

## **“No!”**

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Meriden, CT

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I can't think of a more apt season for heresy than the December holidays! I'll explain.

Unitarian Universalism is grounded in the curious faith of doubt and wonder. We wonder at the expansiveness of the universe. We wonder at the sun rising morning after morning. We wonder at the birth of a child. We wonder at the complexity of human nature and the mystery of Mother Nature. And we doubt. We doubt dogma. We doubt certainty. We doubt ultimacy. And sometimes, we doubt the notion of the holy, the sacred, or God to the extent that we become dogmatic, certain, wholly convinced of the ultimacy of our opinion. How human it is to lose balance in forging the tightrope between birth and death. How human it is to cling to a variation of certainty even as we espouse NOT knowing for sure about whatever, whomever, whenever, and why ever life is as it is. “NO!” is quite commonly our “YES!”

Sometimes when folks ask me about the roots of Unitarian Universalism, I'm tempted to say that we grew out of the radical wing of the Reformation; but that's too simple and the response is generally a glazing over or even an alarmed nod. Our faith roots extend as far back as human choice. I relish citing Eve as the first Unitarian Universalist who just didn't know it. She said “Yes!” to one species and “No!” to a power that forbade her to taste of the knowledge of good and evil.

Who among us doesn't seek to know the difference between good and evil, at least in the myriad degrees that define the spectrum between what we know as good and what we understand as just plain evil? Choice is paramount to free will, and Eve made a choice.

Consider two other choosey figures in the history of Unitarian Universalism—both from the earliest centuries of the Common Era.

The story of Arius and the Arian controversy is recently familiar to those of you who participated in the first of our Next Steps sessions on exploring this faith. Our spiritual forebears were known as Arians and eventually, as heretics, because Arius was choosey. Born in what is now known as Libya in the mid-3<sup>rd</sup> century of the Common Era, his life extended well into the 4<sup>th</sup> century and his influence, into our present day. Arius traveled and studied throughout the Middle East and was eventually drawn to Alexandria, Egypt, one of the most cosmopolitan cities of the ancient world. There he was ordained as a deacon of the early Christian church and became well known as a preacher who could hold attention and interpret Scripture with flare. What got him into trouble were his understanding of Jesus as human and his relationship to the utterly transcendent deity. He echoed a former bishop of Alexandria known as Dionysius, who spoke of the relationship between God and Jesus as “a spring and a river, a root and a plant, a shipbuilder and a sailor of a ship.” Arius reveled in these metaphors.

It didn't take long before the Bishop of Alexandria took issue with Arius's teachings, contrary as they were to the convention that Jesus and God were one. This was the beginning of Arius' theology becoming the Arian heresy. It culminated in the Council of Nicaea, a summit called in 325 CE by the Emperor Constantine. Constantine had declared Christianity as the religion of the empire, and his bottom line was religious conformity. Boats that rocked did not serve his purpose. Bishops from throughout the Empire descended on the tranquil lakeside town of Nicaea just outside of Constantinople; and with them came Athanasius, a newly ordained bishop with agenda in tow. Arius and Athanasius squared off in debate on the issue that was front and center of that council—namely, the relationship of God the Father to Christ. It was a debate as political as it was religious.

Athanasius won. Arius, in the company of two Libyan bishops, was excommunicated and sent into exile to a place known as Illyria along the Danube. Arius is one of the few heretics to have died in his sleep or at least not at the hands of imperial violence. Exile was a merciful edict, and it served *our* spiritual history well, for in this part of Europe along the Danube, seeds were planted for vines that spread across the centuries into the Unitarianism of our own day. For Arius, God was ultimate mystery, the "Unbegun." From within the depths of the transcendent "Unbegun" rose a basic pattern of the cosmos. Arius held that Jesus was a human, who for whatever reason, *chose* to move to the rhythm of this cosmic pattern. Jesus *chose* to be compassionate and loving and truthful and healing. It wasn't inevitable, but it happened. Yet Jesus had a beginning, and God, or the *Unbegun*, did not.

I find this fascinating. Arius conceived Jesus as one who chose rightly, but nonetheless *chose*, a heretic if you will. And Arius understood the Deity as that with no beginning, the *Unbegun*. My colleague, Mark Belletini, in his novel-like rendition of the Arius saga, explains that:

"The eternal capacity of the Unbegun to remain ultimately unknown *safeguards the mystery of divinity* for Arius. His upset with the Nicene language [that Jesus was of the same essence as God] stems from his conviction that it was a full frontal assault on the Mystery that is God."

Universalism had sprung into the arena of theological discourse much earlier, through another figure from Alexandria. However cosmopolitan Alexandria was in these early years of the first millennium, the political powers of the day wrested control of culture and thought and, like Constantine a few centuries later, did not readily bend to any who resisted convention. Enter Origen. A brilliant student, he said, "No!" to orthodox teachings. He was a heretic—contentious and choosy.

Most specifically, Origen espoused universalism—not like you or I, but universalism in the claim that all souls will eventually make it to heaven. There might be a detour or two into a hell that he didn't deny, but eventually, the door was open. In Origen's words:

"...the process of amendment and correction will take place imperceptibly in the individual instances during the lapse of countless and unmeasured ages, some outstripping others, and tending by a swifter course towards perfection, while others again follow close at hand, and some again a long way behind."

That is, some take awhile, but God still welcomes the “late bloomers”—my choice of words, not Origen’s. To make matters worse, Origen held an open admissions classroom, welcoming students at all levels of spiritual and intellectual competence, including women.

As threatening as his universalist theology and his inclusive practices was his deference to uncertainty and its tie-in with free will. How we choose is driven not by destiny but by our particular path of choice en route to holiness. In other words, no predestination, no micro-management. This, remarks Origen scholar Rebecca Lyman, is “extremely strenuous spirituality.” We should not be surprised that Origen did not die in his sleep.

Resistance, contrariness to convention, and saying “No!” as a more profound “Yes!” are constants in the practice of this faith that we share. Lest we puff up our chests in self-righteousness, historically we have not always leaned so hard on that moral arc of the universe in the direction of justice and love—the metaphorical language of 19<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian Theodore Parker. We sometimes boast of Thomas Jefferson as Unitarian, though he never officially became such. Yet one need only cast more than a toe into the waters of this complicated figure of American history to know that while he proclaimed the “self-evident truth that all men are ‘created equal,’” he remained a life-long slaveholder and an often cruel “master.” Such is the perspective of an op-ed by Jefferson scholar Paul Finkelman in yesterday’s *New York Times*! Ouch!

While our faith now has more women than men in its ordained ministry, it wasn’t always easy for women to break what might not have been a hard glass ceiling but was certainly firm plastic—even in the early days of the merger of Unitarianism and Universalism.

In other words, Unitarian Universalism has its fare share of spiritual potholes.

Now fast forward, it’s the first Sunday of December 2012. We’re gathered here in the sanctuary of the Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden on the threshold of this season of holidays and holy days. We’ve “gathered our spirit” in song, considered with our youngsters the vagaries of Yes’s and No’s, and reflected on what it means to be a sojourner of our faith—venturing forth, leaving “behind our desires for a no-risk life, worldly accumulations, certainty of answers.” We’ve welcomed new members into this faith and this congregation, reminded that “ours is not an easy faith to live by,” that this is nonetheless a “community of hope,” and that “we draw from the deep well of abiding love and respect, that is the far-reaching promise of this faith that we share.” We’ve held silence, some of us having to work harder than others to tame our monkey minds—that’s me! I’ve beckoned you into the heretical roots of this faith, resistance to convention, life-threatening challenge to authority, a religion of doubt and practice, a history with no more reason for self-righteousness than many of our religious counterparts, yet a faith that many of us have chosen and some of us have extended from our childhood. Why wouldn’t our underlying mantra for the day be simply “Yes?”

I took my cue this morning from one among you who shared how burnt out you were at balancing all you’re seeking to balance, at having such a hard time saying “No” to the onslaught of requests to lead this or do that in this congregation that brims with opportunities for both, and tempted to walk out the door altogether given the understandable limits of your energy. Consider “No!” a sacred word, with roots in who we are as beneficiaries of a faith filled with figures whose resistance to the expected conventions of their time spills into the needed heresy of our here and now.

This time of Christmas to a great extent and Hanukkah and Kwanzaa to a lesser extent seduces us into a frenzy of activity—of spending more than we have, of exuding merriment as we move into overdrive to our detriment, of seeking to fill expectations of children or parents or partners from wells that may be all but dry.

How will we ever make it to “Silent Night, Holy Night” if we don’t summon the wisdom of realizing what we can and can’t be and do through a guilt-free “No!” Perhaps it is a “No, I can’t do this, period.” Perhaps it is a “No, but maybe later!” Perhaps it is a “No, this is not where I can put my resources of time, talent, or treasure right now.”

We stand in the company of the wondrously resistant rebels against convention in this sanctuary and in the larger world of this faith, seeking day after day to heed the words of Elwyn Brooks White—yes, the same E.B. White who gave life to Charlotte the spider and Wilbur the pig, who authored *The Elements of Style*, and who for years was on the staff of *The New Yorker* very much on his own terms.

“I wake each morning,” he remarked, “torn between the desire to improve the world and the desire to enjoy it. It makes it hard to plan the day.”

His friend James Thurber, described White as reserved, who during his time at *The New Yorker* was known for avoiding an unwanted meeting by running down the fire escape toward a nearby Schrafft’s for something more desirable. Wrote Thurber:

“Most of us, out of a politeness made up of faint curiosity and profound resignation, go out to meet the smiling stranger with a gesture of surrender and a fixed grin, but White has always taken to the fire escape. He has avoided the Man in the Reception Room as he has avoided the interviewer, the photographer, the microphone, the rostrum, the literary tea, and the Stork Club. His life is his own.”

From the ancient figures of our faith to the pronounced opinions of a recent columnist, to the characteristic habits of a beloved writer, “No!” can be profoundly affirmative.

Consider the first syllable of a much-loved carol, “Noël, Noël.” Its early meaning is “day of birth.” May it be so.

Amen.

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