

“OURS IS A HARD RELIGION”

**Sermon preached in the First Universalist Church, Columbus,
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“Think not that I am come to destroy the law or the prophets; I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill.”- Matthew 5:7

There is little doubt but that Jesus spoke these words in reply to the accusation that He was destroying religion. The believers in the superstition of medievalism, and the traditionalist of the modern world have constantly hurled this same accusation against Universalism. They have said it is a good religion to live by but a very poor religion to die by. Quite the reverse true. Universalism is a good religion to die by because the whole foundation of it's philosophy is faith in God – the Universal Father – just, loving and eternal. Even those whose awful theologies and superstitions have led them into a world of bigotry, prejudice and unrighteousness will eventually find their way through the jungle of creeping things, out into the sunlight of Divine Love. Beyond life there is probably a greater opportunity to understand that love is the basic principle of human and Divine relationship. Death may be the great adventure that frees us from the ignorance that hate of this mortal life*

“When I am dead, that which my soul hath known so long I shall **see** in clearer, purer light. That when I loathed and hated, I was wrong That when I loved and pitied, I was right.”

Whatever adventure death may bring to us, the Universalist can go in faith that a loving God- is there.

On the other hand, Universalism is a hard religion to live by. Should we do adequate justice to this statement, we would need to go back a long way in history and trace the slow development of civilization in its growth to better things. The people of the Upper-ward Way have always “been martyrs to the call of God. Progress has ever been made through suffering. What would history be, Had

it not been for those in science or religion, who have stepped outside the common runways of the crowd? That is what Universalism has done, and we cannot expect but that it will be a hard religion to live by. Shall we enumerate?

First, it is a hard religion to live by because it is not popular. We are not a large church and nowhere do we have large congregations. Most churchgoers are not actuated by religious convictions. The greater part of them know nothing about religious beliefs. The first consideration of the great majority of both young and old is, "Where is the biggest crowd?" We live by the results of the Gallup Poll. Let us first see where other people are going, what other people are wearing, what other people are doing, then go? and do likewise. Popularity is like the tides of the ocean. It sweeps you along and you like it. Few people have the hardihood to leave the crowd. Someone has said, "The minority is usually right and the majority is usually wrong"; but that doesn't make it any easier to live with the minority. Thinking, especially in religion, is one of the most unpopular practices of today. Evangelists tell you, "If you think, you are lost," and the vast majority of religious leaders are afraid we will "disturb our relations with other Faiths," or we will question the "faith of the Fathers." To live with the minority is not easy. To fight your way upstream toward the sources of life is hard. It is a lonely fight and if you try it you must have within you something that popularity has never put there.

Second, Universalism is a hard religion to live by because it requires a world outlook. One must see the world in its historical background and in relation to science, evolution, and all social development. Our ancient forefathers did not know there was a universe. They had no conception of a world outside their immediate locality and their immediate physical needs. Up to the time of Columbus this world was a very small affair. The historical and scientific world as we know it today did not exist. Consequently, God and human relationship had to be very small affairs. Our forefathers did not know that there was such a thing as the human mind. Consequently, anything that occurred to them was considered a revelation from God, the spirits, or angels were speaking, so we hear them saying, "Thus saith the Lord." The ancient world and the ancient thought were not big enough to hold a universal God.

Our religious thinking has not yet grown out of its ancient forms. It is not easy to “lift up our eyes on high” and see this world in terms of universal brotherhood, human society progressing toward some “far off Divine event,” and the “eternal and all- conquering Love of God” overshadowing the whole of human existence.

Third, ours is a hard religion to live by because you cannot be a Universalist in the true sense of the term without allowing the full play of reason in all religious thinking. This can be very disconcerting It can raise so many questions, even doubts and fears, that few are willing to plunge into the sea of life with reason as a life-preserver. Few people will take their religion to the bar of justice and the court of reason. To differentiate between emotionalism and fact is a hard process. Yet how long emotionalism, with its fantastic exhibitions, has passed for religion. The vast jungle of emotional sensations engulfs the greater part of mankind. The savage instincts of untold centuries of the past make it hard for us to allow “sweet reason” to hold court. Rev. Strain was one of our pioneering ministers in the south. He was scheduled to hold a debate with a Baptist minister in Mississippi. At the last minute the Baptist brother stipulated that brother Strain “was not to use reason in any of his arguments.” Curious, is it not, that in religion, which we consider so important -we are afraid to use the highest attribute that God has given the human mind. What else is there that distinguishes us from the beasts of the field? Nearly all creeds and theologies fall before the onslaughts of a thinking mind. To push the sharp analyzing point Of reason into the accumulated mass of religious superstitions is no easy task.

Fourth, ours is a hard religion to live by because it requires the ability to free one's self from the influence of blighting superstitions of the race. Out of the centuries of the past come the most powerful impulses to believe in charms, incantations, spirits, ghosts, demons, demigods, angels, incarnations and almost every other kind of super-naturalism the imagination can conjure up. Few people realize the tremendous influence of the crass superstitions of the dark ages in our modern religious thinking. More people are swayed by the pagan doctrines of the deity of Jesus, the Trinity, and the Holy Ghost than are by the sermon on the mount”;oi”.-the ;Great Commandment. Everywhere we are overshadowed with their smog of supernaturalism. If we are Universalists, try to get out from under it; we have to think, work, and give to make Christianity live.

Fifth, ours is a hard religion to live by because it requires the ability to be religious unhampered by the great mass of traditions that have accumulated through the centuries. We are constantly being asked the same question the Pharisees asked of Jesus, "Why walk not thy disciples according to the traditions of the elders?" Do we realize what Jesus meant in reply when he said, "Laying aside the commandment of God, ye hold to the tradition of men." The Catholic Church, exalting as it does the Virgin Mary.. still says. The Immaculate Conception of Our Lady is not formally and expressly taught in the Scripture, nor can it be proven from the Scripture alone." "The Catholic Church teaches it is sufficient if tradition clearly witnesses to any truth." No one can read the history of the Christian church and not realize that traditions have been stronger than the "commandment of God" in shaping its doctrines and attitudes. It is no easy matter to shake them off, and we step outside of them at our peril.

Sixth, our religion includes the concept of God as the Universal Father, and to the Brotherhood of all men, and the supremacy of love and justice as the ultimate powers of this universe. Here is a conception of human and Divine relationship not at all implied in most of our Christian doctrines. Few of us realize its magnitude. It carries with it the very incentive of creation and involves the ultimate goal of human activity. It includes the Great Commandment, the Golden Rule, and stirs the heart with faith and courage heeded amid the privations and disasters of this world. It contains the only promise of ultimate peace among nations. It is the only foundation of religious unity. It carries us to mountain tops where we can see the enchanting panorama of history unfolding and the dawn of the bright morning of the future.

Seventh, ours- is a hard religion because in the final analysis religion is neither a form of belief, nor a set of doctrines. It is a way of life. It is so easy to assume that because we believe a thing, therefore it is true. Nothing is more fallacious. What we believe has, so often, proven contrary to the facts. Our religion demands a kind of life, not a Set of doctrines. Here is the rub. It is easier to believe the Christian doctrines than it is to live a Christian life. It is easy to give assent to the high quality of the thoughts contained in the Lord's Prayer, but to forgive as we would be forgiven is something else. Here is where we come in contact with ourselves and ourselves are so important. It is not easy to live our religion because in our daily contact with life we forget that love and truth and righteousness are the great under girding realities of this Universe. Without

these, life is a hollow shell, meaningless and devoid of any coordinating principle. It is much easier to believe in a heaven of ease, indulgence, luxury, idleness, and uselessness in the hereafter than it is to help in building the Kingdom of God here on earth. It is much easier to believe that Christ came down from heaven to save us, than to live as Jesus did. We believe in the "authority of truth." But try making truth your authority in religion if you dare. We believe in the "power of men of good will and sacrificial spirit to overcome all evil and progressively establish the Kingdom of God." But try putting the spirit of good will in your life, if you have the courage. Try living a life filled with the spirit of self-sacrifice if you think ours is an easy religion. Try pinning your faith "in God as eternal and all-conquering Love" amid the suffering, disillusionments, disasters, and wars of this world, and see how easy it is. Try following the spiritual leadership of Jesus amid the savage instincts rampant in this life. Try following Him to those spiritual heights where you also may discern that "God is a spirit, and they that worship Him, must worship Him in spirit and in truth." To live in a firm conviction of the rightness of our religious faith is hard enough, but to coordinate that faith with our daily life and relationship to other people is the real task before us. Have we the courage for either our faith, or our human fellowship? Universalism calls you to a hard religion, but if you would build the Kingdom of God in your own life or human society, there is no other way.

The most pathetic scene described in all literature is that occasion when Jesus saw the crowds leaving him. They were no longer fed. He was not bringing the immediate redemption of Israel. So they went Jesus, turning to his disciples said, "Will ye also go away?" When I call you to the fellowship of the Universalist Church, with religion that is hard, will you also go away?