

## ORIGINS OF A FREE FAITH

A Sermon By  
The Rev. Susan Manker-Seale  
September 20, 2009

Somehow, in our day and age, “liberalism” got a bad rap. As a political term, it has been used, at least in this past decade, to accuse people of being without boundaries, mindlessly welcoming of those who might do harm to our nation, doling out monies to people who were just too “lazy” to earn their own. At some point during this posturing, someone came up with the idea to attach the words “bleeding heart” to liberals, and this, of course, raises the question of why a “bleeding heart” is such a bad thing, considering all the horrors still prevalent in the world today.

Since when did compassion become a bad virtue? Which, I guess when we call a virtue “bad,” that takes it out of the virtue category and puts it in with the vices!

Many of you know I rearranged my home office this summer and went through all my books, as well as took on the books from my father’s ministry. While I was doing this, I carefully looked at every book and placed each one on my shelves in an order which made sense. I found a lot of books which I have never read; I save them from being destroyed when I find them on the discount tables at Barnes and Noble, or I keep the ones you all give me in the fervent hope that one day I really will get to reading them. I find them all fascinating and worthy of attention.

So when I found this particular book on my shelves, I remembered that my Dad had given it to me as the most important book of his ministry, and I had never gotten around to reading it. I was reflecting on this, and realized that when he gave it to me, it was Christmas 1988, about nine months after my daughter was born and we had moved back to Phoenix from San Francisco. It was also just two years after I had graduated from seminary, so I think I was not only distracted by babies, but also, maybe a little tired of theology.

Now, I picked up this book, which, by the way, my father had had copies made especially for us kids (at least my brother David who had gone into the ministry, and myself), and when I was going through the books I got from Dad recently, I found the original book published in 1943 by Beacon Press. So, I opened mine, read a little, got hooked, and decided to write a sermon, which is the only way to get me to read theology now-a-days!

I tell you this, because every sermon has a story behind it, and every idea has one, too. And I want to share with you the story behind the origin of our liberal faith, the origin of being liberal, at least in the Christian tradition. This book I was given twenty-one years ago is called *The Legacy of the Liberal Spirit: Men and Movements in the Making of Modern Thought*, and it’s by Fred Gladstone Bratton, a Unitarian who was Professor of the History and Literature of Religion at Springfield College in Massachusetts in the 1930’s and 40’s.

I’m not going to cover the entire book, only the first two chapters, and that extremely briefly and in kernels to help those of you who are unfamiliar with church history understand a little of the struggles and changes Christians and Christianity went through. Because, as Unitarian Universalists, this is our liberal heritage.

We have to start with defining “liberal,” and Fred Bratton gives a good description, in which I know you will recognize yourselves at least in part. He writes,

The word “liberal”...refers to a way of life which emphasizes the primary importance of the person, the freedom of the individual, free press, free speech, constitutional government, tolerance, the scientific spirit of inquiry, the rational outlook, social reform, popular education, a relativistic philosophy, and an ethico-social religion.” (p. viii)

When I hear that description of liberal, I think, “What’s to argue with?” But, of course, there is plenty, and two thousand years ago, there was even more. Liberal ideas have been around for 2500 years at least, but they have come and gone in popularity, mostly gone, but there is an abiding light in such ideas, an enduring hope that keeps them alive in at least some breasts to break forth now and again in history, and more often today than ever.

In order to understand how Christianity came into being, you have to understand the Mediterranean world in which it was born. Bratton puts it this way: “Christianity was born in a Jewish home and grew up in a Greek household.” (p. 20) The followers of Jesus drew their ideas of monotheism, or one god, from Judaism, as well as a religion based on ethics. The idea of taking a sabbath day is also from Judaism.

But Christians were living in a Greek world as well, which greatly shaped it. There was a plethora of religions, a soup of ideas traveling around the Mediterranean at the time. And quite a few of those ideas found their way into Christianity, a phenomenon which is called the “Hellenization of Christianity.” From the religions of Mithras, Attis, and other Mysteries came such ideas as “the supernatural birth of a religious hero [you may recognize that as an annual Christmas reference], deification, Lord, Savior, miraculous resurrection, Last Supper, baptismal rites, divine healing, and mystic union with the deity.” (p. 21)

Christianity was not one thing yet, not for the first three hundred years of its existence. Three hundred years! That’s a long time. It’s a long time for ideas and stories to get written down, translated and mistranslated, argued over, thrown out, transformed, and manipulated into whatever the particular teacher, school, or group wanted to promote. And, remember, for much of this time Christians were persecuted for believing differently from the dominant religion of wherever they were.

Do you remember reading about the famous library at Alexandria that was burned so long ago? So much was lost! Well, before that happened, Alexandria, which was a city in northern Egypt, was one of the great centers of the Mediterranean world. Bratton describes it as “the meeting place of many streams of thought, a channel where cross currents met, and the resulting syncretism produced an unusual tolerance.” (p. 23) When I read that, I was reminded of Konya in Turkey in the thirteenth century, also a crossroads wherein Christians, Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists could all coexist, a milieu which sparked and fed the creativity of such greats as the poet, Rumi. Alexandria in the second century was such a place, where Christians, Jews, Greeks and pagans all sat side by side to hear the great lectures at the famous School of Theology, started by Clement, and continued by our theological forebear, Origen.

Origen was an amazing person. He was a great thinker and teacher, and at the early age of eighteen was made the president of the School of Theology by Demetrius, Bishop of Alexandria. They taught astronomy, geometry, logic, and philosophy as preparation for studying Christian doctrines and morals, and they also taught Greek literature and philosophy, because Origen was open-minded regarding pagan ideas. Bratton calls Origen “the fountainhead of the

liberal tradition,” because he represented the more rationalistic and less dogmatic interpretation of Christianity. (p. 1)

Origen was born in 185 C.E.. and could recite scripture by memory. When he was seventeen, his father was thrown into prison under the persecution of Christians, and Origen wanted to die a martyr’s death with him, but, as Bratton puts it, “his mother prevented his leaving by hiding his clothes.” (p. 2) It’s a lucky thing for us that he lived. Since Origen was the oldest of seven children, and their property had been confiscated by the state, he took up residence in the home of a wealthy patron, and then decided to live on his own. He sold his library of Greek classics, which he had transcribed himself. He taught in the daytime, made his reputation as a teacher, and gathered a large following and much attention, so that he was made president of the School of Theology at eighteen.

One of the things he taught was that “faith and knowledge were not antagonistic,” and that true Christians should receive a “sound liberal education.” (p. 2) Tell that to the Kansas School Board!

A critical event in the life of Origen was his meeting Ambrose. Ambrose was a rich Alexandrian who came to hear Origen and was converted to Christianity. Ambrose began to fund Origen’s efforts, so that he could write and publish those writings. One of the most famous of his writings was the Hexapla.

To understand the Hexapla, you have to know what the Septuagint is. The Septuagint was the Greek translation of the Old Testament, and was made in the third century BCE. It’s named that after the traditional seventy translators. Origen recognized that the Septuagint had many errors in it which were due not only to the haste of those who copied it (remember, no printing press!), but also to the ulterior motives of those who wanted to use it to persecute the Jews. There was a lot of arguing going on about its accuracy. So Origen decided to dedicate himself to restoring the original text. This took him twenty-eight years, seven amanuenses or those taking dictation, and a dozen copyists and calligraphers, all funded by Ambrose.

He collected and collated all the Septuagint manuscripts, compared them, and found many discrepancies and faulty reconstructions. It was impossible to figure out the true original text, but by comparing the Greek translations and the Hebrew Old Testament, he created something much superior. This was called “the Hexapla because each page consists of six parallel columns: the Hebrew text, a transliteration of the same into Greek, the Greek translation of Aquila, that of Symmachus, the Septuagint, and the version of Theodotian.” (p. 11)

Why am I telling you this? Because this effort of Origen’s was the first achievement in the field of Biblical criticism. He invented it. All the theologians after him used his example or his texts. I even have a parallel Bible here that my sister gave me, and now I know where the format came from.

Origen wrote many, many other works, over 6000! Bratton calls him an “intellectual superman.” (p. 1) But his ideas eventually came into conflict with the Bishop in Alexandria, and he fled to Ceasarea where he continued to write. Origen insisted on free will for humankind. He wrote that we have the power to choose between good and evil, an idea that was not popular in Christian circles back then due to an idea that we are born into sin and only God’s grace can relieve us of it. (p. 12)

We’re still fighting that belief today, aren’t we?

In denying the Christian ideas of inherited guilt and human depravity, and teaching that we can rise to divine likeness, Origen was the first Universalist.

Origen defined God as “Spirit” and “light.” Those words remain in our spiritual vocabulary even as we sang “Spirit of Life,” today, by Carolyn McDade, a Unitarian Universalist among us. He also defined God as “the Source of all Mind.” Origen taught that, contrary to certain passages of scripture, God is merciful and does not punish; punishment is a consequence of sin and is self-inflicted. God is self-limited by virtue of his own love and wisdom, and can do nothing contrary to natural law.” (p. 13)

Origen advocated reason, tolerance, and a recognition that religions adjust themselves to the prevailing cultures. And he taught that ethical conduct must be part of a valid faith. And he was daring enough to state that there were passages in Scripture that could not be literally true, and some that were even absurd. Of the laws of Moses, he wrote, “I should blush to admit that God has given such commands which are inferior to many human enactments.” He rejected the anthropomorphism of the Old Testament (making God in the likeness of man), and he wrote that stories such as Moses’ seeing God were “old wives’ fables.” He also “designated as immoral and unfit to read such material as Lot’s intercourse with his daughters, Abraham and his licentious conduct, and Jacob’s amours. He regarded as barbarous the command in Genesis 17:14 to do away with uncircumscribed children.” (p. 17)

I ask you, does he not sound like a liberal? Is he not applying his reason to these works of his own faith tradition? He was brilliant and spoke his mind, and his legacy was to shape the thought at least of those who discovered his ideas. He lived long and survived many persecutions, but he was eventually captured under Emperor Decius’ persecution of the Christians, and thrown into prison, tortured on the rack, and might have died there except for the death of the Emperor. His body was so broken, anyway, that he only lived three more years and died in 254 at the age of seventy.

Why is Origen called “the Forgotten Man of Christianity?” Because those who took over the Christian church, both in his day and in the thousands of years since, suppressed his teachings and outlawed him as a heretic. Since the seventh century, Origen “has received the eternal condemnation of the papacy.” (p. 19) In spite of this, those theologians who see his liberal light have called him “the greatest master of the Church after the Apostles.” (p. 19)

In spite of Origen’s many teachings, by 325 C.E. and the Council of Nicea, Christianity had been transformed, as Bratton puts it, from the religion of Jesus to the religion about Jesus. My father used to quote me that, and I have said that same thing to others. Now I know where he got it. And now you can use it, too, and tell people that our tradition of reason and tolerance goes back to this great master, Origen, the origin of the liberal Christian tradition. That’s not the whole story, but it’s a beginning, and your legacy of faith and the liberal spirit.