot be saved apart from humanity as a whole. In the language of Rich's earlier vision of the stone building, each individual stone might have a unique existence, but there is only one building. It ceases to be the same building without even one stone. In the same way, all humanity was damned through Adam and saved in Christ simultaneously, as God's sovereignty worked all things out through them. Murray's adoption of Rely's universal election took a similar tone; as mentioned previously, Jesus united himself to everyone in the atonement, putting on all of humanity "as a garment" in a "common salvation."<sup>111</sup> If those salvific benefits did not apply to even one person, either Jesus failed in his mission or he willingly "passed over" that person. In defaulting to the latter explanation, Universalists reasoned, traditionalist Calvinists resigned to a world that pitted God against humans and humans against each other, incentivizing the "elect" class to only be grateful that they themselves were saved and to abandon their duties to broader society.

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<sup>110</sup> Rich, "Memoir" (*Candid Examiner* 2, no. 25), 3.

<sup>111</sup> Williams, *American Universalism*, xiii.

## Personal Piety: Gospel Liberty

Finally, we may conclude our discussion of Universalist public piety by looking at the role individuals played in the life of the local congregation. The early Universalists, along with many other radical Protestant sects, were characterized by what Marini calls “gospel liberty,” which entailed that God made humanity free to discern moral and doctrinal truths on their own outside of the explicit commands of Jesus and the Ten Commandments.<sup>112</sup> While the previous two sections make it clear that liberty came with responsibility, the prevailing mood among Universalists held that clergy and institutions should not coerce consciences in the ecclesial sphere, just as monarchs should not coerce consciences in the civil sphere. Murray’s Thanksgiving sermon, for example, thanked God for leaving America free from “imperious, dogmatizing creed makers” demanding full theological conformity.<sup>113</sup>

The Universalists’ mentality was a product of the democratization of Christianity in the eighteenth century. After the Revolution, individual conscience was king, as hierarchies of all kinds fell into question. Not least of all these was the clerical hierarchy, as many Protestant laity questioned if ordained ministers had any special authority at all.<sup>114</sup> Predictably, the Universalists adopted a congregationalist polity and a minimal, non-binding set of five Articles of Faith at the 1790 Philadelphia Convention, with some Universalists bristling at even that: Murray believed the Articles conceded too much to Winchester’s purgatorial Universalism, while Zephaniah Lathe believed any creedal statement was a threat to gospel liberty as Marini has defined it.<sup>115</sup> Rich’s and Winchester’s aforementioned experience of independently retreating to search the

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<sup>112</sup> Marini, *Radical Sects*, 123.

<sup>113</sup> Murray, “Thanksgiving Sermon,” 382.

<sup>114</sup> Hatch, *Democratization*, 35, 44-45.

<sup>115</sup> Cassara, *Universalism in America*, 28; Marini, *Radical Sects*, 123.

Scriptures in search of a “pure” Christianity was representative of many radical Protestants at the time.<sup>116</sup>

In relation to our previous discussion of the Enlightenment, it is in this area of individual piety that Enlightenment influence on Universalism is most prevalent, with an important caveat. The Universalists’ independent-mindedness definitely bears semblance to Enlightenment anti-creedalism.<sup>117</sup> However, Universalist piety was not so much a conscious “compromise between Christianity...and Deism” as Cassara hypothesizes, or even human autonomous reason as such.<sup>118</sup> While Cassara probably wrote with the whole of Universalist history in mind, pre-Ballou Universalism may be more accurately described as a solidly Christian movement accepting Enlightenment critiques as those critiques challenged American Christianity as a whole. In fact, Rush directly stated that “the morality of the deists... is, I believe, in most cases, the effect of habits, produced by early instruction in the principles of Christianity,” instruction Rush believed should continue with the form of regular Scripture study in public schools.<sup>119</sup> Winchester, too, believed that “deism, infidelity, and atheism” were all harmful to the republican body politic, and warned that if Americans forgot the Scriptures, “the principles of liberty will probably be soon forgotten.”<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Hatch, *Democratization*, 41.

<sup>117</sup> See Thomas Jefferson: “I have never permitted myself to meditate a specified creed. These formulas have been the bane and ruin of the Christian church, its own fatal invention, which, through so many ages, made of Christendom a slaughterhouse, and at this day divides it into castes of inextinguishable hatred to one another.”; Allen Jayne, *Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence: Origins, Philosophy, and Theology* (ProQuest; Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1998), <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/duke/detail.action?docID=1915028>, 141.

<sup>118</sup> Cassara, *Universalism in America*, 6.

<sup>119</sup> Rush, “School Book,” 95.

<sup>120</sup> Elhanan Winchester, *A Plain Political Catechism* (Early American Imprints, Series I: Evans; Greenfield, MA: T. Dickman, 1796), <http://opac.newsbank.com/select/evans/31645>, 69, 71.

## Religious Liberty

Despite Winchester's and Rush's statements, though, the Universalists as a whole carried their stresses on gospel liberty and republican responsibility into an advocacy for religious liberty in the civil sphere.<sup>121</sup> In that way, an important clarification is needed before we affirm that nascent Universalism reflected Williams' "republican Universalism." The early Universalists tended to be strong supporters of religious liberty, only viewing the unique benefits of Universalism for republican ethics as a special vocation for themselves as a covenant people. They did not embrace the 1870 centennial's nationalistic triumphalism.

Centennial speaker Israel Washburn spoke of the Universalists as "the American church of the future," urging Universalists to work hard "for the upbuilding of the Church which shall best represent [God's unlimited love], until that Church shall become the church of Christendom and Christendom shall be coextensive with the earth."<sup>122</sup> The early Universalists, by contrast, held to an ecumenical outlook centered on religious liberty, living alongside and helping their traditionalist neighbors.<sup>123</sup> The 1779 Articles of Association of Murray's Gloucester congregation betray a relatively sober view of church-state relations, affirming that "we will be peaceable and obedient subjects to the powers that are ordained of God, in all civil cases; but as subjects of that King whose kingdom is not of this world, we cannot acknowledge the right of any human authority to make laws for the regulating of our consciences."<sup>124</sup> A clear line is

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<sup>121</sup> Rush's defense of Scripture in public school curricula does not seem civilly libertarian by twenty-first century metrics, but most New Englanders agreed with him at that time that biblical education should be a part of public school curricula. It was hardly a uniquely Universalist plan; May, *Enlightenment*, 180.

<sup>122</sup> Williams, *American Universalism*, 19-20.

<sup>123</sup> After winning an early court case that gave them the legal right to be taxed separately from the Congregationalist church from which they split, Universalists joined the ranks of Baptists as leading religious liberty advocates in the Massachusetts disestablishment debate up until final disestablishment in 1833; Miller, *The Larger Hope*, 26.

<sup>124</sup> Williams, *American Universalism*, 6.

drawn here: God is the only sovereign, and all human authorities exist to honor God and promote the public good, an ethic no doubt owing to the Universalists' experience as a persecuted religious minority. Rush likewise penned a letter to ministers of all denominations where he recommended the formation of an ecumenical federation of churches which influenced American legislation in a confessionally neutral manner.<sup>125</sup>

Conversely, Williams notes that the Universalists had matured in American society between the late eighteenth century and the 1870 centennial to a point where they felt they could be a part of the establishment. God, Universalism, and country were effectively collapsed into one single-minded entity.<sup>126</sup> As opposed to Murray and others' call for harmony with other sects in the definite future, Washburn's Universalism was one "universal in its scope and ultimate membership," with Catholics *and* traditionalist Protestants serving as "but a temporary instrumentality and not the final church."<sup>127</sup> In *Not in God's Name*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks addresses religious violence among the three Abrahamic faiths. He notes that a universalistic<sup>128</sup> conception of God and God's covenant with humanity can facilitate tribalism if left unchecked, leading to confrontations with those who do not share one's religious vision and explaining much Christian and Islamic violence throughout history.<sup>129</sup> We see this rhetoric creeping into the Universalist movement's republicanism by the time of Washburn's address, as the universality of its scope complemented Washburn's larger manifest destiny rhetoric.<sup>130</sup> Conversely, the gentler

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<sup>125</sup> Benjamin Rush, "An Address to the Ministers of the Gospel of Every Denomination in the United States, Upon Subjects Interesting to Morals," essay, in *Essays, Literary, Moral & Philosophical* (Philadelphia, PA: Thomas & Samuel F. Bradford, no. 8, South Front Street, 1798), 114-124, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=evans;idno=N25938.0001.001;rgn=div2;view=text;cc=evans;node=N25938.0001.001:7.3.>, 122-23.

<sup>126</sup> Williams, *American Universalism*, 6.

<sup>127</sup> Williams, 19.

<sup>128</sup> I.e. absolute and unitary in scope, not referring to universal salvation.

<sup>129</sup> Jonathan Sacks, *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 2015), 189-90.

<sup>130</sup> Williams, *American Universalism*, 20.

blend of civic republican virtue, local covenantal piety, cross-confessional unity, and work parallel to (rather than synonymous with) government in early Universalism ironically led its social ethic to resemble the covenantal particularity of Sacks' Orthodox Jewish faith more than establishmentarian forms of Christianity.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the Universalists forged their theological and social ethic in the aftermath of a breakdown of trust in the Calvinist religious consensus. The Universalists believed their doctrine would provide the social cohesion that neither old Calvinism nor strict Enlightenment values could offer, building a Spirit-led communal piety that used the love of God demonstrated to all creation in God's universal salvation as a sort of "conversion experience" to spur the believer to a life of good works. These good works would ideally produce a virtuous citizenry, ready to contribute to a burgeoning republic by using their liberty with responsibility.

The early American Universalists are not often covered in contemporary scholarship, which is unfortunate for the field of American religious history. The early Universalists exemplify the founding era ethic of republican sentiment and ecclesial independence, but with the caveat of being the only major denomination to adopt universal salvation as an article of faith, giving them a unique social outlook. A revitalized look at the Universalists from contemporary scholarship involving historiographical work from Christian, Unitarian-Universalist, and secular perspectives would enable us to uncover the many dimensions of early Universalism to understand it better in its context.

In particular, later scholarship should consider how Universalists clashed with other upstart religious movements in New England, particularly Baptists and Methodists. The limited

scope of our paper only allowed us to consider the Universalists as opponents of the Calvinist establishment, but many other rising preachers denominations embraced an Arminian theology (especially later on during the Second Great Awakening) which would require an entirely separate response.<sup>131</sup> Further, social history would benefit from a look at how the Universalists' unique eschatological conviction influenced their social work. We alluded to how Rush built the foundation of many later social reform movements, movements which he did not compartmentalize from his Universalist faith.<sup>132</sup> To Rush, Universalism “establishes the equality of mankind—it abolishes the punishment of death for any crime—and converts jails into houses of repentance and reformation.”<sup>133</sup> Understanding how and if Universalist convictions shaped the denomination's later work for prison reform, abolition of slavery, temperance, and much more would be a boon for understanding these programs as part of a broader religious movement rather than simply civic humanitarianism.<sup>134</sup>

Overall, as we stated at the beginning, the Christian Universalists of early America are interesting because they are so quintessentially American, Christian, and Universalist, with each of these identities influencing the other in countless ways. Let us hope that contemporary scholarship can rediscover the fascinating story they have to offer.

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<sup>131</sup> Bressler, *Universalist Movement in America*, 13.

<sup>132</sup> Miller, *The Larger Hope*, 39.

<sup>133</sup> Rush, *Letters*, 584.

<sup>134</sup> Miller, *The Larger Hope*, Ch. 18-22.

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