

## **OUR ORIGIN IN ORIGEN**

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About a week ago I met up with a fellow on the trail where I walk my dogs. We had been out for about an hour and were heading back home when coming from the opposite direction I saw someone I took at first to be the farmer who lives down the road and who I sometimes run into. But as he got closer I saw this fellow was a good deal younger than the farmer and a little shorter since he slouched and walked with a different, swinging gait.

I put the dogs on leash until he got up to us and told him they wouldn't bite but would bark and sniff him all over. He said he had dogs too and that that was all right, so I let them loose again. We got to talking. He'd moved into the area in the past year and was in school, and so was his wife, and he just liked to walk heedless on the trail at this time of the morning. This was earlier than I generally walked the dogs, so I said that was

likely why we hadn't met up previously. I pointed out the direction of our house and mentioned the trail was part of the reason we'd decided on moving here.

At first I figured he'd keep on walking past once he'd met up with the dogs and we'd head on home, but he kept talking and the conversation was pretty good, so I stayed there and the dogs romped around and we talked some more. We swapped names—his is Jeremy—and eventually I asked him what school he attended, expecting to hear Stout since it was nearby, although I wouldn't have been surprised to hear Chippewa Valley Tech or Indianhead. But he said, “Well, actually I'm getting a degree in ministry at Northwestern.” I said, “I'm at United Theological.”

So there we were, two seminarians in the middle of the woods—it almost sounds like the setup to a joke: “two seminarians, a Christian and a heathen, walk into the woods...”—and so naturally we got to talking about religion. Now, I was familiar with his seminary—Northwestern College is one of the more conservative evangelical colleges in the Twin Cities. Their website says their vision is to “light the way” as Christ-honoring education, business and community leaders. Alumni tend to work in what they call media ministry—Christian broadcasting (including those evangelical stations I like to listen to) and with fundamentalist newsgroups like The Religion Desk and Skylight.

Now I was familiar with his seminary, but he wasn't so with mine, so he asked a lot of questions about United and about liberal religion in general. He had come to Christianity after decades of alcoholism and drug abuse and found a refuge in it, a position I understand if not entirely endorse, and I said I'd come to much the same conclusions except they involved Unitarian Universalism. We'd been walking together

for a while by then, and I wasn't surprised when he turned to me and said, "I'm afraid I don't know anything about your—Unitarianism, did you say? What's that?"

Being a good UU I had my 10 second elevator speech ready—"what matters most is how we treat one another in the here and now"—and he took that in, and I should have been expecting it, but I guess I really wasn't, when he followed that up with, "Why do you believe that?"

Understand, this wasn't a hostile reaction or something aggressive. This was an example of two religious people who both took their beliefs seriously and wanted to take the other person's beliefs seriously, so he was asking for something he could latch onto and say, "I understand that. I can fit that into my experience whether I agree with it or not." I said, "Well, the divine inside us seems to call out for love and compassion, not only for ourselves and our own but for as many as we can help." He digested that and then he said, "The divine?"

"Yeah," I said. "God, the Higher Spirit, the Connective Force, the Great Unknown. We call it a lot of different names."

"Why not just call him 'god'?"

"Some of us do," I said. "But a lot of Unitarian Universalists are uncomfortable with that language so we use what we're comfortable with."

He took that in and we talked some more, and then he said, "But you don't believe in the reality of the Triune God?"

"Some of us do," I admitted. "Most of us don't. The Unitarian in our names is all about the unity we see around us, the spark that connects us with one another and with other beings."

He nodded and then started explicating his belief in a supernatural and personally involved god that was actually a very articulate theological understanding of his experience and with much of which I could agree. With one exception, and I pointed that out to him—I said, “You presuppose god is separate from us.”

“Of course. He created us and we have to accept him.”

I said, “Unitarians are more like Buddhists in seeing a continuity between us and other things.”

And he said, “Why’s that?” And the truth is, I could answer that for myself using my own experiences to explicate it, but I couldn’t at that point trace the history of thought that evolved into present-day UUism.

The upshot of that conversation is that we parted at the trailhead by the road that leads to my house with a hearty handshake and a shared decision that we really needed to get together to talk again sometime. And I came home and started to look more closely into the history of why we think the way we think.

I think it’s safe to assume that most of us aren’t too proficient in knowing how Unitarian Universalism started or where its ideas came from. That we are Christian heretics is a notion all of us have at least a passing familiarity with. I want to focus for a moment on the heretic part of that equation. *Heretic*, Jack Mendelsohn says, is a Greek term meaning, literally, “the ability to choose.” He writes

Heretics are persons of independent mind who...do not simply accept beliefs because they happen to be dominant in the society or because they are taught by their churches, but they accept them on the basis of their own testing, their own independent choice. They consider different possibilities and are able to choose.

I start out by talking about heresy because our origin begins with one. Origen, an early Christian church father who lived in the later Second and early Third centuries, was eventually outed by authorities 600 years later as a heretic. From Karen Armstrong:

Neither Origen [as the leader of the catechetical school in Alexandria] nor [his predecessor] Clement believed that God had created the world out of nothing (*ex nihilo*), which would later become orthodox Christian doctrine. Origen's views of the divinity of Jesus and the salvation of humanity certainly did not conform to later official Christian teaching: he did not believe that we had been 'saved' by the death of Christ, but that we ascended to God under our own steam.

Armstrong points out that the important thing to remember is that at the time they lived and taught, there was no official Christian doctrine. It was not for a hundred years after Origen's death that Christianity began to attain its codified status with the Council of Nicea in 325, and it was several hundred years after that that the mossiness and rigor mortis set in.

The early years of Christianity were a fervid time of idealism that, frankly, proved to be a pain to the later authorities. I keep track of these *-isms* by means of an acronym, like the HOMES that reminds us of the Great Lakes. I call it LiP-THAND. This stands for Liberal Christians, who don't necessarily believe in the divinity of Jesus but believe in the teachings of Jesus; Pagans, who celebrate the interconnectedness of life and whose adherents may believe in gods or goddesses that are themselves facets of larger divine sources representing life-affirming qualitative; Theism, a belief in a single god who may be personal and supernatural; Humanists, who represent the "functional ultimacy" of the

many flavors; Agnosticism, in which religion and spirituality are intrinsically unknowable since evidence is inconclusive. There are also Naturalists, who believe that nature is all there is, and which breaks down further into Atheism, an active disbelief in the existence of a supernatural god, Religious Naturalism, for which sacredness and good and evil are a part of nature and a way of experiencing the world, Pantheism, in which all things taken together are god, and Pantheists, for whom all things are in god. The final letter stands for Deism, the belief that a so-called intelligent clockmaker has set the clockwork in motion and then stepped away. By the time of the turn of the First Millennium, all but the most conservative definition of Theism had been declared heretical.

Before we get too excited about our connection with Origen, we need to keep in mind a particularly uncomfortable example of the messiness of the way people live their lives. During his particularly zealous youth, Origen took as his own teaching Matthew 19:12, which states:

For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to receive this, let him receive it.

Some scholars have given his self-castration an interesting twist, saying that he did so in order to be able to teach women without hint of scandal, and Armstrong goes to pains to remind us that

Castration was quite a common operation in late antiquity; Origen did not rush at himself with a knife, now was his decision inspired by the kind of neurotic

loathing of sexuality...[It] may have been an attempt to demonstrate his doctrine of indeterminacy of the human condition, which the soul must soon transcend. Apparently immutable factors such as gender would be left behind in the long process of divination, since in god there was neither male nor female.”

I'm sure Origen had his reasons and I don't see much reason not to give him the benefit of the doubt. Still, it's also worth noting that later in life he wrote an exegesis of the Gospels in which he fervently advocated against a literal reading specifically of Matthew 19:12. Received opinion has it that this was a part and parcel of his ascetic insistence against literal interpretation of most of the words of Jesus, but I've got to believe that there also has to be some niggling bit of buyer's remorse in his strong condemnation.

Origen also introduced the notion that evil and suffering, far from being the result of the machinations of a supernatural agent—Satan—was rather the abuse of human freedom which was necessary for the achievement of good. This was seconded later by Thomas Aquinas and, a millennium and a half later, by philosopher G.W. Leibnitz, who coined the term Theodicy (*theos die*, literally “the justice of god”) to describe the existence of evil in the best of all possible worlds; its shadow is necessary to highlight the attractions of the world. Leibnitz, of course, would later be the model for Voltaire's farcical Dr. Pangloss.

More importantly for our consideration, though, is the other notion Origen came up with. In the work *On First Principles*, Origen noted that, “One could pity but not

censure a being totally deprived of all capacity for recognizing goodness and doing what is right.” Origen saw god as *apophatic*, that is,

perfect unity, invisible and incorporeal, transcending all things material, and therefore inconceivable and incomprehensible. He is likewise unchangeable, and transcends space and time. But his power is limited by his goodness, justice, and wisdom; and, though entirely free from necessity, his goodness and omnipotence constrained him to reveal himself.

Origen thus concluded that, if god is pure love and his divine punishments therapeutic rather than retributive, and if all creatures are freed by god to act on their own decisions, then everyone is redemptive, up to and including Satan. This is the doctrine of universalism in its earliest form. The ultimate act of Christ will be to deliver the kingdom to God and then god will be in all. This universal reconciliation or universal salvation holds that a god who is all good cannot withhold her—remember the indeterminacy of the human condition and god’s lack of gender—her benevolence from one willing to accept it, which it is the Christ’s duty to provide to all souls.

This is a fundamental of UUism. Everyone is capable of redemption, however you want to consider redemption as being. For me, it’s the notion that each of us can, in some sense, make up for past harmful acts, preferably to the person or being we harmed, but where that’s impossible then in some connected way. Let me give you an example. When I was living in my car people were often good to me, giving me money when I needed it, rides when I needed them, shelter when I needed it. These things didn’t manifest themselves when the need arose, nothing like that, but happened eventually and randomly. As my form of payback, I help others when I can. Like yesterday—on my

way to Jim and Naomi's house for Micah's graduation party, I saw a car stalled on the ramp off I-94 and a couple rummaging around in the trunk. I stopped and asked if they were all right. The man, a tall, strapping truck driver, told me they were on their way to Chicago and a belt in the engine had split and the car stopped. I said, "I don't think there's anything I can do about that, but I can take you to find another belt."

Well, what with one thing and another, it took a while and three different stores for us to find the proper belt. It took me about an hour and half to get these folks back to their car. I don't offer this as an example that I am doing things better than anyone else, although I doubt at this point in their development that Dick Cheney or Tom Delay would have pulled over. The woman offered me money for gas, for helping them, but I said no, you may be likely to need that before you're finished with your trip. They said "god must have put you in our path," and at one point the man, who rode beside me, did one of those little half-Catholic, half-charismatic crossing-and-delivering-oneself gestures I've seen among evangelicals. They shook my hands time and again on getting out. Later, I drove by to make certain the car was gone, and it was.

In conversation yesterday, Jim Cummings told me about the books on Unitarian history by Earl Morse Wilbur from the 1940s, I came across this comment in an unpublished history chapter by Richard Venus for the Midwest Leadership School in which I participated a few years back. Venus notes that, "in his definitive, difficult and detailed history," Wilbur concludes

that we ought to trace our Unitarian history not by its theology but by three emphases: First, the importance of freedom of religious thought; second, the unrestricted use of reason; and third, tolerance of differing views and practices.

While the ideas that shaped us go back to the early history of the Christian church, Wilbur reminds us that it was our demonstrated values and how we acted in history that shaped us and led many leaders to their untimely and cruel deaths.

It is, in short, the distinction between believing something is so and acting on that belief. To put into practice our values. This is my Universalism in action. It is because I believe in the redemptive quality, if not necessarily in other people but in myself at least, that I am willing to put myself out a little for their benefit. I told the couple, whose names were Richard and Dardonel, that it was my pleasure to help them, and it genuinely was. This is my heaven. Conversely, if there is a hell, it is also one of our own making. A Buddhist teaching holds that Heaven and Hell are exactly alike, two long tables heaped with food and with six-foot long utensils. In Hell everyone is frustrated by the impossibility of feeding themselves, while in Heaven everyone feeds the person across the table.

I'm looking forward to running across Jeremy on the trail again. He's the sort of thinking evangelical charismatic I often argue that the bulk of the movement relies on. Perhaps it's a part of my Universalist history to look for points of concord between me and people who might otherwise disagree with me, but I think that if we were to articulate where our beliefs merge, and they certainly do, it would be at this point: we both envision a point at which even Dick Cheney and Tom Delay happily and willingly feed the haggard homeless and the aimless alcoholics sitting across from them. In doing so, they find themselves equally nourished.