Is Hitler in Heaven?

The Rev. Edmund Robinson -- Unitarian Universalist Meeting House -- June 13, 2010

Let me start by asking you to open your hymnals to the title page, and notice the symbol that you see there, the same symbol that is on the front of our order of service, and is on the tapestry behind me. If I ask you what that symbol is, many of you will say it's a flaming chalice, but if you look closely, you will see more than the flaming chalice. You will see two circles surrounding the chalice, which cross each other twice, but are slightly off-center to each other. These circles represent the two separate denominations, Unitarianism and Universalism, which came together in 1961 to form Unitarian Universalism. Yet while they joined, they did not merge, and that is why they are represented as two distinct circles which do not quite match each other.

Most of the time we are concerned with the large space in the middle which is covered by both circles, but sometimes I get fascinated by the sliver in between which is covered by one but not the other. Today we are going to talk about how Universalist theology, which asserts that everyone is saved, deals with evil.

Now while you have your book open, I'd like you to turn past the index and the preface to the page which has the Principles and Purposes, starting with We, the Member Congregations, and I'd like us to read that preamble and the first principle."We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote... The inherent worth and dignity of every person..."

I want to start with our First Principle, because, as those of you who have been around this movement for a while recognize, it is close to the core of who we are. We fly our rainbow flag in front of this church because of the first principle, we fight racism and sexism and homophobia because of the first principle. I start with this because when I get to the finer points of theology some of you might be inclined to tune out and say to yourself that if you don't believe in a God or don't believe in an afterlife, Universalist ideas on salvation don't really mean very much in the real world. I am going to try to show by the time I stop talking here that those ideas on salvation go directly into our first principle.

Last week at the annual meeting this church made kind of a split decision on the fate of two gothic arched windows that remained from the former Universalist church here in town: by a fairly large majority, you turned down a proposal to display them permanently, but then you went on to vote unanimously to keep them in storage rather than getting rid of them.

In a way, this action is symbolic of much of our relationship today to Universalist theology. We don't want to jettison it, and yet we don't know quite what to do with it, because it doesn't seem to fit the religion we've crafted for ourselves. Yet, as the late Forrest Church was fond of saying, our pluralistic faith is like being in a cathedral with light coming through many windows and creating different colors and appearances thought it emanates from one source beyond the walls.

This morning, I want to look at the central idea of Universalist theology, the notion that God is so loving that all people are saved, that none are going to hell. What I have done in the title of this sermon is push this notion to its farthest reaches. If all are saved, then the worst person you can imagine is going to heaven.

Now this pushing of an argument to its furthest extent, to pick as a candidate for heaven a person who has become in our culture a kind of poster boy for evil, is easy for a lawyer and anyone else trained in the Socratic method. You will hear this kind of argument in courtrooms and classrooms across the country every day. You state a general principle and then test it by a seemingly absurd example: all people are saved, all people are going to heaven, what about Hitler?

This method can be illuminating, but it has its limitations. It is a method of logical argument, and when we get into a discussion of good and evil, often logic seems completely inadequate to the task.

Notions of good and evil touch very primitive parts of us. The very name Hitler has deep emotional associations for most of us; some here have fought in World War II; you who are here in this room made it back, but each of you could name good men you knew who died fighting Hitler; others have relatives who perished in the Holocaust; others of you lived through the Second World War and can remember how the whole nation adopted as its national purpose defeating Hitler, a purpose it has never had since then with such clarity. Others of us know of Hitler only as an historical figure, but if we delve in any measure into the immense tragic sweep of the Second World War and the Holocaust, we will agree that if anyone deserves the adjective evil, it is Hitler.

But Hitler died sixty-five years ago, and there are plenty of other contenders for embodiment of evil before and since. You may take another public figure like Saddam Hussein or Osama Ben Laden, but there may be someone in your private life whom you can't think of without shuddering, someone who has done great harm to you or to someone else you love. Can you imagine your ex-spouse or the estranged stepparent, sister or child who did so much damage, can you imagine them in any kind of reward in this life or the next? This is the spiritual exercise I set before you as we delve into the idea of evil and where it comes from.

The question is, what does this word evil mean? Where does it come from? What is the problem of evil?

As I was preparing a sermon on evil a few years ago, a friend of mine told me a story about cross country skiing. He had been skiing in his neighborhood after an overnight snow and had seen the tracks of a rabbit or some small animal in the snow. He followed the tracks into a field and at some point the tracks abruptly stopped, but there was no rabbit. My friend looked closer and could see on either side of the end of the tracks two shallow indentations in the snow which had been made by the wingtips of the owl as she deftly picked up her prey and flew off.

It was a marvelous story, but it immediately raised in me the question, was the owl evil? Most of us would say no. The owl was doing what owls do, what they have evolved to do. But suppose you were the rabbit? To the rabbit, the owl is the very angel of death.

That is, if rabbits thought about good and evil at all, but there is no evidence they do. What I am trying to get at is that sometimes it seems as if evil and good are all-encompassing, but in reality they are human concerns, they don't exist in nature. Nature is beyond good and evil.

At least that is what a modern mind thinks. We exist in a time after Newton, when the general assumption is that the world runs on impersonal and amoral laws. To the ancient mind there was no such thing as a realm of nature, everything was in the hands of God. Earthquakes, storms, success in war, disease, disability or recovery from it, all were in the hands of God. Ancient peoples might well have seen the owl as evil.

Several ancient religions are based on a battle between good and evil. In Persia, Zoroastrianism posited a God, Ahura Mazda, who is perfectly good, and creates the world, but evil, Druj, is trying to destroy it. Manichaeism, which also flourished in Persia, sees the world exclusively in a battle between good and evil.

To a somewhat lesser extent, orthodox Christianity also asserts that the big picture is a titanic battle between good and evil. This comes from the Gospel stories; Elaine Pagels is a biblical scholar who writes books for popular audiences. Her book, *The Origin of Satan,* argues that the gospel writers deliberately chose to cast the life and ministry of Jesus as a titanic struggle between the forces of good and the forces of evil because, at the time they were writing forty years after his death, after the total defeat of the Jewish revolt, with Judaism was in disarray, there would be no traction for a claim that Jesus was a political messiah. So three of the Gospel writers, starting with Mark, portrayed the battle as a spiritual one, between Good and evil; Matthew Mark and Luke all begin Jesus' ministry with his baptism and then an encounter with Satan. Satan is not explicitly mentioned throughout these Gospels, Pagels says, but he is always just offstage:

"Satan, although he seldom appears onstage in these gospel accounts, nevertheless plays a

central role in the divine drama, for the gospel writers realize that their story would make little sense without Satan. How, after all, could anyone claim that a man betrayed by one of his own followers, and brutally executed on charges of treason against Rome, not only was but still is God's appointed Messiah, unless his capture and defeat were, as the gospels insist, not a final defeat but only a preliminary skirmish in a vast cosmic conflict now enveloping the universe.?"[1]

Satan comes back into the picture at the time of the trial and crucifixion. Jesus' whole ministry is set into the context of a giant battle between the forces of good and the forces of evil. His crucifixion is called a victory over the devil.

Fast forward to the Reformation: John Calvin placed great emphasis on the inherent depravity of the human race – evil is the default, the background condition after the expulsion from the Garden of Eden -- and asserted that only the death of Jesus on the cross could atone fro the sins of humankind. And even this only served to save a small portion of the human race, in Calvin's view; most were condemned to eternal torment in Hell.

It was against this gloomy prospect that Universalism revolted. If God is in fact love, it makes no sense that he would allow his creatures to suffer eternal torment. In his treatise on Atonement in 1805, Hosea Ballou argues that conventional Christianity had it backwards. Orthodox Christianity insisted that Christ's sacrifice on the cross was to atone for humanity for its sins against God, that God had to be reconciled to humanity. Universalist Historian Ernest Cassara explains that Ballou took the opposite tack:

"It was humanity that had to be reconciled to God. Because of our carnal nature we misunderstand the deity; we misunderstand that, being an infinite God of unchangeable love, He seeks, not to condemn and punish us, but to "happify" us. Thus, we come to His sending of Jesus to earth as an example, to teach us the nature of God's love."[2]

Just two years before Ballou's Treatise on Atonement, the national convention of Universalists, meeting in Winchester, New Hampshire adopted a statement of faith known as the Winchester Profession, which I quoted in my sermon last week. The second article is:

Article II. We believe that there is one God, whose nature is Love, revealed in one Lord Jesus Christ, by one Holy Spirit of Grace, who will finally restore the whole family of mankind to holiness and happiness.

One God. Ballou ultimately concluded that if we take that idea seriously, if there is one God whose nature is love, then evil as a separate force could not exist.

"...there can be no such thing as real evil in the universe. If by real evil, be meant something that ought not to be, in respect of all the consequences which attend it, I cannot admit of its existence; for I cannot conceive of any productive cause whatever that can be limited in its consequences.[3]"

As Universalist theologian Albert Ziegler later explained it[4], Ballou's reasoning is that God is the sole cause of all that happens, God's intention is good and God's intention is not thwarted.

Now when Ballou and the Universalists following him say that evil does not exist, they are not saying that the monumental bad things that happen in human life are all good. They are not wilfully ignoring slavery and racism and genocide. They are saying that if God is all loving and all powerful all these bad things must be part of the scheme.

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[1]Pagels, Elaine, *The Origin of Satan* (New York, Random House 1995) p. 12

[2] Ernest Cassara, "**Affinities and Animosities: Universalists and Unitarians in the Formative Period" 1999 address at Meadville Lombard http://www.uua.org/uuhs/News/Cassara.html**

[3]Hosea Ballou, *A Treatise on Atonement* (Cassara, Ed:)(Boston: Skinner House Books 1973) p. 10.

[4]Albert Ziegler *Foundations of Faith* (Boston: Universalist Publishing House 1959) p 45-6.

So Universalist theology can admit evil as an adjective; there can be evil acts, evil thoughts; there could even be an evil system. But evil itself, as a separate force countervailing the love of God, does not exist.

And when we apply the word evil to a person, we are getting perilously close to damning that person to hell. In universalist thinking this is something that God doesn't do, and we shouldn't either.

But do these Universalist windows fit the edifice we're inhabiting? They all derive from a notion of God and a notion of salvation many if not most of us do not embrace. What is a notion of salvation that we can use if we don't hold much truck with the afterlife, if we concentrate our attempts to build the beloved community in the here and now? What does it mean to be saved?

I submit that salvation for a contemporary UU means, at its most basic, being accepted as a human being, and treated as a human being. That means, in an ethical world, treating someone else as we would want to be treated. The basis of all religion, it seems to me, is the recognition that the other is in some sense like me. In theistic terms, the other is a child of God as I am a child of God. The basis of ethics is to take this insight and apply it in the realm of how we behave towards each other. Some variant of the golden rule is found in virtually all the world's religions.

I have given you the words of the Winchester Profession of 1803; let's update that with the next Universalist statement of faith, the Bond of Fellowship adopted by the Universalist convention of 1933, which avowed "A faith in God as Eternal and All-Conquering Love, in the spiritual leadership of Jesus, in the supreme worth of every human personality, in the authority of truth known or to be known, and in the power of men of good will and sacrificial spirit to overcome all evil and progressively establish the Kingdom of God." Now the word "salvation" does not appear in this recitation, but the concept is there: it's there in the affirmation of the "supreme worth of every human personality."

The difference is this: old-style salvation is a matter for God; treating another as a full human is a matter for humans. What it says is, we are going to treat you as one of us, we are going to treat you as a fellow child of God. Notice that this is not an ontological statement, but a faith statement. We are not saying that every person has supreme worth as a matter of some objective fact, but that we as a matter of where we put our faith, will treat every human that way.

A minute ago we read the First Principle: we covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. You can see that this First Principle proceeds directly from the Universalist Bond of Fellowship of 1935.

So let's recast our test of universal salvation into today's terms. Let's imagine our poster boy for evil – Hitler or ben Laden or some private villain known only to you. Are we prepared to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of a person who has done these awful things?

Perhaps you can't. You might say, as some of my colleagues have said when this subject comes up on the ministers' chat list, that a person who commits horrible acts forfeits the right to be treated with worth and dignity. I reply that if that's the case, the worth and dignity are not inherent. In the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson talks about inalienable rights. I think this is the same sort of thing. As a matter of faith we will affirm and promote every person's inherent worth and dignity, regardless of actions.

I think this is where the rubber meets the road for those who would live a religious life. Jesus certainly asks us to. Jesus goes beyond our first principle: he doesn't just say to accord our enemies worth and dignity, he says to love them.

Some of you will say I can't do this because to do so would be to compromise with evil. Is not fighting evil and standing up for the good what we're all about?

Well, yes and no. The word evil is what misleads us here. It leads us to think that there is a thing out abroad in the land and it is separate from us and if we can only vanquish it we will enter the promised land. A mature approach to evil starts with the recognition that each of us has the capacity to do harmful acts. As Clarence Skinner, Dean of the Crane School of Theology at Tufts and Universalism's greatest

Twentieth Century thinker put it, "the line which separates the good from the evil runs not between men, but through them.[5]"

In 1983 in an address to the New York Universalist convention, my eminent colleague Dick Gilbert set out to try to pin down the reasons for the decline in Universalism in the Twentieth Century. He had two reasons. One was that the Protestant denominations had de-emphasized Hell and moved closer to the Universalist position. The other was ethics; Dick Gilbert points out that Universalist ethics are much harder to live than Universalist theology. You may say that everyone is going to heaven, but how would you translate that into action? How do you treat everyone as if they are saved? In particular, what do you do with the really bad ones?

Is Hitler in heaven? I don't even know if there is a heaven; I remain personally agnostic on the afterlife. I prefer to spend our energies building the beloved community in the here and now. As we build, let us study the history of regimes like the Third Reich in order to know what to guard against. It is not an easy thing to do, but it is something we must do, to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every human. Amen.

Readings

Matthew 5: 38-47 (NRSV)

38 "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' 39 But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; 40 and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; 41 and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. 42 Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

43 "You have heard that it was said: You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. 46 For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47 And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? 48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Albert Ziegler, *Foundations of Faith* (Universalist Press 1959)(p. 52)

"Even less does the antiphony of 'good' and 'evil' serve us. We deny the infinite existence of opposing forces. There is not God and the devil. There is one source of life, and one divine purpose operating in life. And we cannot suppose it is otherwise on the finite plane, since what we see and arbitrarily designate as finite is not different from, but a part of the infinite."

"It is the genius of Universalist thinking that no entity in life can be so low in a scale of values as to be unacceptable, so low that it does not express some good, the development of which is essential to life. Life is not a patchwork of good and evil. Nothing in life is evil, if by evil is meant that which should not have been. Nothing in life is good if by good is meant that which does not stand in need of some improvement."

[5] Skinner, Clarence Russell, *Human Nature and the Nature of Evil* Boston: Universalist Publishing House 1939, p. 87.