

## Heretics?

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January 19, 2020

Let's start with a couple of definitions.

Heresy is any belief or theory that is strongly at variance with established beliefs or customs, in particular the accepted beliefs of a church or religious organization. It's a religious word.

The original Greek word meant "choice" or "thing chosen", but it came to mean the "party or school of a person's choice" and also referred to that process whereby a young person would examine various philosophies to determine how to live.

A heretic is professed believer who maintains religious opinions contrary to those accepted by his or her church or rejects doctrines prescribed by that church.

You have to be in a religion to be a heretic.

This whole idea of heresy begins with the Catholic church – AFTER the contentious early days of Christianity, when many ideas similar to those of Unitarianism and Universalism were considered and debated. AFTER the establishment of an orthodox set of beliefs and practices that applied to all who would be Christians.

Orthodoxy needs some source of authority to draw the lines and enforce compliance.

Without orthodoxy, there can be no heresy.

Heresy requires an orthodoxy to doubt, to question, to challenge. And the fundamental stance of the heretic is: "Yes, but..."

The first big Western heresy is the Protestant Reformation, which pretty much sets the ball rolling for heresy after heresy after heresy.

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As a colleague of mine once observed, it's heretics all the way down. In that centuries deep stack of heresies, Unitarians have been heretics for almost 500 years. Universalists have been heretics for 250 years or so.

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Since the merger in 1961, we seem to have laid claim to the label of heretics as being a significant part of our identity.

One might even say that heresy is our orthodoxy.

But I wonder.

What exactly are we heretics from?

Christianity has fragmented into a huge array of sects and churches and biblical interpretations, an array we left behind some years ago when we started to call ourselves a post-Christian religion.

That fragmentation started with the breakdown in the authority of the Catholic Church and the feudal system. It was a time of great social change and experimentation. Relevant to our discussion, England broke with Rome and created the Church of England. Not too long after that, Oliver Cromwell overthrows the monarchy and governs as Lord Protector of the Commonwealth until he is overthrown and the monarchy and the Anglican church are restored.

During this time, a century or so, England was a hotbed of rebellious religious groups, known collectively as the English Dissenters – from the Latin dissentire, "to disagree" – specifically, those who disagreed with the Church of England and the monarchy, who are powerful allies.

There were the Anabaptists, who thought baptizing children was a waste of time, because only a conscious adult could truly profess their faith and benefit from being baptized.

There were Barrowists, Behmenists, and Brownists. There were the Diggers, who were agrarian communists and pantheists.

There were the Enthusiasts, the Familists, the Fifth Monarchists, and the Grindletonians. The Levellers believed in popular sovereignty, extended suffrage, equality before the law and religious tolerance.

There were the Muggletonians, who began in 1651 when two London tailors announced they were the last prophets foretold in the biblical Book of Revelation. Muggletonian beliefs included a hostility to philosophical reason, a scriptural understanding of how the universe works and a belief that God appeared directly on this earth as Christ Jesus. They also thought that God took no notice of everyday events on earth and would not intervene until He was ready to bring the world to an end. Muggletonians avoided all forms of worship or preaching and met only for discussion and socialising amongst members. The movement was egalitarian, apolitical, and pacifist, and resolutely avoided evangelism. They seem to have achieved a large degree of public notoriety by cursing those who reviled their faith.

The Puritans we know about, but there were also the Philadelphians, the Quakers, and the Ranters. The Ranters were sort of pantheists – they believed that God is essentially in every creature; this led them to deny the authority of the Church, of scripture, of the current ministry and of services, instead calling on men to hearken to Jesus within them.

There were Sabbatarians, Seekers, and Socinians. I talked about the Polish Brethren and Socinians last month, and how they influenced English Unitarianism.

From our distant and privileged perspective here in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we might find it easy to laugh at curious names, like Grindletonians and Muggletonians and Ranters. We might wonder how people could believe that 2 London tailors could be the last prophets, or if it mattered whether you were baptized as a child or an adult.

Although if we are honest, much stranger things have always happened, and are happening today.

This was serious and bloody business. If you were loud enough and critical enough of the Crown or the Church, you could find yourself in the stocks or in prison with your nose lopped off and your ears cropped and a brand burned onto your cheek.

Being a dissenter meant risking that – or even death – for your beliefs. Not too many years earlier, a heretic might have been burnt at the stake, or drawn and quartered, or suffered any number of other painful deaths for their beliefs.

At the very least, they'd be excommunicated, cast out.

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What we've been striving for is a world in which people aren't maimed or imprisoned or killed or cast out for who they are, for their beliefs or for disagreeing with other people beliefs. This has been historically hard to achieve, and we aren't the only ones trying – or who have tried.

Framing the world in terms of orthodoxy vs heresy comes with its own set of problems. We can use other words, but it all boils down to the same thing: making human beings into the Other.

A heretic is heretical in relation to a truth system. Usually a truth system with coercive powers. To call yourself a heretic is to define yourself in terms of someone else's truth system – to

define yourself as a protestor against that truth system. Sometimes this is necessary and important, but at other times all you end up doing is confirming the orthodoxy you have rebelled against.

The heresy/orthodoxy axis can be self-reinforcing, self-validating, self-perpetuating, like most binaries. It can be a trap.

Which makes it even harder to really break out and establish something new. So I'm not sure that the heretic label is useful.

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Despite having seven principles and six sources, we don't have an explicit theological orthodoxy. And this may be because our principles and sources and polity are in tension with each other. More on that in a moment.

Instead of orthodoxy, we've ended up with orthopraxy – correct practice, or conduct. This is what being a covenantal religion is all about.

Now, defining or at least trying to define correct conduct is a wonderful thing, but doing that can be really problematic for a couple of reasons.

One reason is that telling people what to do, how to think and behave, is pretty much a non-starter. That's how the whole heretic / dissenter thing got its start in the first place. Coercion has no place in a free faith.

The main reason is that our faith is based on freedom of conscience, congregational polity, democratic process, and religious tolerance, and it has been since our early days as Unitarians.

Recently, a number of our coreligionists are defining praxis in a way that I think contradicts or at least misaligns with our stated principles.

I think that's because we've failed to make the connection between theology and practice in a meaningful way. We've failed to come to a common understanding about theological debate and decision-making, about right conduct and how it shows up consistently in alignment with our principles and sources, and our history.

We desperately need a General Conference to hash some of this out.

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I want to return to this idea of tension.

We have principles and sources that serve as guidelines. These are both generally broad and oddly specific.

There is tension among and between all of our principles. Tension between the first and the seventh, between the individual and the community and the web of life. Tension between the second and the sixth. Peace and justice sometimes can't coexist. Justice and equality are a messy business that human beings have wrestled with for thousands of years. There is tension within the fourth – between free and responsible, and between truth and meaning.

There is tension about who decides what is important and what takes priority. Some of our sources are in tension, the pagan in tension with the Judeo/Christian in tension with the humanist. I'm sure we can think of a few more if we try.

I think these tensions are a valuable thing.

But we can't gloss over them, or minimize them, or somehow try to release or resolve them.

Holding these things in tension is our source of mystery and spiritual power.

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I suppose if we hold to any religious heresy, it's humanism. I define this as the faith that human beings are capable of emancipating themselves without divine assistance.

It's a blind faith really.

Tony Davis wrote in his book *Humanism* that, after the horrific experiences of the wars of the 20th century, "it should no longer be possible to formulate phrases like 'the destiny of man' or the 'triumph of human reason' without an instant consciousness of the folly and brutality they drag behind them. It is almost impossible to think of a crime that has not been committed in the name of human reason. Yet it would be unwise to simply abandon the ground occupied by the historical humanisms. For one thing humanism remains on many occasions the only available alternative to bigotry and persecution. The freedom to speak and write, to organize and campaign in defense of individual or collective interests, to protest and disobey: all these can only be articulated in humanist terms."

Humanism's ultimate goal is human flourishing; making life better for all humans, and as the most conscious species, also promoting concern for the welfare of other sentient beings and the planet as a whole. The focus is on doing good and living well in the here and now, and leaving the world a better place for those who come after.

That sounds like Unitarian Universalism to me.

In 1925, the English mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead cautioned of humanism: "...man, who at times dreamt of himself as a little lower than the angels, has

submitted to become the servant and the minister of nature. It still remains to be seen whether the same actor can play both parts".

There's that tension again. To be both servants – and rulers - of our destiny.

Can we play both parts? This not the same as being two-faced or duplicitous.

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Holding these tensions in a meaningful way means that we must be in constant evaluation and dialog with them and each other. We must always be both believers and heretics. We can't ever stop, because these tensions aren't ever fully resolvable. The variables involved are endless. Events and people and knowledge never stop changing.

We are always wrestling with the angels of our better nature.

About now, you might be thinking, creeds are looking pretty tempting. Something fixed and eternal, to swear to and die for, seems simple in comparison. Easy.

But I suppose that if you were looking for a creed, you wouldn't be here.

And neither would I.