

**Reconciling Faith and Reason:
Universalism as Theological Anomaly in Nineteenth
and Twentieth-Century Rural Ontario**

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In light of the thematic focus of this year's annual meeting on Boundaries, I will be giving specific attention to the various ways in which the Universalist understanding of Christianity was a theological anomaly in nineteenth and early-twentieth century rural Ontario that was at variance with more conservative formulations of Christianity in neighbouring Christian churches in their local rural communities. This paper is based on my historical research in preparation as the guest speaker for the celebration of the 120th Anniversary of The Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda located near Leamington, Ontario, in Essex County, on Sunday, 12 November 2000.

For the purposes of this paper, I will primarily concentrate on the salient theological challenge posed by the Universalist movement in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries within Canada. Secondly, I will examine the growth and formation of this "Christian" denomination at the Olinda Universalist Church during this period, with brief attention to its historical transformation into its present-day identity as the Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda.

In summary, this paper will examine the significant theological and historical inroads made by Universalism as a predominately rural movement in Ontario. The characteristic values and theological outlook of Universalism will be analysed with specific attention to the small town and rural context in which this liberal religious orientation took root and thrived. The

theological and religious anomaly of Universalism was clearly evident in how the longstanding Universalist church at Olinda contested, if not trespassed, traditional Christian, ecclesial boundaries and mores for normative religious life in southwestern Ontario. Furthermore, I will speculate on how the Olinda Universalist Church maintained its isolated Universalist religious identity despite the latent suspicion and occasional hostility from local and neighbouring Christian churches.

Even though the Olinda congregation continues to maintain amicable relationships with most of the local Christian congregations to the present day, its clearly liberal theological orientation was undeniably a source of misunderstanding, if not unspoken conflict and suspicion, for more conservative Christian congregations. Since 1880, the historic legacy of Universalism in Ontario reveals the tenuous yet palpable community tensions between Universalists and their counterparts, pushing the boundaries between faith and reason, rural and liberal (which usually implied urban), and salvation and damnation. The remainder of the paper will analyse the unique theological and historical context for Universalist congregations in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries within Ontario in light of the following summary descriptions of the above three categorical polarities, or ideological conflicts.

Faith and Reason

For early and later generations of Universalists, faith and reason were never considered antithetical to each other. Unlike the traditional Christian theological conflict opposing faith to reason, Universalists saw reason and rational thought as part of religious faith. This integral emphasis on reconciling faith and reason was both practical and theological in lay terms. It undoubtedly contributed to making Universalists more intellectually astute *and* religiously tolerant, especially compared to their Baptist and Methodist neighbours and peers within a dominant Christian social milieu. The rigour and thoroughness with which lay Universalist parishioners carried out their thinking and theological reflection suggests they were neither non-intellectual nor anti-intellectual, despite their limited access to formal education.

Most of the Universalist congregations were located in rural southwestern Ontario, and many of their members were farmers. Consequently, the time and money required for schooling and formal education was out of the question for most of them, not to mention the prohibitive geographical

distance they lived from schools. Furthermore, their “low-brow,” rural, self-educated intellectual and spiritual formation distinguished them from the humanistic ethos and social location of the very group with whom they would eventually merge in 1961 – the Unitarians.

Rural and Liberal

There is a prevalent stereotypical assumption that “rural” invariably equals conservative. This stereotype is persistent in historical documents, and continues to carry weight despite the lack of critical attention to its implied connotations. Conversely, the term “urban” is, generally speaking, equated with liberal. Moreover, since rural and urban have been and still are conceptualized as dichotomous to each other, the likelihood of any liberal thought or religion thriving in rural and farming communities seems remote. This assumption was, however, clearly contradicted by the liberal religious perspective and presence of the Olinda Universalist Church and other Universalist congregations alongside their more orthodox Christian neighbours.

Salvation and Damnation

The Calvinist emphasis on divine election and predestination was implicit in the orthodoxy of most Christian churches. Meanwhile, the firm theological conviction in universal salvation espoused by Universalists was not only central to their religious ethos, but it constituted their very name. The vernacular caricature of this doctrine was epitomized anecdotally in the following colloquial disdain for the Universalists’ dogmatic repudiation of hell-fire: “Those Universalists believe there is *no* hell; the hell there ain’t [no hell].”

Though amusing, the above commentary on the Universalists’ reputed denial of hell-fire and damnation attests to some of the contemporary reservations surrounding Universalists in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Such anecdotal sarcasm signaled the implicit moral danger in no belief in the doctrine and reality of hell. The historical record testifies to this climate of suspicion and fear of “heresy” occasioned by the new presence of Universalists. In 1846, the third Universalist minister to arrive in the province of Ontario was named J. R. W. Lavelle.¹ Lavelle was twenty-eight years of age and a convert from Presbyterianism. He went first to Smithville

where the local Universalist congregation, which had been organized by Alexander G. Laurie, the first ordained Universalist minister to arrive in the province two years earlier, was now meeting in a schoolhouse.² Two or three years later Lavelle moved to London, Ontario, to succeed Laurie who had returned to the United States. For several years Lavelle published a monthly paper, *The Gospel Messenger or Universalist Advocate*. The appearance of the first issue in January 1849 aroused unsavory comment from as far away as Montreal:

We are grieved to see, by the receipt of the first number, that a Universalist paper has been commenced in Western Canada. The beginning of this grievous error lies either in contemplating only the goodness of God's character, to the exclusion of his justice, truth and holiness; or in taking such an exaggerated and erroneous view of Christ's atonement as to believe that it will save all men, whether they will or not. But, however amiable the mistakes may be in which it originates, its onward course is, like that of all other errors, a desolating one. In many cases the atonement is discarded; Scripture, or, at all events, the greater part of it, ceases to be regarded as of Divine authority, and much uncharitableness appears towards those who continue to believe it. All the sanctions under which men usually act disappear, and the out-and-out Universalist may, so far as his creed is concerned, do anything he chooses, in defiance of all laws, human and Divine. The most man can do to him is to put him to death, and then he enters into immediate and unmingled happiness. Or, let the worst come to the worst, if no one will kill him, he may do it himself, with the same glorious result. Truly this is an awful decision!

We do not say that Universalists are such dangerous members of society as their faith tends to make them, but if they are not, we think it is because they have not full confidence in their own creed, and not because of the goodness of the human heart.³

Lavelle reportedly traveled widely throughout rural Ontario on horseback, and announcements in his publication indicate that he was preaching in Westminster, Beamsville, Berlin, Galt, Brantford, Waterford, Louth, Aylmer and Temperanceville.⁴ In her book, *Universalists in Ontario*, Louise Foulds carefully documents the various historical stages through which the present Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda and former Universalist congregations gave formal expression to their Universalist

identity throughout the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.⁵ Foulds points out that the first organized congregation for which there is record was founded at London, Ontario, on 10 September 1831. Thirty male members signed the constitution, which declared, "The object of this society shall be the cultivation of peace and harmony and the promotion of religion and morality among ourselves and our fellow men." But interdenominational hostility was rife during this period of history, and the Universalists were clearly seen as a threat on both theological and political grounds.⁶

Convinced that reason was on their side, Universalist missionaries rejected outright the manipulative emotionalism of the revivalists at this time, and opted instead for public debate as a means of capturing public interest.⁷ Both David Leavitt, the first missionary to settle in the province, and Lavelle, were skilled debaters. Having memorized much of the Bible, Leavitt, in particular, was never at a loss for the right quotation to counter his "Partialist" opponents; Universalists often referred to non-Universalists, and Calvinists, in particular, as "Partialists," because they believed that only part of the human race would be saved.⁸ As a matter of fact, Leavitt reportedly enjoyed debating so much that he often paid the expenses of his adversary in order to have the opportunity of showing off his oratorical prowess. A Leavitt obituary quoted from *The Universalist* described him as "a man of great natural ability, having unexcelled logical keenness, and possessed with argumentative powers beyond anyone we ever knew . . . simply a giant among pigmies in the days of his activity . . . a Universalist of the Ballou order."⁹

Generally speaking, parishioners in rural communities and small towns across Ontario and New England were more biblically literate than many have recognized. There was intense public interest in theology during this period, and theological debates between Universalists and their opponents had great drawing power. The debates over hell-fire and damnation often lasted for two, and sometimes three, days.¹⁰ They must have easily provided the equivalent entertainment staying power of Oprah Winfrey at a historical time when the practice of both skilled elocution and rhetorical debate was more sophisticated than it is today. Most listeners were intellectually and patiently engaged for hours in attending such debates, unlike the "sound-bite" visual audience to which we have become accustomed in a television culture.

A sketch of Leavitt's life by his grandson, Ezra, offers firsthand testimony to the entertainment value of these oratorical contests. Ezra wrote

of his high school headmaster recalling Leavitt debates that he had attended in his younger days, in which the headmaster admitted that while he hadn't believed a word "the old man" [Leavitt] said, he would have traveled any distance to see the fun. The teacher added: "I once saw him [confound] four Methodist preachers one after another – they angry and he with a smile on his face."¹¹

A famous two-day debate took place in a schoolhouse in Picton, Ontario between Leavitt and David Oliphant, a "Disciple Baptist" (Campbellite) minister in 1846. In February three years later, in the Methodist chapel in Jordan, Oliphant met Lavelle in a three-day marathon that attracted a huge crowd and was reported in detail in the local newspaper. It also drew brickbats from "Partialist" clergy, and three months later Lavelle again arranged for use of the chapel "for the purpose of informing the people what Universalism is and replying to some disgraceful misrepresentations made by some of the endless misery ministers."¹²

In 1853, however, an even bigger crowd of reportedly 1,500 people attended an open air debate at Fonthill – impossible to contain within any local town hall or schoolhouse – to hear Lavelle and C.P. Harris, a Methodist minister argue for and against the scriptural authority for Universalist doctrine. The two men spoke from a six-foot high platform, each supplied with a table and writing materials. Speaking fifteen minutes at a time, they debated for two days from eight in the morning to six in the evening, and only a short break for lunch. The whole affair was recorded in shorthand for publication after the event.¹³

In order to understand the prevalent and practically ubiquitous acceptance of "Partialist" theology over against Universalism in both Ontario and New England, it is important to recognize the prominent sacred canopy of New England Calvinism in eighteenth and nineteenth-century North America. It will also help set the stage for the entry of possibly the most famous Universalist preacher to whose lofty status in the communion of Universalist saints David Leavitt was elevated above – Hosea Ballou (1771-1852).

In 1750, Joseph Bellamy, a follower, and to some extent, a popularizer of Jonathan Edwards, published his theological masterpiece, *True Religion Delineated*, with the latter's blessing and explicit endorsement, to "distinguish true religion from false."¹⁴ Despite the objections of some Calvinists, Bellamy's tract represented the last major formulation, or reformulation, of the older idea of the atonement as put forth in New England Calvinism. As

Anne Douglas suggests in her book, *The Feminization of American Culture*, one can probably trust Harriet Beecher Stowe's claim that *True Religion Delineated* was one of the most popular non-fictional books in New England in the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries.¹⁵

In delineating his own Calvinist interpretation of eternal punishment, Bellamy stressed repeatedly that humans have no claims on God at all: every person has deserved eternal damnation if only because God wants it that way.¹⁶ God has every right to judge everyone and, conversely, God's judgment cannot be doubted by anyone. In fact, Bellamy infers that God has so written the human story of damnation and salvation so it will fully reveal and exercise his gifts. "What will he get by it all?" Bellamy inquires. "He will excite and display every one of his perfections to the life and so . . . will exhibit a most perfect and exact image of himself." To paraphrase Douglas' commentary on Bellamy's divine scenario, regenerate humans will be so bedazzled by the spectacle of God's glory that they will happily consent to play any bit part in his orchestrated cosmic drama.¹⁷

Two contemporary Calvinist Edwardseans, Samuel Hopkins and Nathaniel Emmons, offered complementary interpretations of the Last Judgment. As Hopkins was to explain, regenerate believers would be willing to be damned if God so wills it.¹⁸ Furthermore, they will even rejoice, as Nathaniel Emmons liked to emphasize, in seeing once-cherished friends and relatives tossed into hell-fire by a justly incensed deity. According to Bellamy, Christ was sacrificed not to take away sin, but to display God's dislike of it; Christ's death was not meant to show God's mercy, but to stress God's punitiveness. In other words, the Saviour died to pacify the Lord's pride. Hence, God can now feel justified in saving humans, if he so chooses, from the damnation they still richly and infinitely deserve.¹⁹

Douglas notes that Bellamy, like other prominent Edwardseans, was under considerable pressure by the Universalists to move toward the idea of a general Atonement. God's sacrifice of Christ has thus made it possible for all humans to be saved, although all humans will not be able to avail themselves of this opportunity.²⁰ Needless to say, many would concur with Ann Douglas – if not with Bellamy's rival Universalists – that "this doctrine of the Atonement is in many ways a horrifying one."²¹ Yet, as Douglas suggests, this same doctrine clearly resonated with many people in its immense imaginative and intellectual appeal. As unfair as it undoubtedly is, especially to modern sensibilities, it still operated as a model of divine majesty; likewise, for as psychologically crushing and humiliating as it may

appear and often was, this doctrine could also be a source of moral energy, if not religious inspiration. Furthermore, “it provided its adherent, no matter how it belittled him, with a supreme and commanding object of worship.” According to popular lore, a long-time black parishioner of Bellamy’s was asked after Bellamy’s retirement how he liked his successor; the parishioner found the new minister satisfactory, but not nearly so exciting or stimulating as Bellamy had been. Bellamy “made God so great – SO GREAT,” he explained.²² Douglas makes the astute observation that the terror and thrill of obeying such a mighty being with whom one could partially identify and from whom one could even anticipate being punished on Judgment Day, must have been enormous.²³ It was no doubt as exhilarating as it was frightening to most believers.

The idea of the atonement, which gradually replaced the Edwardsean or “New Divinity” theory among liberal Protestant ministers and theologians in the early and mid-nineteenth century, represented a shift from this basically paternal (or gubernatorial) and authoritarian view above to a fundamentally maternal and affective one.²⁴ God is no longer seen as expressing his hatred of sin by requiring the sacrifice of his son, but is now seen as demonstrating his love of humanity. Therefore, God ceases to govern by the direct and arbitrary imposition of his paternal will and begins to hold sway by the virtuous influence of his example. This theological shift in the doctrine of the atonement was already under way in various forms in the eighteenth century within the liberal wing of the Calvinist clergy, but it surfaced most decisively in the next century with the Universalist attack on the atonement in 1807 by Hosea Ballou (1771-1852). The Unitarian assault begun by William Ellery Channing in 1819, and consummated by Noah Worcester (1758-1837) in 1830, eventually led to a Congregationalist redefinition of the doctrine of atonement under the skilful interpretation of Horace Bushnell in 1866.²⁵

In addition to the formidable legacy of its founder in New England, John Murray, succeeding generations of Universalist thinking in North America were profoundly indebted to the seminal influence of Hosea Ballou. With practically no formal schooling, yet gifted with an acutely logical and inquiring mind, Ballou first drafted his *Treatise on the Atonement* in 1805.²⁶ Although Ballou’s *Treatise* was indisputably his single greatest contribution to Universalism, his entire career as a preacher, pastor, and theologian augmented his formidable influence throughout the Universalist movement.²⁷

In his *Treatise on the Atonement*, Ballou supported his arguments with a direct appeal to reason as well as to Scripture. He flatly denied the doctrines of original sin, eternal punishment, the Trinity and the supernatural redemption of humanity, on the grounds that they were not only unscriptural, but also irrational. “Why the above ideas should ever have been imbibed by men of understanding and study,” he said, “I can but scarcely satisfy myself; their absurdities are so glaring that it seems next to impossible that men of sobriety and sound judgment should ever imbibe them.”²⁸ Ballou saw Jesus’ mission on earth not as one of saving humanity from its inherently sinful nature and God’s resulting wrath, but of winning men and women over to an understanding of God’s loving character and a reciprocal desire to express the same love in their own lives.

Furthermore, Ballou reasoned that punishment could only be justified as a reforming influence, and therefore concluded that it made no sense for God to threaten humans with eternal punishment. No parent would be so irrational. He exalted human reason as “the highest faculty we have received from God” and proclaimed as a tenet of the faith “an extensive latitude to think freely.”²⁹ The majority of Universalists quickly adopted Ballou’s Unitarian position, but only gradually did the denomination embrace the whole of his modern thinking. Foulds comments that the Winchester Profession of 1803 differed from its predecessor in that it dropped both the Trinitarian concepts and the description of Jesus as a sacrificial saviour – reflecting a growing sentiment that salvation was assured by reason of the loving and merciful character of God. The Five Principles of 1899 acknowledged simply “the spiritual authority and leadership of Jesus.” It was not until 1935 that Universalism officially shifted its basis of authority from the divinely revealed Bible to “truth known or to be known.”³⁰

According to Ballou, nowhere does God require more of his creatures than they can actually perform. God is not concerned with self-assertion but, in keeping with his loving character, he is eager to accommodate humans in the working out of their salvation in terms comprehensible to them.³¹ Ballou mocks the very idea that God could either want to preserve or to add to his own glory, for such a wish would imply that his glory is not already eternal and immutable. Moreover, God would never punish humans eternally because endless torment by definition cannot possibly heal or reclaim them, and would contradict God’s preoccupation with their spiritual growth. “It is profane,” Ballou explains in his *Treatise*, “to attribute a disposition to the Almighty which we can justly condemn in ourselves.” Ballou always

believes it is fair and pertinent to ask the following question about any divine action: is it the way a parent would treat a child?³²

While Bellamy consistently started from the premise that it is obvious that God does not treat humans as a father treats his son, Ballou assumes the reverse. As Douglas notes, it is precisely from this assumption of implied familial affection on the part of God the loving father that Ballou sets forth his own explanation of the Atonement, which he illustrates repeatedly by invoking the parable of the prodigal son. Ballou believes that God, like any good parent, loves all his children equally; likewise, he wants all of them to be happy, and he will thus save them all. Furthermore, Ballou utterly rejects Bellamy's notion that humans could so readily lose themselves in God's glory as to rejoice in anyone's damnation. Human feeling, which is superfluous and vain in Bellamy's impregnable logical system, has become the supreme value in Ballou's theological scheme. By his own emphatic confession, Ballou "had rather . . . be possessed of that *sympathy* which causes [one person] to *feel* for *another*, than to *enjoy* an *unsocial pleasure* in a *frosty heaven* of misanthropy" [italics in original].³³

This same sentiment was undoubtedly shared among Universalist parishioners in general because it was central to their firm conviction that their God would never indulge in relegating even the worst of sinners to eternal damnation. Granted, the definitive theological understanding of the process of salvation in relation to suffering as a consequence of sin remained controversial among Universalists. In the early 1800s one faction, known as the "Restorationists," maintained that sinners in this life must undergo a limited period of penance in the afterlife before the soul could be "restored" to holiness and happiness. Others, known as "Ultra" Universalists, categorically rejected any idea of punishment after death. They believed that the consequences of wrong-doing were suffered in *this* life. While Restorationists were only a minority at first, their position would eventually become the dominant one by the end of the nineteenth century.³⁴

In order to understand the Universalists' dogmatic repudiation of "partial salvation" central to the prevalent Edwardsean and Calvinist theology in nineteenth-century Ontario and New England, I turn now to the Russian philosopher and Eastern Orthodox theologian, Nicolas Berdyaev. Exiled from his country in the wake of the Russian Revolution, Berdyaev was writing long after Ballou in a completely different cultural and religious milieu amid the political upheaval and transformation that followed the Revolution. With poignant similarity to Ballou, however, Berdyaev laments

the tragic course of Christian history in regards to the doctrine of salvation. He states emphatically, “the Gospel does not recognize a race of the good who are going to heaven and a race of the wicked who are going to hell.”³⁵ Furthermore, the very “idea of hell,” Berdyaev insists, “has been turned into an instrument of intimidation, of religious and moral terrorism.”³⁶ With incisive and disturbing imagery, Berdyaev’s sarcastic inditement of the “Partialist” scenario for salvation sounds uncannily like Ballou:

The so-called good are often “wicked” and the apparently “wicked” are often “good.” People managed to deduce from Christianity the most disgusting morality that has ever been known . . . The “good” are so anxious to get to the Kingdom of Heaven that in the crush at the entrance to it they are ready to trample on a great number of their neighbours and push them down to hell, to eternal damnation. And since the gate into the Kingdom is narrow, there is a struggle and a selection. “The good” and the righteous fight their way into Paradise over the corpses of their neighbours, less good and righteous than themselves.³⁷

Although the influence of Calvin’s formulation of election and predestination had waned by 1860, lurid descriptions fitting the above image of fiery torments awaiting unrepentant sinners were still a prominent feature of rural communities and small towns in New England as well as in Ontario. Based on both a defiant rejection of this arbitrary “Partialist” view of salvation, as well as a strong belief in a loving God, twenty-three men and women founded the First Universalist Parish of Olinda on 10 November 1880.³⁸ Nine of them were women. For the previous twenty years, Michael Fox, a local settler, had circulated Universalist literature in the community and organized services when visiting ministers were available. Mr. Fox was known locally as “Big Mike” – a name bestowed on him by the local Chipewewa people. At a time when it was common for European settlers and non-native residents to refer to native people as “savages,” Mr. Fox regarded them and referred to them as his brothers. Among his kindnesses to them was the donation of a small plot of land for use as a burying ground about 1840. This tiny cemetery, marked by a single stone, may still be seen on the Fourth Concession, not far from the church.³⁹

Writing in 1889, J.C. Barrows, the Clerk of the church, gave the following account of the mixed, if not openly hostile reception of Mike Fox’s evangelism on behalf of Universalism:

Mr. Fox had been educated in the Orthodox faith, as had also Mrs. F., and it seems a happy co-incidence that their minds should simultaneously call in question those barbaric ideas which obscured their mental horizons. The Baptists at this time were predominant, and when it became known, as it speedily did, that Universalist literature was being introduced into their midst, they, with renewed vigor, sought to counteract its influence by a more literal presentation of an endless hell and kindred doctrines. Mr. Fox was assailed as the devil's emissary, and he, more than all others, was pointed out as the man who would suffer the most intense pain in the hottest corner of hell. The most opprobrious epithets were applied to him, while his very presence at that time was sufficient to appall the more credulous.

In the midst of all, however, Mr. Fox and his wife retained a perfect composure of mind, and were ever ready to defend their new-born faith as a precious inheritance vouchsafed by the loving kindness of God. They never hid their light under a bushel, but kept it bright until others seeing the good way followed. And thus the one *Gospel Advocate* falling casually into the hands of an individual proved the means whereby the tide of religious sentiment, in that locality, was turned.⁴⁰

The formation of the church (as distinct from the parish) took place on 24 June 1883, when the Universalist Convention of the Province of Ontario was meeting for the first time at Olinda.⁴¹ At the time of its founding, Olinda was a thriving little farming community with a general store and post office, a blacksmith's shop, a school, and a Methodist church. Located near Leamington, in Essex County, Olinda even had its own industry – a broom factory, using local broom corn. There had also been a Baptist church in the area at one time, but it is not clear if it was still in existence in 1880.⁴²

Although many of their neighbours thought otherwise – as we have heard above – there was no doubt in the minds of the first generations of Ontario Universalists that they were Christians. The earliest denominational body in what is now Ontario was named the Christian Universalist Association for Canada West. It was succeeded in 1877 by the Ontario Universalist Convention, which eventually comprised six small churches at Bloomfield, Smithville, Port Dover, Nixon, Blenheim and Olinda.⁴³ Dr. Church and W.S. Goodell both referred to Universalism as “a Christian body,” and the first meeting of the Association spoke of “Christian Universalism.”⁴⁴ Meanwhile, Convention memorials frequently referred to the departed as faithful Universalists and Christians. Foulds is convinced that the decision to drop

the word “Christian” from the name of the Association in 1856 does not appear to have been associated with any visible decline of Christian commitment, or any implied rejection of Christian identity. Rather, it probably reflected the “coming of age” of Universalism in Ontario so that by this time it may have seemed superfluous to spell out their literal identification with Christianity.⁴⁵

Parallel to this is the fact that for the first generations of Universalists in Ontario, there was absolutely no question that the Bible was still the ultimate authority in matters of faith.⁴⁶ For example, the Bible and the cross figured prominently in the design of the Convention’s seal.⁴⁷ In addition, some of the early Olinda records describe the faith as “Bible Universalism,” and speak of the Bible as “our only Creed” and “the rule and guide of our faith and practice.”⁴⁸

The idea of Jesus as Christ and Saviour, “a Mediator who gave himself a ransom for all,” appears to have been generally accepted in the early years at Olinda. This was reflected in the changing of its name from “The First Universalist Parish of Olinda” to the “The Church of Our Saviour” in 1902. Three years later, however, the minister, Willard Bodell, offered more liberal options. His list of the essential principles of the Olinda Universalist Church included, along with “the Universal Saviourhood of Jesus Christ,” “the Divine authority and leadership of Christ” and “Salvation by Character.”⁴⁹

As the years went by, it was obvious that there was less and less emphasis on the “saviourhood” of Jesus and more and more on the exemplary nature of his teachings. By 1951, Stewart Moore reiterated from the Olinda pulpit that the teachings of Jesus, though difficult to follow, were the lofty ideal to which everyone should aspire. Simply put, one’s *life* was now the measure of one’s religion.⁵⁰

Eight years later the congregation voted nineteen to two in favour of the merger being negotiated between the Universalists and the Unitarians, forming the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) in 1961 and the Canadian Unitarian Council (CUC) the following year.⁵¹ Both organizations are still active and carry the same name, although the CUC has officially become independent of its mother affiliate, the UUA, within this past year. For 23 years after Blenheim closed in 1938, Olinda was the only remaining Universalist congregation in Ontario, and one of only three in all of Canada (the other two being in Halifax and North Hartley, Quebec – both are still active, and affiliated with the CUC). In spite of the cynical prediction of a local resident during the building of the church that he would live to see it

used as a sheep-pen,⁵² the congregation continues to meet regularly, having recently celebrated its 122nd anniversary. “The Olinda Universalist Church” is now called “The Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda,” and it remains the oldest church building built in Canada by either a Unitarian or Universalist congregation.

Despite the gradual decline of the denomination and the changes in Universalist theology over the last two hundred years, Foulds concludes that there was one defining element of the historic Universalist faith that remained constant – the conviction that the only real religion is one that puts its principles into practice.⁵³ This was reiterated in formal Universalist declarations in 1790, 1803, and as late as 1935. The reputed founder of Universalism in New England, John Murray, had said that “every man’s faith, be it what it may, is only between him and his maker. It is his actions and their influence in society that concern mankind.” Similarly, Ballou had emphasized brotherly love as the single overriding imperative flowing from the practice of true religion.⁵⁴ If God was the father of all men and women, it naturally followed that all men and women were brothers and sisters.

One of the direct consequences of the above emphases was a strong ethical and humanitarian thrust characteristic of historical Universalism, and one that propelled many of its followers into the front ranks of reform movements of all kinds in Canada and the United States. Disproportionate to the historically small size of its denomination compared to other Christian denominations, Universalists have historically shown leadership in social programs and causes such as temperance, penal reform, abolition of slavery, non-sectarian education, the humane treatment of children, animals and people with mental illness, as well as the rights of conscientious objectors to war.⁵⁵

Needless to say, Universalism’s primary distinguishing mark – that salvation was universal – undoubtedly challenged not only the reigning theological orthodoxy of the day, but also the social and community climate. Furthermore, Universalism’s ecclesial practices must have scandalized many of the residents in small towns and rural communities in nineteenth and early twentieth-century Ontario. Consider its practice of ordination, for example. First, it had ordained George Moses as the first native person to enter the Universalist ministry in 1871.⁵⁶ Moses had already been leading a small congregation on an Indian reserve near Hagersville, Ontario, for seven years prior to being recommended by the Indian Universalist Society of Delaware Line at the meeting at Port Dover.⁵⁷ Second, it ordained women.

The first ordained woman to serve a Universalist congregation in Ontario was Mrs. L. Fidelia Woolley Gillette, who came to Bloomfield in 1888 from Rochester, Michigan. She began her pastorate in April 1888 at a salary of \$500.⁵⁸ When the Universalist Convention met at Bloomfield that year, one of the resolutions congratulated the church on “the evidence which we see of genuine wisdom of their choice of pastor” – hardly a token gesture aimed at affirmative action!⁵⁹ Mrs. Gillette may have been the first ordained woman to serve in any denomination in the province of Ontario. Next, in 1901, came Martha Jones who with her husband served two pastorates at Olinda. Yet, as late as 1921, the validity of a marriage she performed at Olinda was contested because one of its officiating ministers had been a woman.⁶⁰

In conclusion, I would like to suggest that it might be the characteristically rural nature of the congregation at Olinda – more than any other factor – that has enabled it to survive to this present day. The sound reputation and amicability of its parishioners have proven to be tangible witness to their good relations with neighbours and the surrounding farming community in which they lived and worked. Because they lived and worked together with mostly “Christian” neighbours, they no doubt lent each other draught horses and machinery, cooked meals for each other, and like most rural communities, looked out for each other when adverse weather, a family tragedy or a crisis in the community warranted it.

While the doctrinal adherence of Olinda parishioners to the belief in “universal salvation” clearly put them at odds with more conventional Christian dogma and their mainstream Christian neighbours, it is likely that it proved less important than how Universalists lived out their faith with comparable “Christian” piety. In other words, the liberal theological outlook and beliefs of the Olinda membership were probably secondary to who they were in practice, and how they walked their talk. In spite of the conspicuous theological anomaly that distinguished, if not isolated, Olinda Universalists from other local religious groups, they were nevertheless still seen as dependable neighbours to whom the locals could turn to for a helping hand. When I was asked to preach on the occasion of the 120th anniversary of what is now the Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda, I stressed first that the salient “Christian” witness of both early and later generations of Olinda Universalists was their consistently silent witness, emphasizing their ethical and lived practice of the gospel and Jesus’ teachings. Second, it is likely that their community ethic and practical concern for their neighbours revealed the true integrity of their piety. In his interpretation of the parable of the Last

Judgment, in which people are judged on the basis of what they have done to the least of their brothers (Matthew 25:3ff), the Asian theologian, Kazoh Kitamori, says, “what we learn from this Scripture passage is that God expects us to love him not as an immediate object, but rather through our neighbours. That is, God becomes immanent in historical reality.”⁶¹ If I could surmise why the Unitarian Universalist congregation at Olinda continues to meet every Sunday, it is, in part, because Olinda’s sound reputation in the local community has vindicated its historic commitment to “inclusiveness” and theological egalitarianism with respect to God’s promise of salvation.

Endnotes

1. Louise Foulds, *Universalists in Ontario* (Leamington, ON: Widmeyer Press Ltd., 1980), 6. For additional bibliographic references on the historical background of Universalism in North America, see Ernest Cassara, ed., *Universalism in America: A Documentary History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971); David Robinson, *The Unitarians and the Universalists* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1985); George Huntston Williams, *American Universalism: A Bicentennial Historical Essay* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971); and Phillip Hewett, *Unitarians in Canada* (Toronto: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1978).
2. Foulds, *Universalists in Ontario*, 5-6.
3. *The Witness*, 29 January 1849, 36; cited in Foulds, *Universalists in Ontario*, 6-7.
4. Foulds, *Universalists in Ontario*, 7.
5. Louise Foulds’ book, *Universalists in Ontario*, was published in 1980 as a Centennial Project of The Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda.
6. Foulds, *Universalists in Ontario*, 1.
7. Foulds, *Universalists in Ontario*, 7.
8. Foulds, *Universalists in Ontario*, 3,7.
9. Foulds, *Universalists in Ontario*, 7.
10. Foulds, *Universalists in Ontario*, 7.
11. Foulds, *Universalists in Ontario*, 7.
12. Foulds, *Universalists in Ontario*, 7.

13. Foulds, *Universalists in Ontario*, 8.
14. Anne Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), 121.
15. Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*, 121.
16. Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*, 122.
17. Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*, 122-123.
18. Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*, 123.
19. Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*, 123.
20. Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*, 362, n. 7.
21. Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*, 123.
22. Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*, 123.
23. Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*, 124.
24. Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*, 124.
25. Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*, 124.
26. Foulds, *Universalists in Ontario*, 126.
27. Robinson, *The Unitarians and the Universalists*, 62.
28. Foulds, *Universalists in Ontario*, 126.
29. Foulds, *Universalists in Ontario*, 126.
30. Foulds, *Universalists in Ontario*, 126-127.
31. Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*, 125.
32. Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*, 125.
33. Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*, 125-126.
34. Louise Foulds, *A Search For Truth* (The Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda, 1999), 7.
35. Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960): 112.
36. Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man*, 278.
37. Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man*, 114.

38. Foulds, *Universalists in Ontario*, 72.
39. Foulds, *Universalists in Ontario*, 70-71.
40. Letter to *Gospel Banner*, exact date unknown; cited in Foulds, *Universalists in Ontario*, 70-71.
41. Foulds, *Universalists in Ontario*, 74.
42. Foulds, *Universalists in Ontario*, 69-70.
43. Louise Foulds, *A Search For Truth* (The Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda, 1999), 17.
44. Foulds, *Universalists in Ontario*, 135.
45. Foulds, *Universalists in Ontario*, 135.
46. Foulds, *Universalists in Ontario*, 134.
47. Foulds, *A Search For Truth*, 17; see also Foulds, *Universalists in Ontario*, 133-134.
48. Foulds, *A Search For Truth*, 17; see also Foulds, *Universalists in Ontario*, 134-135.
49. Foulds, *A Search For Truth*, 18.
50. Foulds, *A Search For Truth*, 18.
51. Foulds, *A Search For Truth*, 24; see also Foulds, *Universalists in Ontario*, 144-145.
52. Foulds, *Universalists in Ontario*, 71.
53. Foulds, *Universalists in Ontario*, 129.
54. Foulds, *Universalists in Ontario*, 129.
55. Foulds, *Universalists in Ontario*, 129.
56. Foulds, *Universalists in Ontario*, 14.
57. Foulds, *Universalists in Ontario*, 14.
58. Foulds, *Universalists in Ontario*, 53, 103.
59. Foulds, *Universalists in Ontario*, 53-54.
60. Foulds, *Universalists in Ontario*, 103-104.

61. Kazoh Kitamori, *Theology of the Pain of God* (Richmond, VI: John Knox Press, 1965), 98ff.

