

Response to *Theologies of Sin, Theologies of Hope:*
Unitarian, Universalist, and Unitarian Universalist Historical Underpinnings
by the Reverend Dr. Linda Anderson for the Ohio River Group, November 2015

Rev. Kathryn A. Bert, Respondent

Yep.

That's my response: yep. Linda describes in beautiful detail the essential questions and U, U, and UU theological responses to those questions over the years. Her analysis rings true. I am especially appreciative of the appendix summary of the respective theologies. I suspect I will return to that appendix over and over again for sermon writing. My quibbles and questions lie with our ancestors, not with my present day colleague. Though I wonder where the reading list comes into play? I would like to know from the program committee if the papers assigned are supposed to relate to the reading list... and had I begun to work on my response earlier, I would have asked before writing this response. But my sin is procrastination. Perhaps Dan Savage would label it, "sloth" – only I've not been slothful: I've been busy with church life. What sin is it that causes me to procrastinate assignments I don't understand in favor of doing what I know how to do (like writing a sermon and serving a church)? My hope lies in the fact that many of my colleagues also serve parishes and are challenged by time management and assignment completion. My hope lies in your compassion for my failures.

I agree that our theology is dependent upon what we believe about human nature, God and the relationship. While treating the nature of a human being with regard to "good and evil," Linda and the theologians she studied left to the periphery the nature of the human as an autonomous individual vs. socially constructed and interdependent being. She names it throughout, but not as explicitly as I would have wished. She writes of the theology of interconnection toward the end of the paper, but I would have loved to have seen it traced as she was examining what the ancestors said about human nature. (Though there was no room for it, as this paper is already so full of good scholarship!) That said, I think she was true to the text, as I think it was "assumed" as it often still is, what a human being is. Perhaps it is the issue of choice, agency and free will that I seek to understand with this request.

Mostly, I was struck reading this paper by how much these old theologies linger in congregational life, or how much we still grapple with these old understandings. How does William Channing Gannett (p.9) "counting nothing good for self that is not good for all." differ from the statement that "what serves the greatest number is the greatest good within an ethic of relational responsibility."? Having celebrated on Sunday the congregational decision to move because our building has a staircase that prevents some people from access to large portions of the building, I got the same comments that "this building served us well for many years," because it served the greater number. The staircase prevents access to only one or two people, and so the majority remained very happy in it...which is why it was so hard for this congregation to move.

I loved reading that Hosea Ballou believed that "the intention of an action made it good or sinful rather than the consequences which we could not foresee" (p. 12) because it explains why the study of micro-aggressions within the congregational context is so difficult! Micro-aggressions are those "everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights whether intentional or unintentional that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership" (from *Diversity in the Classroom*, UCLA Diversity & Faculty Development, 2014 found in the *Beloved Conversations* curriculum designed by Dr. Mark Hicks.) Some truly still believe that our intentions alone are what matters most. I believe that until we change that belief, more diversity within our congregations is not possible.

I have personal evidence to support Linda's claim that "Ballou's belief in immediate restoration after death seemingly undercut the importance of how one lived during one's mortal life" (p. 13)

I have family letters written during the Civil War. My great-great uncle, Lemuel Reed served in the United States Christian Commission, which is the forerunner of the Red Cross, so this would be around what would be the third Great Awakening. He wrote from Kent, Ohio on September 3, 1866:

"...Uncle William's health and also his family's is very good. Mary has joined the Universalists church in town. There came a minister of that denomination here and has kicked up somewhat of a dust by telling people they would be saved and that God is love and cannot punish his creatures and has organized a church, and upon the day of admission of his members he told them that the joining of themselves to his church would not exclude them from the pleasures of the world and what they had been enjoying so long. My opinion is if we live a Christian life and come to judgment and find that the Universalist doctrine is right, why we're all right anyway, but if we live according to the Universalists doctrine and find out Christianity is right then we are certainly in a backfire. So it is profitable to live a Christian life anyway..."

In the discussion of mid 19th-mid 20th c Universalism, Linda writes that "sin remained a violation of the moral law, which is the Golden Rule, and human beings remained prone to sin." (p. 13) Her analysis (post-merger) that we require a theology of accountability (p. 16) is a corrective, in my opinion. "Positing interconnection as foundational, however, raises the questions of how we understand and treat diversity. Asserting that we are all connected sometimes slides into an assertion that we are all the same. Such a universalizing theology can become oppressive." Yes! I now preach the Platinum Rule instead of the Golden Rule. (do unto others as they would have done unto themselves)

I am finally energized by the diversity work in our movement rather than drained as I was by previous attempts. The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) which was the model I learned in the US Peace Corps, has finally made it into our congregations and provides a healthy tool for understanding and working with difference. I think this should be a part of our "theology of accountability," understanding and naming our cultural assumptions. We need to sharpen and refine our understanding of our social nature, that interconnection, so that it doesn't get reduced to "we are all the same" even as it recognizes our shared human qualities. Perhaps understanding human nature as it relates to an autonomous/social spectrum is more telling than whether our nature is primarily good, evil, or neutral. Or perhaps I am just settled on the question of good/evil/neutral (understanding "human nature as prone to both goodness and sin" p.18), and I am not yet able to articulate the other as clearly.

I really want us to develop this "theology of accountability," because it does stem from positing interconnection as foundational. It would lead, I believe, to help me answer the questions I have about choice, agency, and free will.