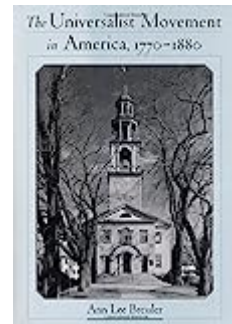


Ann Lee Bressler. *The Universalist Movement in America, 1770-1880.* Religion in America Series. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. vii + 204 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-512986-1.



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Universalism's Precarious Balance

Universalism's Precarious Balance

Ann Lee Bressler adds to Harry Stout's *Religion in America* series with her book on the doctrinal development of the Universalist movement. Universalism has long been associated with its more liberal counterpart, Unitarianism. Both movements emerged in the Northeast and drew their doctrines from the Enlightenment. However, as Bressler demonstrates, Universalists created and struggled to maintain a separate association throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that balanced communal piety with reason. While Universalists consistently maintained a belief in the universal salvation of all mankind, their communal vision waned in the nineteenth century. Like other mainstream Protestant sects, the movement ultimately succumbed to the forces of moralism and individualism.

At its inception, Universalism was a movement that balanced Calvinist piety with Enlightenment rationality. Led by Hosea Ballou in the latter part of the eighteenth century, the religious sect set forth a doctrine of universal salvation that openly rejected the Calvinist tenet of predestination. Believing that a rational and benevolent

God redeemed all humanity, Ballou's followers sought to fashion a piety that linked all humans to a unified, communal faith. Early Universalists challenged evangelicals' anti-intellectual tenets as well as the "scare tactics" they used to induce morality as anathetical to God's divine benevolence and plan to unite all humanity in love. Likewise, Universalists denounced the overly rational arguments of religious liberals as leading to an individualism built on the dignity of human nature rather than on God's power and glory.

Bressler argues that the early Universalist position did not conform well to the post-Revolutionary sentiments of Americans. While the movement had an inherently democratic message, most Americans distrusted the doctrine of universal salvation and claimed that it unraveled the moral order of society by creating a God that did not punish transgressors.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, Ballou's vision of a communal piety had broken down. Universalists shifted the doctrine of universal salvation away from eschatology and toward moral reform. As adherents began to move into urban areas and gain a higher social sta-

tus, the denomination slowly resembled other sects like the Methodists and Presbyterians. Universalists joined their Protestant brethren in supporting social and moral reforms like temperance, public education, and penal restructuring. Bressler demonstrates that by the late nineteenth century the doctrine of universal salvation was widely accepted throughout Protestant denominations as an outgrowth of the Victorian faith in human progress. Universalists seemingly won the battle, but the new Victorianism was so wedded to a defense of human moral agency and individualism that it necessarily undermined the communal faith in God's power and glory that had animated the early movement.

The *Universalist Movement in America* is a focused study of a relatively neglected religious movement. Like other works in the *Religion in America* series, Bressler's book is aimed toward the specialist of American religious history. The book is not intended as an institutional study. Readers will find Russell E. Miller's two volume work on the church more helpful in that regard. Rather, Bressler illustrates the shifting role of the doctrine of universal salvation within the broader context of nineteenth-century Protestantism. As a result, readers get a more complex view of liberal religion in the new republic and the tenuous balance between piety and reason, individualism and communalism.

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