

When Doctrine is Unjust, Heresy Is Holy

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In the first part of the 16th century, at the height of the power of the Holy Roman Empire, a German monk named Martin Luther became disillusioned with what he saw as gross abuses of power and corruption in the Catholic Church and wrote a list of 95 theses to the local Archbishop explaining his position. More famously, he also nailed the list to the door of the Catholic Church in Wittenburg.

Martin Luther was by all accounts a really good monk. He devoted himself to being the very best monk he could be, fasting and praying and being humble and all the rest. But it was during a pilgrimage to the Vatican in Rome that his disillusionment really began.

Priests and the hierarchy of church authority were living lavish and corrupt lifestyles, claimed Luther, and were placing themselves between the people and their God.

Now, one can make excuses when one sees corruption at the local level. It is easy to think, "well, we got the bad priest, clearly. I am sure the others are not like this." But in his travels, Luther noticed that the corruption and sumptuous lifestyles of priests and bishop through Europe was widespread, and indeed, seemed to be endemic to the system.

There were a lot of other things that Luther took issue with, including the selling of indulgences, which allowed the wealthy to make donations to the church in exchange for a free ticket to heaven without any stopovers in purgatory or hell first. But really, it was the hypocrisy that chafed him the most.

So he wrote his theses, and predictably got in serious trouble for them right away. An inquiry and official trial was ordered, in the town of Worms,

Germany, on the order of Emperor Charles V, as an act of enforcement of the papal bull issued by Pope Leo X.

It may be difficult for us to imagine why one person protesting a church would cause such a fuss, but that is because we are safely in the 21st century and thousands of miles from Rome. In the 1500s, the Holy Roman Empire encompassed both church and king, meaning any sin against god was a crime against the king, and any fracture of the law was a sin against god. So serious was the issue of eternal salvation that wars were fought over just how the rules governing that salvation were written.

So Luther was brought to Worms, to a trial sort of thing called a Diet, where he was asked to denounce and recant his heresies or suffer the legal and eternal consequences thereof.

At the conclusion of the testimony, Luther was asked if he authored and supported the books and writings he was accused of writing. He said to the council:

Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. May God help me. Amen.

This has often been translated as “Here I stand, I can do no other.”

Facing imprisonment and possibly death, Luther stood fast to the truth that others were calling heresy, and in doing so, changed the western world forever.

It can be argued that Jesus of Nazareth was a heretic in his age, challenging the doctrine and laws of the priests of the temple, and seeking the laws of God instead.

Michael Servetus is the best-known Unitarian martyr – determining what was right and just and moral, in direct opposition to the doctrine espoused by John Calvin.

Heresy for the sake of argument is not virtuous. That's simply playing devil's advocate, or recreational argument.

Heresy happens when a person or persons, generally outside some structure of power, often at the sharp end of the stick of that same power structure, speaks truth about the unfairness of that power structure. Heresy happens when the powerless call out abuses of power. Heresy happens when those in power have no moral or logical argument to justify their behavior, so they fall back on divine edict or perhaps long years of tradition.

The accusation of heresy is often the last-ditch effort of corrupt institutions to hold onto power. In the times in which Servetus lived, the Spanish Inquisition was the enforcement arm of the Holy Roman empire in western Europe. It was the Inquisition that forced Servetus to flee east to Germany and Switzerland, for Italy was far too hostile to his rhetoric. His books were burned, and Servetus would likely have suffered the same fate had he lingered.

For a while, Servetus tried to avoid all the fuss his first works had created, and reinvented himself as Michel de Villeneuve, a bright, 22-year old student enrolled at the University of Paris to study Mathematics.

He eventually became a physician, rising through society until he offended people, as was his habit, and eventually settling into a relatively modest life as a country doctor where he could be a big fish in a small pond, socializing with the elite of the area.

But Servetus, bless his heart, could not remain under cover for long. Information in the form of books and pamphlets passed through the town where he was, and he could not let pass what he found improper or incorrect, so he again began writing opposition pieces.

He worked with multiple printers to hide his identity, but eventually was discovered. To make a long story just a bit shorter, he ended up in Switzerland, where Calvin oversaw his trial and sentenced him to death by

burning at the stake, atop a pile of his own books and fueled by green wood, to make his death that much more excruciating for him and for those who witnessed it.

Fast forward to 18th and 19th century in North America, and there was a movement afoot to reject the doctrine of the holy trinity. Like Servetus hundreds of years earlier, these claims were met with accusations of heresy, albeit with less harsh penalties. The purveyors of dangerous religion were men, after all. Had they been women, they may have indeed been burned alive. But, that's another story.

Channing is cited as one of the leading proponents of Universalist Christianity in north America, arguing that there was no scriptural basis for the doctrine of the trinity. Logic and reason must be applied to the scriptures, he argued, and where the scriptures required us to abandon reason in order to believe, then the belief must be abandoned, not reason.

As happens with every progressive movement, Channing was first a revolutionary, then the accepted leader, and eventually, the pitied old guard who could not or would not change.

It was Ralph Waldo Emerson who argued against Channing's intellectual, from-the-neck-up-only kind of religion, arguing that humans sought transformation of a spiritual nature, to transcend that which is corporeal, and connect the heart and spirit with something greater than dry pages covered with words.

Emerson, of course, was labeled a heretic, like Channing before him.

Hosea Ballou, the self-educated son of a New Hampshire farmer, similarly was branded a heretic when he challenged Calvin's doctrine of predestination and humanity's natural state of utter depravity. A creation of God, made in God's own image, he argued, could NOT be utterly depraved in nature. Not if you claim that God is all loving and all powerful and that god's grace is not a thing you can reject if you wanted to.

The theologians whose work are the foundational basis of Unitarian Universalism were all heretics in their age. Indeed, every great truth we know was once some generation's heresy.

The earth is round. The earth is not the center of the universe. Gravity is physics, not god's weird hobby. Blood is pumped from the heart through the lungs and to the rest of the body (thank you Servetus.)

Which of course brings us to the question of what great truth of the future do we view as today's heresy? To be fair, I do not have a clear idea of which challenging notion might be the controversial new truth of a coming age. Perhaps it is the growing understanding that spiritual growth comes in shared community as opposed to individual practice. Perhaps it is the white, post-enlightenment individualism that will be the next thing to be torn down by new truths. I do not know.

Heresy is our heritage.

It is a natural outgrowth of progress and learning and growth. Like children outgrowing their clothes each year, our spiritual understanding of life, each other, and the divine, also outgrows each generation's container.

That growth is sometimes gradual, sometimes abrupt, but never without resistance. When growth is unpopular to UUs, it is not usually called heresy any longer. For us, the insulting accusation is to call something a creed. Like integration. Like LGBTQ rights. Like Black Lives Matter.

We are still called heretics by some faith traditions. I'm ok with that. The label in the 21st century lacks the sting it once carried in the 1500s. I do not fear being condemned to hell for my beliefs, or even my behavior.

Our god – our understanding of the divine – is too expansive and too loving to be so petty.

I encourage you this week to watch for heresies, real or implied, in our world. They are all around us. Some are great truths for the future, some are the tragic last gasps of a bygone culture.

May we have the humility to continue learning and the courage to be heretics when the world needs us.

Amen.