Born Okay the First Time

Moving Beyond the Fall/Redemption Paradigm

By
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I used to have a coworker who didn't consider himself religious in the least because he couldn't accept any religion's fantastic claims. Yet he feared a world without it because he also couldn't imagine what it would be like if people didn't have religion to keep their selfish desires in check. Much like a plethora of Hollywood films envisioning an apocalyptic future in which all manner of anarchy, sadism, and violence breakout the instant civilization and its rules breakdown, my coworker, who may not have considered himself religious, bought fully into Doctrine of Original Sin, the belief, that is, in human depravity, without even realizing it.

The assumption is so ubiquitous in our society, as it is in much of the world, we no longer have to believe in Adam and Eve's disobedience to presume human nature is essentially evil. Long before my coworker upheld the doctrine, even while claiming to be irreligious, President John Adams said something very similar in a letter to his friend, Thomas Jefferson. Adams, the U.S. President who ratified the Treaty of Tripoli, which states explicitly, "the government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion,"[1] told Jefferson it left him so discouraged he often found himself "upon the point of breaking out, 'This would be the best of all possible Worlds, if there were no Religion in it!!!'"[2]—with three exclamation marks. This was so because, like my coworker, he couldn't buy into what he called, it's "fictitious Miracles,"[3] and the laws existing, "even in our Massachusetts," at the time that made it illegal to question the Bible, calling them, "a great embarrassment" and "great obstructions to the improvement of the human mind."[4]

Nevertheless, also like my coworker, he second guesses himself, going on to tell Jefferson, he feared that without religion, "this World would be Something not fit to be mentioned in polite Company. I mean Hell."[5] He said this, even though he claimed not to believe in original sin, or what he called, "the total and universal depravity of human nature."[6] But if he didn't believe in it, why did he fear there'd be Hell on Earth without religion?

It's true, people have committed all manner of injustice against others, but often in the name of religion, not despite it. Yet, when emergencies and disasters strike, we more often rush to help each other, not to exploit each other, whether by helping the neighbors we know, or

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[1] Treaty of Tripoli (Treaty of Peace & Friendship), 1796, Article XI
[2] Adams to Jefferson, April 19, 1817.
[3] Adams to Jefferson, June 20, 1815.
[4] Adams to Jefferson, January 23, 1825.
[5] Adams to Jefferson, April 19, 1817.
[6] Ibid.

going to help people we don't know in places we've never been. When hurricanes and tornadoes and earthquakes take out our power and destroy our infrastructures, our species doesn't instinctively break into mass looting, raping and pillaging, or setting up miniature fiefdoms to control and exploit their neighbors, like I've seen in every dystopian film I've seen. In reality, we rush in with Red Crosses and Red Crescents, take up collections, send supplies, even as millions of volunteers from around the world arrive to help.

The idea that we need to be controlled because we are an innately selfish, violent, savage creature is an invention that authoritarian tyrants use to justify what, deep down, they know needs to be justified, their own exploitation and dominance over others. "Without the order I establish," they convince themselves, "these depraved creatures would create Hell on Earth." This is the meaning of those myths I mentioned last week, of Uranus casting his own children into Tartarus, beneath the crushing weight of the world; and of Chronos swallowing his as they are born; and Zeus swallowing his even before they are born; and it is the reason the Church latched onto the myth of Original Sin, as an excuse to forcibly subjugate and rule over everyone in its ever expanding dominion—because, as the great philosopher Wilford Brimley used to say about oatmeal, "It's the right thing to do."

I believe it's precisely because we have to create such extraordinary myths, absurd doctrines, and "fictitious Miracles," to sustain authoritarianism that proves it isn't natural or necessary. For these are the stories that convince us, or excuse us, to go against the better angels of our nature by oppressing, exploiting, and dominating others, causing the very kind of cruelties they are supposed to prevent. In our society loving everyone is discouraged, especially loving those who are most exploited and demonized by the authorities. Those who do love them are mocked as do-gooders, tree huggers, bleeding hearts, and sometimes criminalized as sympathizers or persecuted as queer. Loving others, those who are truly "other," in that they are unlike us because they have other beliefs, other ways, and are coming from other places, is disparaged in an authoritarian society, which uses sacred stories that are not to be questioned to convince us we can't trust each other for the same reason we can't trust ourselves, we're all depraved.

Ironically, the notion of Original Sin, which has penetrated deep into the human psyche, even into the unconscious of those who outright reject religion, isn't substantiated in the Bible it's supposed to be based upon. Erich Fromm, though an atheist, received a traditional Jewish education, and reminds us, "The Old Testament does not take the position of [humanity's] fundamental corruption. Adam and Eve's *disobedience* to God are not called sin; nowhere is there a hint that this disobedience has corrupted [humanity]."[7] Or, as Herbert Haag, a former President of the *Catholic Bible Association of Germany* once said, "The doctrine of original sin is not found in any of the writings of the Old Testament."[8] Theologian Matthew Fox also insists, "Original blessing is far more ancient and biblical a doctrine and ought to be the

[7] Ibid.
[8] Fox, Matthew, Original Blessing, Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, New York, NY, 1983. p.47.

starting point for spirituality."[9] By "original blessing," in contrast to *original sin*, Fox is referring to what he calls the first law of creation, "It is good," and that we are not born in sin, but, "In the image and likeness of God."

Unitarianism has been struggling to uplift human goodness and worth since it's ancient beginnings at least 2000 years ago, with the first followers of Jesus, who, as Jews, believed in only one god. That's what Unitarianism is, a belief in one god. Trinitarianism wouldn't be fully born and officially adopted for almost another 400 years. Yet Unitarianism, as an early Christian phenomenon, does differ in one significant way from Jewish monotheism. Unitarianism, because of its belief in one god, can't accept the divinity of Christ. Instead, it embraces the humanity of Jesus.

Alas, after the teachings of Rabbi Jesus, and his oppressed Jewish followers, were misappropriated by the Roman Empire, it became illegal to claim he was only human, and the Unitarian belief in only one god was replaced by the incomprehensible and inexplicable idea of the Trinity; one god equals three, three gods equal one. A thousand years later, after the invention of the printing press made it possible for people to start reading the Bible for themselves, Unitarianism was rediscovered in Eastern Europe, and, with it, a belief in Jesus' humanity. It was adopted by Hungarian King, John Sigismund, who appointed a Unitarian theologian, Frances David as Bishop of his Kingdom. Together they established a freedom of religion law that gave people the right to believe and say what they wanted, the Edict of Torda in 1568. Tragically, after Sigismund's untimely death the new authorities passed an anti-innovation law that made it illegal to express new ideas. When the ousted Bishop, Francis David began saying infant baptism should be abolished and it was wrong to pray to Christ since he wasn't God, he was sentenced to life in prison, where he languished and died within just six months.

The belief in Jesus' humanity was not only consistent among Unitarians, it consistently got us in trouble. Jumping ahead to New England in the 1740s, Unitarian ideas again came under attack during a period of Christian revivalism. Revivalism is based upon the, so-called, "conversion" experience, meaning a person has be "born-again," usually expressed through a public profession of faith. The "New Birth" movement, as it was called then, was, again, rooted in the notion of human depravity—*Original Sin*—that there is something fundamentally wrong with all of us to begin with, and our souls need to be crushed or swallowed the moment we are born by some external authority, then washed clean in the blood of the lamb so we can be reborn in the likeness of whoever hangs us out to dry.

Such revivalism ran counter to a budding American Unitarianism as expressed by ministers like Charles Chauncey, a Harvard educated pastor of Boston's First church for sixty years. A staunch opponent of the Great Awakening, Chauncey taught there should be a, "commitment to logic and reason in theology," a, "critical and historical analysis" of the Bible, and that

[9] Ibid. p. 49.

moral behavior ought to be the point of Christian religion.[10] These are the same principles Unitarians are still arguing for today. Back then, in further opposition to the "New Birth" movement, Chauncey and others further argued that human beings aren't born fundamentally flawed, but "with the capacity for both sin and righteousness,"[11]—the point being that we don't have be born again, or saved, or converted, because we are *born okay the first time*, with the capacity, that is, to do good completely on our own, without the need for Uranus, Chronos, Zeus, Yahweh, or any King or Pope to reform our minds in order to control our behaviors.

In the 1740s this belief in original goodness was called, "Arminianism," which historians consider the precursor to what would eventually become American Unitarianism. A hundred year later, for instance, this belief in human goodness, or, rather, the disbelief in human depravity, was expressed by the Unitarian Minister, John Haynes Holmes, among the very first ministers promoting the "Social Gospel," the idea religion isn't about saving souls, but about benefiting society. Holmes, in particular, advocated that religion should be completely free from, "the supernatural and the miraculous,"[12] and should, instead, focus on the social wellbeing of all people. He was so impressed by the efforts of Gandhi in India at the time, that in one of his sermons he called him, "the greatest man in the world," and said, "When I think of Gandhi, I think of Jesus."[13] Historian David Robinson says, "Gandhi's reputation in America began with Holmes' sermon."[14]

In the early 1900s, One of Holmes' younger associates, a Universalist preacher named Clarence Skinner, also began emphasizing a social gospel. He even wrote a Declaration of Social Principles and Social Program that was adopted by the Universalist General Convention in 1917 and explicitly rejected the idea of "inherent depravity," stating, "that mankind is led into sin by evil surrounding, by the evils of unjust social and economic systems."[15] It went on to call for the basic right to own land, equal rights for women, freedom of speech, some form of social security for everyone, and a global government guaranteeing these same rights for all people. In his book, *Liberalism Faces the Future*, Skinner said the starting point of liberalism must be a sense that, "at the core of human nature is something good and sound… [an] inherent moral capacity to choose the right…"[16]

As Unitarianism, in particular, moved west, away from New England and our Boston headquarters, it became increasingly more humanistic and less theistic, which is still relatively true today. When the Unitarian Society, as our church was then called, was first established here in Spokane, in 1887, our church bylaws stated, "the authority for its belief

[10] Robinson, David, *The Unitarians and the Universalists*, Greenwood Press, Westport, CT, 1985, p. 9.
[11] Ibid., p. 11.
[12] Ibid., p. 137.
[13] Ibid., p. 139.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid., p. 140.
[16] Ibid., p. 141.

is reason; The method of finding its beliefs is scientific; Its aim is to crush superstition and establish facts of religion;" and its, "First principle is freedom of opinion and is subject to no censure for heresy…" Of course, having joined with the Universalists in 1961, it's unlikely we'd uses such a harsh term as "crush superstition" in our bylaws today. Now we have to be nice to everyone. But even our wish to be nice to everyone suggests the assumption that everyone is worth treating nicely, that everyone has worth and dignity, that all human beings are worthy of respect and kindness.

Of course, we are particularly proud that our Spokane church is the birthplace of Religious Humanism. For it was here the father of Religious Humanism, John H. Dietrich first began defining himself as a humanist. He came to us, his first Unitarian congregation, in 1911 after having been convicted of heresy and defrocked by the Dutch Reform Church, which he had previously served in Pennsylvania. It was here, within the context of a church that embraced a convicted heretic's worth and dignity, with its desire to crush superstition, that he read a word in a book lent to him by one of our members, "humanism." *That's me*, he realized, *That's what I am.*" Dietrich went on to become one of the thirteen signers of the original *Humanist Manifesto*, six of whom were Unitarian ministers.

When I think about all of this, of our Unitarian history, in particular, it seems obvious to me that *Humanism* would inevitably be born of our religion. It evolved from the original Christian belief in a human Jesus and his humanitarian teachings, was reawakened in the 16th century by a King who made freedom of conscious and free speech the law of the land, and a Bishop who said wait until you're grown to be baptized, so you can choose religion for yourself, and stop praying to Christ for God's sake! He was just a human being, like you. Later still, in New England, and then the U.S., a growing expectation that religion ought exist for the purpose of human welfare, and a belief in the inherent goodness and potential in all people, led a heretic to finally give birth to the child whose crown could be seen poking toward the light for 2000 years, *Humanism*.

This all sounds interesting from a historical perspective, but what does it really mean for us today? How can the humanistic tradition inherent within Unitarianism positively impact us now? Firstly, I hope it remains a driving force in our religious lives and pursuits. Unitarianism is rooted in three principles, *reason*, *freedom of conscience*, and *humanism*. As we put our faith into practice, not by worshiping a god, or blindly following someone else's rulebook, we ought to remember our tradition, that religion is about making society and, ultimately, the world a better and more just place for everyone. This means treating each other reasonably and that our beliefs be well reasoned and factually supported. That's a polite way of saying we should, "crush superstition." We must also work to assure that everyone, those we agree with and those we disagree with, can not only express themselves, but live beside us as our neighbors, work with us where we labor, enjoy the same rights as us while they are away, and dine with us as guests at our tables. Finally, it means, recognizing

we are all born okay the first time, that none of us needs to be saved because we are inherently good.

This last one is the hard part, because, like my coworker and President John Adams, ancient Church doctrines have gotten into our unconscious psyches, even if we don't consider ourselves traditionally religious. This causes us to mistrust others, to presume they must be up to no good because they are selfish, greedy, lascivious beasts by nature. It makes us feel we are mostly alone in world of big bad wolves and mustn't talk to strangers as we hurry through the dangerous thicket on the way to grandma's house.

I know how difficult this is, because I too once existed within this matrix, with my spidey-senses always on high alert, always ready to do battle with the windmills I mistook for giants. But as I've become more humanistic in my approach to living, I understand the windmills before me, including big corporations, big business, big institutions, and big governments have human beings dwelling within them, and that they are inherently good, and ready to do what good they can. And knowing this gives me great hope because I know that I am not alone.

Nor am I not naïve. I know there are people in this world who have not fully unfolded as human beings, and their incompleteness is expressed in harmful ways. Yet, even within these underdeveloped ones there is a capacity to reach greater human heights, just as within the best of us is the capacity to sometimes falter. But mostly, when I consider the world I live in, I see a world with billions of people who are goodhearted and care about the welfare of others. We are everywhere. We are a majority. And this is so, I believe, because we are all born okay the first time.