

## THE UNIVERSALISTS

### Origin and Growth of the Denomination Its Forty-Six Years' History in Brooklyn— The Three Churches of the City—Their Pastors

It is a fact not wholly without interest, when we look at the Brooklyn of to-day, that Universalism began its career in this city about the same time as Congregationalism. It was in December, 1844, that the Church of the Pilgrims was organized; and it was not till November, 1846, that the Rev. Richard Storrs, as pastor of the Church of the Pilgrims, was formally installed. Universalism dates from 1841, having thus had the start of Congregationalism by three years. Yet, while Congregationalism can now boast of some twenty-six churches and chapels, the strength of Universalism is measured by three churches, and by an incipient organization which until recently held its meetings in Ridgewood Hall, and is now building a new Church. Universalism compares more favorably with Unitarianism, which though older as a Brooklyn denomination by ten years, can only point to its three churches. It would seem as if there were something in the intellectual soil of the city unfavorable to the growth of either of the two last named denominations.

Universalism has never, in any age or among any people, developed great denominational strength. As a form or system of belief, however, it is of ancient date. Its leading tenets—that God is essentially benevolent, and that the ultimate fruition of Christ's work will be the complete eradication of all evil from the world, and the restoration of all erring creatures to God's favor and friendships—go far to commend it to human reason as well as to the human heart; and it is doubtful if in any age of the Church there have not been men of intellect who have silently, if not openly and without disguise, approved of Universalist doctrine. The one drawback to the system is the unsatisfactory and even undecided view which it presents of the nature and character of Christ. It is notorious that the Universalists for the most part are as one with the Unitarians in rejecting the doctrine of the Trinity—holding Christ to be, in a very distinctive sense, the Son of God, the Great Teacher, the Saviour, human but sinless, Divinely commissioned out, not a Divine Person. It consists with this view of the nature and character of Christ and His mission that Universalism should reject the doctrine of original sin, and should refuse to see anything supernatural in the new birth. By most of the great masters of Christian thought, it has been held that such a system of doctrine was alike contrary to Scripture and to reason—and that even if Scripture could be so interpreted as not to seem to conflict with the individual doctrines, the system as a whole was wanting in coherence and consistency. It is claimed, however, by Universalists that the distinctive feature of their faith finds support in the earliest Christian writings—in the Sibylline oracles, for example; and quotations in favor of the same are made from Clement of Alexandria; from Origen, from Gregory of Nyassa and others of the fathers of the church. It is claimed further that the doctrine of final and universal salvation was held by some of the Waldenses and Albigenses and also by some of the Lollards and Anabaptists. In later times, too, we are reminded, the doctrine has found favor, if it has not been openly held by many prominent divines and laymen connected with the Church of England and other orthodox churches—by such men as Archbishop Tillotson, as Bishops Burnett and Newton, as Soame Jenyns, as David Hartley, as John Foster, as Thomas De Quincy, in later days Frederick D. Maurice and others. It is claimed further that the doctrine has found support at the hands of many of the leading theologians of Germany. On close examination, however, it is found that, in the greater number of cases referred to, final and universal salvation has not been considered incompatible with the divinity of

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Christ, with the doctrine of original sin and with the supernatural character, in most cases, of the new birth.

If Universalism had not so closely allied itself with Trinitarianism, and had limited itself to giving prominence to the doctrine of final and universal salvation, there is good reason to believe that as a distinctive denomination it would have acquired larger dimensions. This particular doctrine is most undoubtedly popular. There are few things in the poetry of Robert Burns more catching than those lines in his famous "Address to the Deil," in which he expresses the hope that even Satan himself "may tak a thought and men'"; [this is in its original Scottish dialect] and Tennyson very happily expresses the Universalist sentiment when he sings

I can but trust that good shall fall  
At last—far off—at last, to all,  
And every Winter change to Spring.

It is now some years since the writer of this article heard the statement made by a gentleman of high culture in this city that with Henry Ward Beecher in Plymouth pulpit there was neither room nor need for a Universalist church in Brooklyn. It was not meant that Mr. Beecher was a Universalist in the ordinary sense of the word, but that his creed was broad enough and catholic enough to meet any spiritual want which Universalism could supply. It is notorious, too, that at the present time the current of religious thought, although neither anti-Trinitarianism or Pelegian, runs strongly in favor of the benevolent character of the Divine will and purpose, and of the ultimate reclamation of the lost. These generous views are now proclaimed from the pulpits of all denominations, especially of all Protestant denominations; and it is rare, indeed, to hear a man of real culture, in these days, dwelling upon the terrors of the law or upon the horrors of the damned. The doctrine of election, too, once deemed so essential to Christian orthodoxy is for the most part set aside, as unworthy of the character of a God of love—of an absolutely impartial Divine Fatherhood. There are Universalists in all the churches; and sympathy with the doctrine of universal salvation has become to a large extent a characteristic of our modern Christianity. If, therefore, Universalism in the denominational sense has proved comparatively at least a failure, it is not because what has been supposed to be its distinctive tenet is unpopular, but because it has been bound up and presented with other and less acceptable dogmas—dogmas which in themselves are obnoxious to the great mass of Christian people.

As an organized system of doctrine and belief, Universalism is not old. The denomination traces its origin directly to a certain James Rely, who was a preacher in London during the latter half of the Eighteenth Century, and who gave expression to his peculiar views in a book entitled, "The Union." Universalism, however, never has had any great success in England, and mainly for the reasons above given. It was not needed. In so far as it laid stress upon the doctrine of universal salvation, it was anticipated; the ground was covered by the national church. In so far as it was opposed to Trinitarian doctrine, it was also anticipated; the ground was covered by the Unitarians. Rely, who for a time was a co-worker with Whitefield, a man of considerable culture and more than ordinary intellectual vigor, seems to have been an able and effective preacher. His writings, which are numerous, reveal a good style, and along with much Scriptural and general theological knowledge, the logical faculty and considerable controversial power. He laid great stress on Christ's oneness with humanity, and claimed that He had brought the whole human race into the Divine favor as fully as if each member had obeyed and suffered in his own person, and had thus made the salvation complete. His views as to the nature of Christ do not

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seem to have differed much, if at all, from those which were accounted orthodox. Relly died in London in 1780, and the society which he had founded was ministered to by laymen until 1830, when it was dissolved.

Among Relly's disciples was a man named John Murray, a native of Alton, Hampshire, England. His parents were members of the Church of England, but devoted followers of Wesley. For a time the family were located in Ireland. In 1760, however, Murray had returned to England and joined Mr. Whitefield's congregation. Later on he came under the influence of Relly; and his late conversion is a proof of Relly's power. Murray was bitterly opposed to Universalism; and he had been appointed to refute the doctrines set forth in "The Union." But Relly's writings and eloquence were too much for him. He avowed himself a convert to the new teaching, and he was in consequence cut off from the Whitefield congregation. Murray came to America in 1760[?], in the character of a Universalist preacher, and preached his first sermon in Good Luck, N.J., September 30, 1770. After laboring for a time in New Jersey and New York he went to New England, and was largely instrumental in the formation of the Society of Independent Christian Universalists at Oxford, Mass. In 1793 he became pastor of the Universalist Society at Boston, laboring with fidelity and acceptance in this charge until near the close of 1809, when he was compelled by a paralytic stroke to give up preaching. Murray was a man of courage, and in the face of much abuse and opposition he boldly and eloquently maintained his ground. He taught that "In Christ God became the Son," and that "God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost are no more than different exhibitions of the self same, existent, omnipresent Being." He taught also that all men would ultimately be saved through the efficacy of the sacrifice of Christ.

In spite of Murray's efforts Universalism spread but slowly. In the year 1800 there were but twenty Universalist ministers in the country. About this time a champion of the cause appeared in the person of Hosea Ballou. Ballou already differed considerably from Mr. Murray and his fellow laborers. He had ceased to give Calvinism any prominent place in his creed. He had thought out a system for himself, and by his energy and eloquence he succeeded in giving to Universalism at once newness of form and newness of life. Of Universalism as we now know it, Ballou must be regarded as the father. Since his time it has undergone modifications, some of them important; but the leading principles of the denomination are substantially such as Ballou commanded and enforced. The polity of the Universalist church is republican in form. In each State of the Union there is a convention made up of ministers in fellowship residing within the State and of lay representatives from each parish. Each State convention has jurisdiction within its own borders. Over all is the General Convention, which meets annually and is composed of delegates, clerical and lay, in definite proportions, chosen by the State conventions. This last named body has a national charter and a permanent Board of Trustees, who, during the interim of the meetings, attend to the general business of the church. According to a recent calculation, there are some 23 State conventions, nearly 1,000 parishes, about 37,000 families, some 43,000 communicants, between [7?? and 8??] Sunday schools, with nearly 60,000 pupils, as near as may be [??] church buildings, and licensed clergymen to the number of about 780. The denomination is possessed of property valued, over and above indebtedness, at over \$6,500,000. It has four colleges and three theological schools. It remains here to be said that although Universalist sentiments are shared by many people, among them many persons of refinement and high culture, both on the Continent of Europe and in the British Isles, the Universalist denomination is chiefly confined to this continent. It ought also to be

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mentioned that the literature of the denomination is highly respectable, abounding in inquiries and defenses and controversial works generally. It sustains, also, a large number of periodicals. On the list of the clergy and among its theological teachers are some men of ripe scholarship and of marked ability.

As was mentioned at the outset of this article, Brooklyn Universalism dates from the year 1841. Friends of the cause had had meetings prior to that time and had been addressed by the Revs. [Edward] Mitchell and [Thomas J.] Sawyer. In 1841 a number of gentlemen, among whom were William Burbank, Hiram K. Baskins, William Raynor, Edwin Smith and Morris Reynolds, rented a hall corner of Fulton and Cranberry streets, and in this place services were held for a time with encouraging results. Universalism, however, was not in favor, and the use of the hall was denied. The Unitarians came to the rescue, offering their building, a small structure in Adams street. Here the society, under the preaching of the Rev. Abel C. Thomas, made some progress. Later a number of the old friends of the cause, anxious for independence and desirous of better quarters, purchased lots on the northwest corner of Fulton and Pineapple streets and erected a building, the upper part of which was used for church purposes and the lower for stores. This place of meeting was first opened June 22, 1843. Thus was organized the First Universalist Society of Brooklyn, called also the Church of the Restoration. In the great fire of 1848 the building was destroyed, and the lots having been advantageously disposed of, ground was secured at the corner of Monroe place and Clark street and a handsome new building set up at a cost, including lot, furniture and organ, of \$30,000. Trouble having arisen, some of the younger people connected with the church having organized a new society, called the Church of the Redeemer, a removal further uptown was agreed upon and the property was sold to the Swedenborgians, who now own it, for \$40,000, leaving the society with a net balance of \$20,000. The sale and transfer took place in October, 1868. Up to this date the society had been served by the Rev. Abel C. Thomas (1842-44), Rev. T. B. Thayer (1844-51), Rev. H. R. Nye (1851-57), Henry Blanchard (1857-69).

In 1868 a sort of consolidation was made of existing fragments, the Church of the Redeemer and the First Church uniting under the name of the Church of Our Father. A chapel was erected on Clermont avenue, and the Rev. E. C. Bolles became pastor. He resigned in 1869, and in 1870 the Rev. H. R. Nye resumed charge.

In 1879 the chapel was sold to the Classon avenue Presbyterian church, and the congregation, greatly reduced in numbers, worshipped for a time in State street, in what is now the Jewish Synagogue. Mr. Nye resigned in 1880, and the congregation removed to the Conservatory building, corner of Fulton street and Bedford avenue. Lots were purchased on the corner of Lefferts place and Grand avenue, and the present elegant house, Byzantine in style, capable of holding about 1,000 people, with large parlors attached, was completed in 1883 at a cost of \$35,000. This church is in a prosperous condition. It has had for its minister from the first the Rev. A. J. Canfield, D.D. The doctor is a man remarkable alike for physical and intellectual strength, free from prejudice, an evident hater of set forms, and if not what could be called a polished preacher, a man of very considerable power in the pulpit. He manages his people well—a task not too easy, for it is not difficult to perceive that the elements of which the Society of the Church of Our Father is composed are pronouncedly democratic. Dr. Canfield is a native of Broome County, N.Y., about 50 years of age and a graduate of Union Theological College and of Canton, N.Y. He was formerly pastor of All Souls, Eastern District [Williamsburgh].

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In April, 1845, was started with some nineteen members what was called the First Universalist Society of Williamsburgh. The organizers were for the most part persons who had belonged to the Orchard street, New York, Society of which the Rev. Dr. Thomas Sawyer as pastor. The first meetings were held in a chapel in Second street. In 1848, however, a church was erected at the corner of Bedford avenue and South Third street at a cost of \$7,000. In May, 1873, the present commanding and commodious buildings—the church facing on South Ninth, the chapel facing on South Tenth—were completed at a cost of \$80,000, and they are free of debt. It is known as All Souls' Universalist Church. This is the most prosperous Universalist society on this side of the East River. It has a large and steady attendance, and the Sunday school has about 500 pupils. Of this society the pastors in succession have been Rev. Henry Lyon, Rev. D. K Lee (1849-1854), Rev. Bernard Peters (1856-63), Rev. A. Canfield, who served for five years, and by the present pastor, Rev. Almon Gunnison, D.D., who has been in charge since 1870. Dr. Gunnison is a native of Hallowell, Me., and is in his 44th year. He is a graduate of Tufts College and St. Lawrence University theological departments. He is a man of pleasing address and an accomplished orator. He has written "Rambles Overland" and is the New York editor of the Boston *Christian Leader*.

There is considerable promise of success at Noble street [Third Universalist] and at Ridgewood Hall [Fourth Universalist], in consequence of the energetic and persevering labors of the Rev. Abram Conklin. Mr. Conklin is a man of liberal sentiments, having a proper respect for what is called the cloth, and wins golden opinions from his brethren of other denominations.

J. L. W.

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