

“The Source of Human Good”

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For the past 1200 years there has been the same argument over and over again. And guess what? We are arguing it all over again today. 1,200 years! You know how you feel when you fight with someone, spouse, partner, sister, son, nephew, neighbor. Imagine fighting about the same thing for 1,200 years. Can you guess what the fight has been about? Well, whether you know it or not, the fight has been about you. Yes, you, you, you, human you. Are you sinful? Are you ok the way you are right now? Are you rational? Are you too emotional? Are you pure? You see this was the basis of the history of religion, the foundation for most of the Inquisition, and other “holy” wars. It has always been you. What to do with you? And the answers have been as predictable as the menu at MacDonal’d’s.

One answer is the external source or voice of authority versus the internal source. The age old question of; do we as humans really know what is right, yes said the Gnostics, the first century Jews who did not follow the Jesus followers, but continued to preach that there was an inward source of goodness that belonged to every human. An inward sense of knowing right from wrong, intrinsically. They were in opposition to the growing Christian church, and guess who won? The Gnostics were hunted down and systematically killed until now we only have their writings to give us a sense of what they believed. Which, strangely enough is a thought form that has been around as long as humanity; self reliance in the human being. Knowledge of self is the foundation of all knowledge. Humans need to foster strong individualism. No boundaries between what is considered sacred or secular.

400’s ~ The struggle continues with Protagoras and Pelagius and Augustine of Hippo. Protagoras who wrote, “As for the gods, I do not know whether they exist or not. Life is too short for such difficult inquiries...besides humans are the measure of all things.” Of course he was exiled and lost at sea; also most of his writings were burned by the government. Much later though, he was called the “Classical Humanist,” his approach to faith, thought and action was affirming an overriding credit to the human rather than to the supernatural. Of course it is also said in history, that his viewpoints were seen as a character flaw.

In 385 CE Augustine of Hippo took on, in the religious debate of the century, a man named Pelagius The issue here was ta-da, the freedom of a human’s will. Augustine, a father of the early Christian church said - sin is a choice, always made deliberately by reason, therefore, sin = pride, the sin is committed when the individual puts themselves in the center rather than putting God in the center. He said there was no way out for anyone, all people are stained by sin and deserve damnation, but God has selected some to be saved by God’s own free choice. Those God will not save will never really know why they are damned, it is just God’s power to choose, because we are all marked by original sin. Pelagius did not like this thought about himself and his fellow humans very much and decided on a different, but not a wholly new approach.

Pelagius, taking a personal risk, as the church was standing with Augustine, spoke against Augustine in that Pelagius believed; each person at birth has the right to choose. Life was a gift, and so was free will. It was a matter of choice in choosing good or evil; the power of that choice lies in the heart of every person. Who do you think was right?

The Inquisitions

1. 1100’s ~ 1600’s the [Medieval Inquisition](#) (1184–1230s)
- 2.the [Spanish Inquisition](#) (1478–1834)
- 3.the [Portuguese Inquisition](#) (1536–1821)
- 4the [Roman Inquisition](#) (1542 – c. 1860)

353,000 people are guessed to have been murdered during the Spanish Inquisition alone. Some historians have put the figure near 8,000,000 of those murdered in the years between 1100's and 1860 when the Roman Inquisition finally ended. And there are curious theories as to why the Inquisitions ended. One theory says that the plagues, bubonic and black death both actually revived the Pagan religion in people's hearts. And in comfort and solace in the face of large scale death people went back to the old ways and in such force and numbers that the Catholic church could not continue their scourge as before. Plus there was now worldwide condemnation of the Inquisition practices.

1500's

In the 14th and 15th century we come around again to the old debate, this time between the Dutch cleric Erasmus, and the founder of Fundamentalism then and today, John Calvin. Calvin took up Augustine's predestination theme and turned it into double predestination, which forgive me I can't understand well enough to explain. Erasmus on the other hand developed his humanist ideals first in France and then introduced them as a movement in England. Belief in the goodness of humans spread quickly in England and paved the way in Elizabethan literature to become a theology of the people, through the works of Shakespeare and later Dickens, who by the way was a Unitarian! Always the same theme, humans can change themselves and the world around them. The choice is always in the hands of humanity.

Now John Calvin is another story. Here was a man who almost more than Martin Luther has affected the Protestant movement even today. "We call predestination God's eternal decree, by which he determined within himself what he willed to become of each man. For all are not created in equal condition; rather, eternal life is foreordained for some, eternal damnation for others" (Institutes 3. 21. 5). But what is most astonishing to me as you read and study history are all the ironies. Calvin was actually a humanist in early years. It was actually Calvin's part in the murder of his friend, and former classmate Michael Servetus, a Unitarian doctor and theologian who rejected the Trinity that brought Calvin to a new stand on salvation and human's role, or rather total dependence on God.

Why is any of this important today? Because we are once again caught between, or maybe on one side or the other of this very same discussion. The discussion is so much the same I am amazed at times that we are having it. Total depravity of humans in contradiction to humanism which has always espoused the need for individual freedom in belief, unrestricted use of reason, people and their welfare as seen as central to organized life in cities and towns, truth as the only measure of authority, the Bible is only one form of revelation, and foremost, knowledge of self is the foundation of all knowledge.

1600's

Now come the Unitarians on the scene. Along with the first recorded anywhere dawning of an Age of Reason or Enlightenment. The Unitarians with their idea of shifting the heart of religion from creeds and dogmas to an honest, reverent life from within. But also at this very same time here in the United States Jonathan Edwards was gearing up with his own enlightenment called the Great Awakening. So, here was the worth and dignity of humans on one end, and the total depravity of humans and a new thought, that if you thought you knew God and his ability or even willingness to save you, you were wrong. A capricious God was born, an impulsive, unpredictable God was introduced. Once again reminding people that even within their Christianity, predestination was always at work and salvation was iffy at best. And our

forebears', the Universalists were in the tent right next to the Calvinists preaching eternal salvation for all.

1800's

The 1800's finds the rising of rationalism and Transcendentalism in the Unitarian and Universalist ranks. And Pietism and growing fundamentalism in the Protestant ranks. Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Theodore Parker, William Ellery Channing, George de Benneville, John Murray, Hosea Ballou, Susan B. Anthony, could be household names to us. Because they are the ones who in their time continued the theological thought that human's are not depraved, corrupt or evil by their nature, but rather that humans are able to know goodness, truth and beauty from their own inward selves. These brave men and women taught that the dignity and wonder and sacredness of life is able to be lived and enjoyed right now, here on earth. They wrote that there was no ending to the religious story of our world. Revelation is continuing through you and through me. After hundreds of years of natural religions and humans being ground into the depths of hell, these were words of faith and hope and beauty to a religiously starving world. These are the shoulders we stand on today. The grace and beauty and splendor of being human given to us as a gift.

1900's

This age brought about the Existentialists and the Process theologians. Art, music and theatre once again brought back the basic ideas of humans pondering their place in the world and of course their power. Along with, guess what, a new rise in fundamentalism. Fundamentalism spread in the 1920s. It was strongest in rural areas, particularly in California, in the border states, and in the South. In these areas, Fundamentalists sharply delineated the issue of biblical infallibility in historical and scientific matters. The controversy over this issue grew most intense in the secular sphere when Fundamentalists urged many states to pass legislation forbidding the teaching of evolution in public schools. Several southern and border states, among them Tennessee, passed such laws. The Tennessee statute led, in 1925, to the world-famous trial of John Thomas Scopes, a high school instructor, who was convicted of teaching evolution in defiance of law. The orator and politician William Jennings Bryan was an associate prosecutor at the trial; the lawyer Clarence Darrow defended Scopes. In 1967 Tennessee repealed the law. In 1968 in a similar case the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that such laws were unconstitutional.

Today

What is of importance today I think is that in every 50 year turn of events for as far back as we can go in recorded history, the generations doing the most work in one direction or the other, liberal or conservative, humanistic or fundamental, have been what we call today the baby boomers. This is the generation that of the 4 generations that we seem to cycle through every 100 years, that is the one most interested in all things spiritual and religious. John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards were baby boomers, as were Erasmus, and Margaret Fuller, as the spiritualists of the early 1900's, Kellogg who created the breakfast cereals for his vegetarian children, Houdini, and others were baby boomers, as are Depok Chopra, Carolyn Mace, Greg Brandon and thousands of others. So our dichotomy today as new age, neo pagan, the rise in interest of health foods, gardens, back to nature and natural healing, and seeking holistic cures is partly because the baby boomers who are so very interested in all things natural and supernatural are not only the dominate generation alive today, but also the ones who are writing, eager to learn and, on the other hand, joining fundamentalist mega churches faster than they can find buildings to house them. And maybe the paradox of this cultural phenomena is more apparent because we are all alive now and witnessing it. But believe me when I say, this split in religious thinking is nothing new to the world. Absolutely not new at all. It's as old as the Gnostics trying to survive with

their theology intact in a growing Christian environment. See, that does sound familiar.

A couple of years ago I was interviewed by some high school students from a local conservative Lutheran high school. I was told that the teacher had put my name down for the students to talk to me because our church was so different the young woman said. She asked me if I was a Christian, was Jesus Christ my Lord and Savior, I said no. I was a Taoist and there was no need for a Lord and Savior in Taoism. She looked shocked and said, "How do you know how to do the right things without the 10 commandments? Why, you could go out and murder and steal and everything, what makes you be a good person if you're not a Christian?" I sighed, where was I to begin with this poor sweet child? I gave her all the standard UU lines, inclusive faith, one truth many paths, the fact that the 10 commandments come from many other religions in many different forms...but mostly I found myself trying to explain to her the ancient debates between Augustine and Pelagius and Calvin and Erasmus. Well, she wasn't buying any of it. In her eyes, without a God, we as humans were unable to be good. I saw once again how even in this young mind the ancient debate continues, as it does in most conservative Christian churches, but also in the hearts of every human being at some point of their lives.

Humanist Manifesto of 1933 tells us the time has come for widespread recognition of the radical changes in religious beliefs throughout the modern world. The time is past for mere revision of traditional attitudes. Science and economic change have disrupted the old beliefs. Religions the world over are under the necessity of coming to terms with new conditions created by a vastly increased knowledge and experience. There is great danger of a final, and we believe fatal, identification of the word religion with doctrines and methods which have lost their significance and which are powerless to solve the problems of living today. So, all of us are called once more to decide; where is the love. Where is the human race to put its trust, its ambitions, its loyalties? Are you evil, born in sin and unable to heal yourself? Are you good and worthy, already becoming your best self? Esoteric questions? I think not. They are essential to the existence of a happy, healthy, creative person. When I look into all your faces I am reminded of Jim Henson a, great humanist and his song. So I sing it now for you, and the beautiful, fully formed, blessed humans you are. "It's in everyone of us to be wise. Find your heart open up all your eyes. We can all know everything without ever knowing why. It's in everyone of us you and I."