

## VISIONING A UNIVERSALIST FUTURE

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In his book on the history of Universalism, entitled American Universalism, George Huntston Williams refers to three forms of Universalism: a branch of Christianity, the American church of the future; and universal religion. These three approaches to Universalism provide a useful framework for me to consider the future of Universalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

I do not see Universalism as a religious organization in 2006 as a branch of Christianity. Rather I see it on the periphery of Christianity. I assume contemporary Christianity involves a belief in God, Jesus as teacher or savior, the work of the Holy Spirit, the centrality of the Scriptures, and the belief in immortality. Except for the small number of Christian UU congregations, these are not the central beliefs of contemporary Universalists. The recent study of the Commission on Appraisal gives a clearer picture of what these core beliefs, values, and practices are in our Universalist (Unitarian) community.

While Universalism as a religious organization is on the periphery, Universalism as a theology-philosophy has had a great impact on Christian thought in America. It is my contention here that what we call mainline liberal Christianity in America embodies the theology of Universalism developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. God is Love, Jesus is Redeemer. All will be saved in the next life. Work for the coming of the Kingdom here on earth. Even many Christians who are evangelical or fundamentalist teach similar ideas. Today, liberal mainline, evangelical, and Catholic Christianity have an even greater impact on American society than they had twenty years ago. Since Universalism as a theology-philosophy permeates the beliefs of these religious institutions, I believe that Universalism as a theology-philosophy will have an important role in the American church of the future.

The dream of our Universalist ancestors for a universal religion is no longer viable. The universal has not triumphed over the particular; rather the particular has triumphed over the universal. Indeed we could say that what is most universal is the importance of the particular. Rather than the triumph of universal religion, we see ongoing strife and warfare between Jews, Christians, Muslims, and Hindus around the world and the conflicts between fundamentalist and liberal Christians here in our own country.

In conclusion, I do not see Universalism (Unitarianism) as a religious institution having an important role as a branch of Christianity or leading the world to a universal religion. Nevertheless we can have an important role in our local communities, witnessing to progressive values, trying to embody anti-oppressive and anti-racist identity and practice, providing a community for marginalized and oppressed peoples, and building bridges across differences in our communities.

