

It Is Hard Being A Heretic

A Sermon Given to Unitarian Universalists of the Chester River, Chestertown, Md.
By Kenneth R. Haslam MD
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Aldous Huxley said: "All great truths began as heresy."

And Unitarian Universalists have a long history of seeking the truth as well being heretics.
Today's sermon is about heresy.

[Visual aid:
Show black tee shirt here purchased at General Assembly:
Shirt states "Heretic" (in large print) followed by a background listing a
couple of dozen famous heretics.]

The mission of UUs of the Chester River:

The mission of the UUCR is
to foster liberal religious ideals through public worship, study, service, and fellowship;
to provide a public forum to address religious, ethical, and moral issues;
to support individual freedom of belief and caring human relationships;
to become an intentionally diverse community;
and to engage in promoting a just and humane social order.

People have a tendency to create mission statements, and then don't always pay attention to them.

On October 26, 1553 a brilliant scholar died in the flames. He was truly a renaissance man at the time of the renaissance. He died for what he believed and his legacy has led to you and me being in this Unitarian Universalists fellowship today. The following description of his death is unashamedly plagiarized and adapted from the book *Out of the Flames* by Lawrence and Nancy Goldstone published in 2002 and should be required reading for all Unitarian Universalists.

"His shabby appearance belied his status as one of Europe's leading geographers, physicians, and theologians and his crime was publishing a book that redefined Christianity in a more tolerant and inclusive way

At the time of the inquisition torture and cruelty were no strangers to sixteenth century justice. There was a strict hierarchy of punishment, from relatively painless to the gruesomely agonizing depending on the severity of the crime. But of all the punishments, the very worst was to be burned alive. The condemned was subjected to prolonged, horrible and unendurable pain. And this was reserved for the most terrible of all crimes - heresy.

Heresy was especially loathed because it put not only the soul of the heretic in mortal jeopardy, but also those of the otherwise innocent people infected by their teachings. The heretics teachings had to be wiped away by burning the man and burning the books. Books, btw, were

the Internet of the 16th century. Knowledge and heretical ideas could now be easily transported to the next village in the saddlebag of a horse.

For this social event that was the 16th century equivalent of NASCAR races the stage was a stake and pyre made of fresh, green wood with newly cut branches with the leaves still attached. They sat this intelligent but recalcitrant heretic down on a log and chained him to a post. His neck was bound with a thick rope and on his head they placed a crown made of straw doused in sulphur. Chained to his side was what was thought to be the last available copy of his heretical book, *De Trinitatis Erroribus* or *On the Errors of the Trinity* -- his exploration of why he thought the holy trinity, a fabrication of men, was just so much bs. All remaining copies of this book were thought, wrongly, to have been destroyed and so all his heretical ideas were to be burned along with the man.

The fire was lit. Now green wood does not burn easily, it burns slowly and unevenly and smokes and sputters. He was roasted slowly, agonizingly conscious the entire time with sulfur dripping into his eyes for a full half hour. He was heard to say "poor me who cannot finish my life in this fire", "oh god, oh god" he screamed and his ashes commingled with those of his heretical book- *On the Errors of the Trinity*.

And so died Michael Servetus. His crime was heresy.

[Visual aids:

Show tee shirt purchased at General Assembly
picture of Servetus on front, "Celebrating 450 years of heresy" on the
back.

Show book *Out of the Flames* on heresy.]

It is damned hard to be a heretic. Not a pleasant life. But heretics seem to be driven by a spirit that, as you have just heard, sometimes causes their deaths. The strength of belief and need to pass on what they believe to be the truth can be a powerful goad to defy society and confront those who consider themselves experts and also happen to be in control.

Heresy can also get you shunned or banished.

Lets move away from burning green wood pyres and take an intellectual look at heresy.

So what is heresy?

In its simplest form heresy means "choice."

There are several definitions but one is: The holding of an unorthodox opinion that is in conflict with established or traditional theory. Well, gee, what is orthodox. It is defined as "following the established or traditional rules of social behavior, a philosophy or a faith."

There are some who say orthodoxy is just "common sense." A for - instance of common sense is "The stars and sun move across the sky and "So the earth stands still and the heavens move." It just makes perfect sense or common sense - all you have to do it look.

An orthodox statement often begins with "Well, everybody knows.... Beware someone who says "everyone knows."

Orthodoxy is right thinking. It is what we learn from our parents, and from our teachers, and from Father Timothy. It is the right way of doing and thinking about things.

And btw "We have always done it this way" is another example of orthodox thinking.

Heresy cannot exist without orthodoxy. And there is no right thinking unless there is wrong thinking. So orthodoxy and heresy must go hand in hand. Probably the Pope and Martin Luther thought of each other as heretics. And as did John Calvin who burned Michael Servetus

We all grow up being taught the right way to think and the right way to act. And for many there is no other way to do it. You just always do the right thing and you think the right thoughts. Thinking within the box -- it is nice and comfortable in that box, and when folks come along and ask you to become uncomfortable by thinking out of the box you rebel. You can rebel by denying, discrediting, reinterpreting or just plain old forgetting the new and uncomfortable thoughts.

There is always some heretic out there who thinks differently and thank god for heretics, for without heretics I believe there would be no progress in the world. They are the irritants that keep people on their toes and they are the guys and gals orthodox thinkers wish would just go away. They are the troublemakers and thought leaders and the visionaries. Those pesky heretics are the causes of social and scientific change.

Think of heresies as Darwinian mutations. Heresies are thought mutations and these mutations introduce new ideas into society. Then natural selection causes these new ideas to take hold or die out if they just don't work. Without mutations of thought - heresies - there is no evolution of any kind.

Lets take a look at a few of my favorite heretics and some of their ideas.

Just 5 years after poor Michael Servetus provided an afternoons entertainment Giordano Bruno was born. He came along about the time the Catholic Church was having real trouble with the likes of Martin Luther and the growing Protestant movement called the Reformation. Bruno liked the ideas of Copernicus who thought the Earth revolved around the sun. Can you imagine anything as crazy at that? Bruno suggested that, can you imagine, every star in the sky was a distant sun and even more heretical, was that each star had orbiting planets. Now I will admit it only took 450 years to discover that at least some of those stars in the heavens do indeed have orbiting planets, but you have got to give him credit for being a thought leader of his day. What really irritated the orthodox thinkers was that he thought the universe was infinite. And if the universe was infinite, just exactly where could god live since Christian orthodoxy insisted that the creator is distinct from his creation. Bruno thought that god dwells everywhere and therefore committed the heresy of pantheism. And to make matters worse he thought Servetus was right - the trinity was an error in thinking. The inquisition had designs on his body and Cardinal Bellarmino had him roasted in 1600. And btw, Cardinal Bellarmino was declared a saint in 1930.

Galileo saw moons going around Jupiter and demonstrated beyond doubt that we live in a heliocentric universe and it got him house arrest.

Now some of you have heard of Jesus of Nazareth -- an obscure Jewish hippie liberal heretic. The orthodox thinkers of the day taught that rigid conformity with Jewish law was paramount but Jesus disagreed. He taught instead that nothing was more important than the love of god and the love of your neighbors. The laws should be violated if they interfered with ones acting

lovingly. Jesus challenged orthodoxy and so provided another afternoon of entertainment for the local populace. This heresy 2000 years ago led to a world wide religion.

.Dianne Turpin, a congregant, reminded me of the following UU heretic:
-- Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Emerson lived in the mid 1800s and was an essayist, public speaker, school master, and Unitarian minister. Emerson outraged the Christian Unitarian community with his beliefs that while Jesus was a great man, he was not god: he rejected the historical miracles of Jesus; and he preached that moral intuition is a better guide to the moral sentiment than religious doctrine. At this time such statements were unheard of and certainly not welcomed. For this, he was denounced as an atheist, a poisoner of young men's minds, and a heretic.

Forty years later his position had become standard Unitarian doctrine.

"Do not go where the path may lead; go instead where there is no path and leave a trail."
-- Ralph Waldo Emerson

Even our own Rev. Dan Higgins is in my opinion, a bit of a heretic having run afoul of Christian church politics and civil rights issues and jumped the fence to become a Unitarian Universalists minister.

Not all heresy is theological and being a physician I will briefly mention a couple of medical heretics.

The first is Ignaz Semmelweis, an obstetrician in Vienna in the middle 1800s. He thought that washing your hands after doing autopsies and before doing pelvic examinations of mothers who had just given birth was a good idea. Through this simple act of handwashing he markedly decreased childbed fever and death but the orthodox physicians of the day rejected his heretical ideas on handwashing and it was a generation before the germ theory caught on and doctors began to wash their hands and use rubber gloves. Ignaz eventually died in an insane asylum. How many women died of puerperal fever because Ignaz was a heretic and his advanced thinking was rejected by the medical community?

When I went to medical school back in the dark ages of the 1950s the orthodox thinking of the day was that the inside of the stomach was sterile. Everyone knew that germs couldn't live in the high acid environment. Period. In the 1980s a couple of guys from Australia, Barry Marshall and J. Robin Warren, discovered germs actually doing quite nicely in that acid environment and were probably causing ulcers. And, you know what, nobody believed them. Of course they were right. Btw those two heretics won the Nobel Prize in medicine in 2005.

It is important to point out here that significant social change often seems to take a generation or two to be adopted -20 to 40 years-sometimes you just have to wait for all old orthodox thinkers to die off.

There is a present day heresy that is, in my opinion, just on the verge of gaining wider social acceptability. It has been around in its modern form for some 20 to 30 years and, with the help of the internet is spreading worldwide.

The social change I am talking about is called polyamory.

The word "polyamory" is now part of the English language having been added to both the Merriam Webster and Oxford English Dictionaries in 2006

The OED defines polyamory as:
Polyamory, n.

- 1) The fact of having simultaneous close emotional relationships with two or more other individuals, viewed as an alternative to monogamy, esp. In regard to matters of sexual fidelity;
- 2) The custom or practice of engaging in multiple sexual/emotional relationships with the knowledge and consent of all partners concerned.

It was with great trepidation I gave one of the first sermons to any Unitarian Universalist congregation on polyamory in our Quaker meeting house some 6 years ago. This movement has grown and there is now a 501(c)(3) (sic) organization (tax deductible religious educational organization just like this fellowship) "Unitarian Universalists for Polyamory Awareness" with several local chapters, over a hundred dues paid members and several, albeit closeted, UU polyamorous clergy.

This heretical movement is now, thanks to the Internet, worldwide in most of the western nations as well as one or two Middle East countries.

So what is the orthodoxy/heresy thing here?

Orthodox thinking is that we are supposed to marry our childhood sweethearts, have babies, and live happily monogamously till death do us part 60 years later. The reality is that we don't. The reality is some marry, divorce, cheat, change partners, practice adultery, serial monogamy, and on and on. Orthodox thinking says we are supposed to love only one. Yet we know that some people practice multiple partnering. Multiple partnering is the elephant in the living room that we just won't recognize or talk about. In polite society there is a conspiracy of silence about multi-partnering.

As I like to say: listen carefully to what people do.

The heresy here is that, in contrast to orthodox thinking, polyamorists recognize, embrace, and accept our true human behavior and try to incorporate this behavior into their lives in a very open and honest way. Authenticity, honesty and communication in sex and relationships are the main principles of poly thought. Polyamorists believe that lives lived without deceit and without repression of thoughts are more healthy and in the long run lead to stronger and happier relationships and authentic lives.

poly folks are strong believers that each of us should choose our own path in forming our families, forming relationships, and being authentic in our sexuality. and yes, polyamorists believe that you can love more than one.

traditional monogamy is what we have learned. it is all that we know. the heresy of polyamory requires a lot of thinking out of the box. it suggests that there are many pathways to building loving relationships.

I predict that this modern heresy will be much better understood and accepted in another generation. we just have to wait for all the old time orthodox thinkers to die.

[Visual aid:
Show tee shirt purchased at UU General Assembly:
Front: "Unitarian Universalist diversity" "not always easy, not always obvious; but always worth the effort."
Back: "Some of my best friends are both UU and polyamorous".]

I will finish up with a short look at Unitarian principles and how they relate to heresy.

The inherent worth and dignity of every person -- heretics are persons. Although you do not agree with their thinking, use the heretic as learning experience. Ask them to explain their heresy. As a Unitarian Universalist heretic, you do have the obligation to hear out the heretic and make a full faith attempt at understanding. You can choose to take it or leave it

A free and responsible search for truth and meaning -- never forget that one of our principles requires us to ask questions and seek the truth. And this requires that we learn of individual (and heretical) truths as well as the orthodoxy or socially acceptable truths.

When dealing with heretics, always attempt to have a dialogue that leads to understanding and not a debate that tends to polarize.

I'll close with a quotation from Schopenhauer

All truth passes through three stages.

First, it is ridiculed.

Second, it is violently opposed.

Third, it is accepted as being self-evident.

It takes a heretic to start the process going.

Kenneth R. Haslam MD

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