

## **Orthodoxies and Heresies**

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All faiths, including Unitarian Universalism, have traditions, ceremonies and rituals. Ideally, these things are teaching tools. They take the form of metaphors, allegories, symbols or the acting out of religious concepts. These rituals almost always include ceremonies to welcome new born children to the religious community and to the world, to allow couples to publicly declare their love for one another and their desire to live together and make a life for themselves. There are ceremonies that celebrate, through the memories of the living, the lives and deeds of those who have died. These are all good things, but they are more physical and visible than the abstract ideals that inform a given religious community's ethical and moral teachings, its insights into what it means to be human and seek after the highest aspirations.

Unfortunately, as centuries pass and a religion becomes more and more institutionalized, rituals and ceremonies take on a life of their own. When that happens there are always those willing to make these secondary things central to the religion at the expense of the teachings of the founder, be it Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed, the Hebrew Prophets, the books of the Hindu Vedas or Zoroaster. History should long ago have taught us that such institutionalization is a threat to any human social creation, especially religion.

Jesus, for instance, said nothing about cosmology, but that didn't stop the Church from persecuting Galileo when he questioned the Ptolemaic cosmology adopted by the

church long after the life of Jesus. Jesus asked questions about and disagreed with some of the religious practices of his day, but that didn't stop inquisitions from persecuting and even executing people who challenged the orthodoxies of their own time. A friend once told me that she brought up the Beatitudes during the course of a conversation about religion with an evangelical acquaintance and was told that Christianity was about being saved and had little or nothing to do with the teachings of Jesus.

In the introduction to his famous book concerning Greco-Roman Mythology, Thomas Bullfinch said: "The religions of ancient Greece and Rome are extinct. The so-called divinities of Olympus have not a single worshipper among living men. They belong now, not to the department of theology, but to those of literature and taste. There they still hold their place and will continue to hold it, for they are too closely connected with the finest productions of poetry and art, both ancient and modern to pass into oblivion."

It is indisputable that Mr. Bullfinch was correct in the last part of his statement, but what about the first part? Before the advent of Christianity there was a popular faith in Rome called Mithraism and one of its most important myths was that the sun god impregnated a virgin so that he might be incarnated in human form. The date of his birth was December 25, around the time of the winter solstice. Around the time of the winter solstice, the days begin lengthening once again and the people of many diverse and ancient cultures celebrated the longer days and shorter nights with festivals of light. Fires and lamps were lit, and evergreens, holly and mistletoe were brought into homes because it was thought their perpetual greenness represented a promise from the gods and goddesses that winter would end. When winter did end, around the time of the vernal

equinox, the people found in the symbols of, among other things, eggs and bunnies and newly greening grass, a proof that the promise was kept and the earth was made new again. These beliefs, these symbols were old when Jesus was born, they were old when Abraham departed from Ur to found the faith of the Jews.

Bearing this in mind, in answer to Dr. Bullfinch, and paraphrasing Mark Twain might we not say that the death of paganism has been greatly exaggerated?

In the fourth century, after the reign of Constantine, the first Christian Emperor of Rome, his successor, Theodosius, made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. Before the time of Constantine, Christians were periodically persecuted by the Roman powers-that-be, but these on-again off-again exercises in intolerance were never as bad as later Christian historians made them out to be, actually they probably served to give Christianity some much needed publicity. The usual Roman attitude from the beginnings of Christianity until the time of Constantine and Theodosius was one of indifference, and Christians were usually tolerated. It was a traditional Roman attitude to tolerate all sorts of religions within the empire. This is because, during those days, people took on various religions, much like we take on insurance policies today. It was not at all unusual for a Roman citizen to support five or six religions. There is strong historical evidence that even Constantine, not baptized until he was on his death bed, split his devotional time between the Christian church and the temple of Apollo.

All of this ended when Christianity became the official religion of Rome. The Christians, persecuted now and again by the pagans, now made the persecution of pagans and Jews, full-time work. When they weren't converted to churches, many pagan temples were destroyed, lands were confiscated, lives laid waste. There was only one

insurance company in Rome now. It sold two policies, one for salvation in the after life, another for health in this life. I suppose one could call it the first health insurance policy. If you didn't buy into it, there was a very good chance that you wouldn't keep your health. For example, in the year 374, St. Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan, and the most powerful prelate of his time, rebuked the Emperor Theodosius for punishing another bishop who led a mob in the burning of a Jewish synagogue. St. Ambrose also blocked any moves that might lead to a reasonable attitude toward pagans and/or Arian Christians. Arians, spelled A-r-i-a-n-s, were followers of a Libyan priest named Arius, and should not be confused with Adolph Hitler's mythological "super-race" spelled A-r-y-a-n-s. The latter existed only in the warped brains of Nazi apologists, but the teachings of Arius, it might be argued, still thrive among some Unitarian Universalists.

In 325 a council of Bishops was called by Constantine. They met in the Greek city of Nicea, and voted to declare as orthodox the views of an Alexandrian Deacon, Athanasius. Those of the priest, Arius were declared heretical. This declaration is known as the Nicene Creed.

What were the views of Arius? They were simply that Jesus of Nazareth was not made of the same substance as God, and was therefore not equal with God. Therefore, the argument of a co-equal Trinity consisting of three divine beings in the substance of one, could not be supported. There were a few occasions when the Arians gained the power of the state through sympathetic Emperors, but when this happened, they were just as happy to persecute the Catholics, as their opposition called themselves, as the Catholics were to persecute them when the tables were turned. There was, most assuredly, far less religious peace in Rome after Christianity than before it. And yet,

Christianity did not hesitate to borrow the myths, legends, ceremonies and rituals of the old pagan faiths. This ability to plagiarize the most popular aspects of the old faiths, while at the same time condemning those faiths, and claiming exclusive access to truth is one of the things that made Christianity so popular and powerful. People could leave the old faiths of their forbearers and still recognize many of the practices of those older faiths in this new and dynamic religion.

Over the years, in every society words take on different meanings. For instance, I can remember a time when the word awesome was used to describe sunsets or galaxies or erupting volcanoes. The word was *never* used to describe clothes or movies or automobiles. I personally prefer the older usage.

And there was a time, long ago, when the Greek word “heresy” simply meant “to choose” meaning “to choose your own point of view.” Unfortunately there was another Greek word, “orthodox” which meant then and now, “true opinion.” Considering the growth of science and reasoned thought during both the Hellenic world of Socrates and Plato, and the Hellenistic period of history, after the conquests of Alexander, it is quite obvious, discounting a few glaring exceptions, that the Greeks were far more comfortable with heresy than with orthodoxy. It would be difficult to subscribe to both concepts for how can one choose his or her own point of view when there is a true opinion, suggesting only one valid point of view?

On the other hand, the Christians, after their religion became the official and only religion of Rome, were great lovers of orthodoxy, and it showed in the terrible decline of reasoned ideas and rational thought in the thousand years that followed the edict of Theodosius.

The serious split between the Arians and the Catholics was short-lived. It took a few centuries but the Arians grew weaker and weaker until they vanished as an organized sect. Their thoughts went underground, not to rise again until the reformation. But there is another, more profound split in Christianity and uncounted other religions and it has caused conflict and suffering probably since the beginning of religious thought.

In the ancient world of paganism, there were various “mystery cults” They appeared during the height of Greek civilization, around 500 B.C. These cults varied greatly in their beliefs. There were the Eleusian mysteries which focused on Demeter, the goddess of agriculture, there were also mysteries involving Dionysus, the god of the vine, and Orpheus, a legendary musician and demigod. In those times, the word “mystery” was synonymous with “secret” and each of these religions possessed a secret ritual at its heart which promised salvation for all who accepted and practiced it. These rituals were kept secret, and were revealed only after a long period of initiation. The rituals involved ecstatic behavior and usually dealt with death and rebirth, and the promise of an afterlife.

Many Christian theologians list as the seven most important teachings of Jesus:

1. The fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of humanity.
2. The Golden Rule.
3. Forgiveness and love of one's enemies.
4. Repayment of evil with good.
5. Self-denial.
6. Condemnation of hypocrisy and greed.
7. Opposition to ceremonialism as the essence of faith.

When St. Paul was traveling about making converts to the new faith, he happened to visit a jail, and a prisoner there asked him the following question: “How might I find salvation?” Rather than referring to any one of the seven points, Paul simply replied: “You must believe in Jesus Christ with all your heart and soul.” Maybe Paul was tired that day or maybe he did, indeed believe that such a simple appeal to emotion was superior to the intellectual content of the seven points. Who knows, but Paul did put Christianity on a new track away from the revolutionary ideas of its founder and toward an institutionalized mystery religion.

Thomas Jefferson once remarked that Jesus of Nazareth devoted his life to knocking over the golden calf of superstition and Paul devoted his life to putting it back on its feet.

Consider this, one who believes in and practices the seven points of Jesus of Nazareth is asking in essence: “What can I do for God and humanity?” While the members of the mystery sects, pagan, Christian, or otherwise, are asking: “What's in it for me?” The mystery sects say: “If *you* believe this, if *you* do that, *you* will be rewarded in the afterlife. If you don't do these things then God will punish *you* horribly, not only in the next life but quite likely in this one as well.” The dichotomy between these two attitudes represents a chasm in religion.

I've personally never understood how anyone could read the Beatitudes and see the term God-fearing Christian as anything but an oxymoron, but here are but a few of the ideas put forth by self-described God-fearing Christians in books, newspapers and especially the internet: The poor deserve to be poor. They have no one to blame but themselves, never mind that a huge number of them are children. Here's another:

Disease is usually but not always a punishment from God. (they have to leave some wiggle room in case they themselves get sick.) I have even heard a claim that God – or less often, the Devil – created and then planted dinosaur bones in order to fool sinful unbelievers about the true age of the earth and thus damn them for their doubt and their embrace of material evidence over the words of scripture. To me, this sounds less like the work of God or the Devil and more like that of a kind of cosmic Chuckles the Clown, who'd do anything for a joke.

Here's another inspiring idea: The poverty and misery that defines life in much of the third world is all part of God's plan. This dovetails rather nicely with the idea that the poor deserve to be poor. One of the most powerful men in congress has suggested that the recent Tsunami was an act of God that punished the world for its sins. Somehow these folks find no conflict between the views expressed above and the views of the founder of their faith who said: "Whatsoever you do unto the least of these, my brethren, you do also to me." Nearly two thousand years later, another great philosopher, George Santayana, warned that we should not drift too far our founding principles lest we should become what we claim to despise.

Intellectual intolerance, like the rites of Easter or the symbols of Christmas, was not invented during the Christian era. Please note that I didn't say religious intolerance, because the story I'm about to relate is about a more universal intolerance. It does relate directly to the mindset of the Spanish and Italian inquisitions – the decision of Copernicus to hold off on the publication of his heliocentric theory until he was on his deathbed, the persecution of Galileo and later of Charles Darwin by those who were convinced that they were privy to the absolute truth.

It seems that in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, Hippasus of Metapontum, produced a proof of the irrationality of the square root of 2. However, the great mathematician Pythagoras, believed in the absoluteness of numbers, and could not accept the existence of irrational numbers. He could not disprove their existence through logic, but his beliefs would not allow him to accept the existence of irrational numbers and so he sentenced Hippasus to death by drowning. After the death of Pythagoras, his followers forbid the mention of Hippasus' proof on pain of death. Orthodoxy and heresy do not always involve the strictly religious, but they do always involve the same, awful mindset: I am absolutely right, therefore anyone who questions my teachings is absolutely wrong and a threat to the absolute and irrefutable truth to which I am privileged to possess.

In Egypt, fifteen centuries ago, an Alexandrian mob led by their bishop, who was later canonized a saint, after skinning the curator alive, burned the great Library of Alexandria, the greatest repository of learning in the ancient world after it had been painstakingly rebuilt from its first burning at the hands of the soldiers of Julius Caesar four hundred years earlier.

A thousand years passed. The western Roman Empire dissolved to nothing more than a quasi-political entity that called itself The Holy Roman Empire which the philosopher, Voltaire later defined as neither holy, nor Roman, nor an empire. The Eastern Roman empire, with its capitol at Constantinople, hit its peak, declined and was finally overrun by the Ottoman Turks. In the rest of Europe, Christianity became austere and brittle during this millennium. Jesus of Nazareth lost his tie to humanity and was often portrayed in the art of the time as the stern King of Heaven. In painting, the size of people was determined not by physical size or natural perspective, but by theological

importance. Needless to say, bishops and kings were only slightly smaller than God, himself.

The heritage of Western learning passed to Islamic Spain, Arabia, and Iraq whose scholars translated many of the ancient books of Greece and Rome into Arabic, and who, in their own right, contributed mightily to mathematics, astronomy, chemistry, and medicine. As Arab learning trickled to western and southern Europe, as the old books were translated into Latin, a new spirit entered into the West.

The Renaissance may be defined in various ways, as a rebirth not only of knowledge, but of the desire to obtain knowledge. It may also be defined as a movement away from mysticism and toward humanism. Quite suddenly paintings gained depth, sculpture lost its stiffness, Jesus regained his humanity and looked as if he was feeling pain and not boredom as he hung upon the cross. Artists were as likely to receive commissions to depict the birth of Venus as they were Madonna and child.

Remember the dichotomy between orthodoxy and heresy? During a time when inquisitions and witch hunts were doing their ugly deeds in much of Europe, Erasmus of Rotterdam, a Dutch priest, philosopher and humanist could write: "It has been written that those who lived before the advent of Christ were ignorant, barbaric and cruel. Yet, as I read the ancient books, I find they were written by men of wisdom, mercy, nobility, and justice. Often am I tempted to utter, "Pray for us, Saint Socrates."

I've been talking about Christianity and paganism. I'm not sure why. I'm not sure that it really matters what influenced what or why we have Christmas trees and Easter baskets.

If we look for wisdom and compassion, we will find it in both Christianity and

paganism, we will find it among Jews, Moslems, Hindus, Buddhists and Unitarian-Universalists. Every faith has a version of the golden rule: The Buddha told his followers: "Hurt not others in ways that you, yourself would find hurtful" Confucius said: "Surely it is the maxim of loving kindness: Do not unto others that you would have them do unto you." Mohammed said: "No one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself." The Jewish Talmud is the most explicit: "What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellows. That is the entire law; all the rest is commentary. Who among the adherents of any faith would dispute that the merciful should obtain mercy, that those that mourn should be comforted, and that we should love our fellow humans as we love ourselves? It shouldn't concern us how others perceive God or gods, but how we behave toward others. Jesus of Nazareth wasn't the only wise man to claim that those who hunger and thirst for justice shall be satisfied or that peacemakers should be called the children of God. The prophet Amos longed for justice and the Buddha preached about the futility of war.

You know, if there really is an orthodoxy, a true opinion, could it be this: Be a heretic. Choose your God or Gods or no God at all, but in your every act strive with your every word and deed to make the sisterhood and brotherhood of humanity something more than a concept loved in the letter, but ignored in the spirit.