

Editor's Note

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What is Universalism and what does it mean to religious liberals today? Universalism has received increasing attention of late in liberal religious communities, and we are witnessing a revived interest in reclaiming Universalism. With the generous support of the St. Lawrence Foundation, the Summer 2002 issue of *The Journal of Liberal Religion* seeks to raise the question of the meaning of Universalism from a variety of angles. In order to do so, we have brought together a number of perspectives in order to create a space for critical reflection and dialogue.

As a way of framing the issues raised by the essays which follow, the meaning of Universalism may be approached at three levels:

Historical – As a historical undertaking, to inquire into the meaning of Universalism is to study the emergence and development of the individuals and communities which have constituted this tradition. Who were the Universalists— theologically, socially, and culturally? What theological commitments and values did they stand for? How did they relate to their historical and social setting and what did they contribute to their times?

As these essays demonstrate, historically Universalism has held several theological positions, including both an emphasis on a doctrine of universal salvation and on the universality of the religious dimension of human beings. Denominationally, the historical study of Universalism must also address the 20th century merger with Unitarianism, the repercussions of which are still being felt today. An ongoing question is the extent to which the denomination continues to own its Universalist heritage. To what extent might we speak of the continuing presence of a distinct Universalist identity today?

Normative – The question of the normative significance of Universalism is intimately related to its history. If the historical asks who were the Universalists, the normative seeks to understand what that means for us today. A pervasive feature of contemporary liberal theology is its historicism—the recognition that we are historical beings, located in communities that exist in particular political, social, and economic circumstances. What then does it mean for contemporary religious liberals to be the inheritors of the Universalist tradition?

Given that Universalism is a rich and varied tradition, in attempting to reclaim it, we must specify which elements of the tradition we seek to appropriate and integrate into our contemporary self-understanding. The Universalism of the past cannot be imported into our present situation en masse; rather, to ask the normative question of who we should become is to engage in theological reconstruction, critically assessing the tradition in relation to the needs of the present.

Universalism/Particularism – The broader intellectual context in which an inquiry into the meaning of Universalism as a denominational and theological identity takes place is the debate over universalism versus what might be termed particularism. This form of universalism (small 'u') is expressed in a search for universal values such as we see in contemporary international human rights norms. Can something be true for all people at all times? Are there values which apply in all circumstances? Such universalism faces intellectual critiques of essentialism, the recognition of real difference between human beings, and the challenge of pluralism. In opposition to universalism's quest for commonality, forms of particularism emphasize the specificity of human beings in their distinct communal identities, as well as oppressive practices and structures that universalism allegedly permits or contributes to.

Religious liberals have historically played a significant role in the development of universalist ideals, yet the relationship today is a conflicted one. On the one hand, religious liberalism has held up commitments to human dignity, commonality among human beings, and the unity and universal accessibility of truth. On the other, liberals have also pointed out the hegemonic tendencies of such commitments and have developed various forms of critique in response. Thus the ongoing contribution of religious liberals to the debate surrounding universalism remains an open question.

At these three levels and at many others, the essays included in the Summer 2002 issue of the JLR inquire into the meaning of Universalism—yesterday, today, and tomorrow. We commend them to you along with our featured essays and conversations section—and we invite you to add your voice and join the ongoing dialogue.

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