

60 SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF UNIVERSALISM

in the midst of the push and pull of social forces, and thus implies and demands a social content.

Universalism is an endeavor to restore the Christ of the first two centuries to the world, and to put into Christianity its pristine vigor of principle and discipline. Any sincere attempt to discover the real Jesus, the visionary, the emancipator, the great teacher, will inevitably lead to a re-discovery of the social gospel. And the rediscovery of the social gospel with its general acceptance will liberate for the world's redemption the great power which is the power unto salvation.

Excerpted from
"The Social Implications of Universalism,"
Clarence Russell Skinner;
1915, Universalist Publishing House

VIII

HELL AND SALVATION

The old ideas regarding hell and salvation, which swayed the imaginations of men for centuries, have deeply affected the attitude of the churches toward the problem of social amelioration. The traditional conceptions of retribution, although recognized to-day to be crude and erroneous, have yet molded a theory of function and a machinery of action which persist long after the cause has ceased to be vital. It has not only been true in the past, but it is true to-day, that those who believe in an avenging God and a substitutional atoning Christ are individualistic, and consistently oppose the new social emphasis in religion. The old theology of Heaven and Hell has been among the strongest deterrents to social service, and the reorganization of religious forces for modernized activity.

The very corner-stones of the old structure of theology were caprice and injus-

tice. A human being might be condemned to hell by a wrathful God, for punishment of an act which was not in itself immoral, and hope for that individual's salvation might be eternally lost. On the other hand, a person might commit a most heinous crime, involving the worst possible sin against the moral nature, yet escape from hell and punishment by accepting the vicarious atonement of Christ. Hell never was pictured in the old theology as an inevitable consequence of breaking the innate laws of being. There were always trapdoors out of which the one who was wise could climb at the last moment. Punishment and reward were not in the exact and inescapable relation of cause and effect. Hell and salvation were both arbitrary and non-human in origin.

The lot of men here, and their destiny hereafter, was supposed to be determined without reference to social causes. The only springs of action and the only responsibilities taken cognizance of by theology were individual motives and individual accountability. Therefore all punishment was conceived to be meted out in accordance with purely personal action.

The social causes of crime and sin such as heredity, congenital weakness, economic deficit, environment, were ignored. Many a poor soul has been damned to everlasting torment in the past by myopic ego-centric Pharisees, when society more than the individual needed the damning.

There are few men whose opinions really count in the modern world, who have the temerity to preach the old idea of a wrathful God and a brimstone hell. The Liberal theology has successfully driven these nightmares from the minds of enlightened men.

But Universalism has not tried to abolish the scheme of suffering and punishment from life. It has not done away with moral accountability. The idea of hell and heaven is just as potent in the modern theology as in the old. They are essential elements in religion. Universalism has not abolished the idea of hell.

It has humanized and socialized it. It has established human misery as the direct effect or consequence of human action. The existence of such a hell can be demonstrated, the sting of its lash can be felt, the horror of it can be seen. The broken

nerves of the *roue*, the rotting flesh of the prostitute, the moral degeneracy of the sensualist, the blood-red conscience of the murderer, are hell. There is no caprice in its operation, there is no trap door for escape. It is the most real, the most inevitable fact conceivable. To believe that every individual will suffer the just consequences of sin is the hardest, most disciplinary faith known.

And everywhere men are seen not merely suffering the consequences of their own actions, but writhing in the meshes of sin woven about them by others. The horrors of war are suffered as much by the innocent men, women and children as by those who murder and are murdered on the field of battle. The most dreaded feature of intemperance is its deadly power to destroy the homes and blast the hopes of those who remain temperate. Insane asylums, hospitals and clinics tell the awful tale of the havoc wrought by congenital syphilis. Youths are wrecked by institutionalized vice pandering to passion. Vampires still live and grow fat on the blood of human beings, throwing the anemic, skeleton

forms into the teeming city to crawl out a wretched death-in-life.

All this is hell—*social hell*—men suffering from instituted customs and practices for which society is responsible, which can be eradicated out of the world.

And Universalism has not only humanized and socialized hell, but it has humanized and socialized salvation. If a man must suffer the consequences of his own sin, he must likewise make his own reparation. The only way out is by an absolutely reformed character, either in this world or in the next. He can not receive salvation, but must achieve it. He must work his way to perfection. God in His infinite mercy is ready to assist, Christ reveals the way, but the man must go that way and avail himself of that mercy. There is no royal road to salvation. Salvation is as much subject to the natural law of cause and effect as is punishment. It can not be arbitrary or capricious. This faith, again, is the most rigorous and disciplinary the world has ever known.

And a man must not only work out his own salvation; he must work out the sal-

vation of the world. He is enmeshed in a world of humanity from which he can by no means wholly disentangle himself. He is a part of the marvelous solidarity of life. He is shot through with psychic forces which he can not escape. He is caught up in the mystic sway of standards and impulsions which grip him as the ocean grips the grain of sand. He cannot be saved except as he spiritualizes and Christianizes all the influences which are consciously or unconsciously molding character.

Such a view of the theological problem of punishment and reformation is fundamental to the new social religion; in fact, the social emphasis grows out of this view. The old ideas of hell and salvation were anti-social, and must perforce be discarded before the new religion can gain the allegiance of the people. Let a single illustration suffice.

A prominent Boston clergyman recently told with evident pride his professional experience with a sinning woman. He was called into a brothel to attend the deathbed confession of a woman of the streets who was in fear and terror of the final

reckoning and judgment. The minister told her the story of Jesus' atoning sacrifice, which was able to obtain for her forgiveness and salvation. Her sins were wiped away by her acceptance of the Savior, and the minister a few days later had the satisfaction of folding her hands and closing her eyes in peace. The terrors of hell which got hold upon her, were assuaged by the blessed assurance of an immediate heaven.

It does not require a great amount of penetration to see that this system of salvation undermines the whole social process, and discourages the social motive. It takes away human and social responsibility, it vitiates the law of cause and effect, and establishes an easy escape from hell. It leaves untouched the great industrial problems, the civic influences, the economic conditions, which are potent factors in modern sin. This scheme furnishes no mighty, all compelling incentive for the organization of the social forces of a community for a radical attack on the social conditions which breed vice and crime.