

ORIGEN OF ALEXANDRIA



The earliest source in our Unitarian Universalist heritage since the writing of the Bible is that of Origen Adamantius of Alexandria (185-254 C.E.). Origen was born into a world of political and religious strife. His father was persecuted and martyred, and so Origen had sympathy for those persecuted. Origen combined Christian faith with Platonic thought. He was independent of mind, fearless, and had personal magnetism. He became the leader of the Christian school of Alexandria, Egypt, where he wrestled with a spiritual disquiet on how to find truth in the often contradictory or disturbing passages of the Bible or versions of Christianity that he encountered. He was very prolific in composing his ideas in an endless search for the meaning of Christianity, keeping seven scribes busy writing out his thousands of treatises and prayers, most of which are lost. He was not a clearly systematic thinker, and so it is hard to summarize his thought. However, several themes stand out.

Reason. Origen was an unbogoted seeker, who sought insight in all literatures, pagan and Christian. He advocated reason, tolerance, and cultural context in the spiritual quest. He kept examining and reexamining ideas in an endless quest of the true and right. His mind qualified the passages of the Bible by degree of inspiration, from the ethereal to the absurd. He rejected any literal interpretation of the Bible, and rather saw it as a vast allegory of truths hard to articulate. The only valid use of reason to him was in support of humane endeavors, never anti-humane dogmas.

Love. God is beyond comprehension, but Origen identified God's attributes as love, compassion, and a disposition to guide creation toward perfection. Therefore, to him a nurturing love is the law of the universe.

The human condition. Human beings are created on a radically equal footing, none above or below another. We are free and responsible. We can heed the call of God's love or not. Evil stems from ignorance of Love and the Good, and so we can misuse free will in ways that shatter the harmony of God's law. Yet, the human spirit in freedom may grow by struggle beyond temptation and toward maturity, expressed in ethical conduct.

The Restoration of All Things (Apokatastasis). God's intention will be fulfilled by the final restoration of all things to the holiness of harmony, equality, and love, a reunion of all souls with God. None can completely achieve that blessed state until all do. Even the one who has committed reprehensible acts has done so out of ignorance, and so with the aid of God's love, will in time achieve holiness. All human souls are in eternal motion called by God's love. Therefore, there is no hell, and in the end all will be restored to harmony as a Garden of Eden, the restoration of all things.

The orthodox repudiated Origen's teachings as heretical. Yet over the centuries they inspired Renaissance Humanists, Existential Christians, and our Universalist forebears. Origen's ideas are at the base of our Unitarian Universalist heritage, and yet today resonate among our spiritual pathways.

Ref: Rowan A. Green, "Introduction," *Origen* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), pp. 1-37; Edward Moore, "Origen of Alexandria (185-254 A.D.);" in *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, at <http://www.iep.utm.edu/o/origen.htm>; Hosea Ballou 2d., *Ancient History of Universalism*, 3^d ed. (Boston: Universalist Publishing House, 1872), pp. 69-102; Fred Gladstone Bratton, *The Legacy of the Liberal Spirit* (New York: Scribner's, 1943), pp. 1-19.

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