

Heretical Thinking

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

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Christianity does not have a good history with its free thinkers. Heretics, skeptics, scientists, and otherwise devoutly religious men and women have been banished or burned at the hands of orthodoxy merely because they had an original thought, a different interpretation of scripture, or refused to be told exactly what to think or believe. How ironic, or perhaps just sad, this appears, in light of the new and innovative thinking that brought Christianity into the world in the first place. The world is admittedly a different place today because of the enlightened teachings of a man named Jesus, at the center of which was his invitation to treat no one as the “other.” But there has also been much that has come from the subsequent organization and “doctrinization” of Christianity, and its parallel smothering of free and creative thinking, that has both overtly and covertly affected society and the world.

Yes, I am being very critical. I know that criticizing religion, specifically Christianity, has been and unfortunately remains a very politically incorrect thing to do. But that is exactly one of the points I would like to make this morning. By inherent definition, heretical thinking points out the weaknesses or faults in the status quo. I submit that this is what we, as Unitarian Universalists, religious people who are not afraid to say what is on our minds, are called to do – say it like it is! If something needs to be brought out in the open don’t hide behind the convenient curtains of politeness and uninformed apathy. There are more than enough examples, right out of today’s news, to convince us that it is time to be honest about religion – both it’s essential nature to our human lives AND, unfortunately, all too often, its institutional mistakes. But our criticism, to be effective, to persuade others, must be both educated and informed.

Originally, the word heresy, from the Greek, meant an “act of choice,” or “the exercise of the power and right of free choice.” But early on within Christianity heresy came to imply the commission of a terrible offense to the church and by the Middle Ages, heresy was a capital crime. Those of outside faiths may have been the enemy, but those from within the faith, who strayed or questioned, were the traitors, the heretics.

It was not until the early fourth century, after Constantine declared Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, that the need became apparent for the Church to establish a more cohesive identity, not to mention more authority. This led to the Nicean Council and the writing of the Nicene Creed, which has been the official stance of the Church ever since. This is the statement that affirms belief in the Trinity, or God, the Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, and the Holy Spirit. Before this council there had been many different strands of Christianity living side by side each other, some with more Unitarian, as opposed to Trinitarian, beliefs.

What happened after that to those for whom the Nicene Creed did not represent their beliefs? It was not a pretty picture. The Theodosian Code of the year 438, in reference to those who would not adhere to the Creed, reads: “The rest, however, whom We adjudge demented and insane, shall sustain the infamy of heretical dogmas, their meeting places shall not receive the name of churches, and they shall be smitten first by divine vengeance and secondly by the retribution of Our own initiative, in accordance with the divine judgement.” By “retribution of their own initiative” they most often meant torture or death. It is important to remember that this was in the days when the religion was the government. There was no separate State. There was no escape.

It was not just religious ideas that came under the category of heresy. Galileo, for example, was forced by the Christian Inquisition, under threat of extreme torture, to renounce Copernican theory, in which the earth was round and not the center of the universe. And this was in 1633, three years after the creation of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the newly discovered continent of America! The Church, however, in order to perpetuate its own importance, had continued to maintain that the earth was flat, and that the center of the earth was, conveniently, the Mediterranean Sea. There must have been people at the time who asked: “If the Church stands against the testimony of men who have already sailed around the earth to a new continent, in what other ways is it resisting the truth and teaching falsehoods?” My curiosity leads me to wonder what other beneficial ideas and advancements were smothered by fear during this reign of religious terror.

In light of the stories of torture, execution and banishment, it is amazing that anyone resisted at all. But they did. Perhaps some of them, like many of us sitting here today, prized their right to think for themselves above their own safety.

It was, in fact, religious heretics like Luther and Calvin who, in their insistence that authority could be found in the Bible rather than solely from the Church, and that people did not need an intermediary in their relationship to God, finally gathered enough momentum to break the monopoly of Roman Catholic rule. This was the beginning of the Protestant Revolution. Luther and Calvin were heretics. They started the move toward denominationalism and today, in this country, as a result of the independent thinkers who wrote our Constitution and the Bill of Rights we enjoy a religious pluralism unmatched anywhere else in the world.

But again, the irony is this: within many of these newer faith traditions, most whose own beginnings were themselves classified as heresies, there is today, again persecution of those who profess differing beliefs. In the early 1800s, not really so very long ago, Theodore Parker, to cite one example from our own early denomination, was ostracized and shunned by congregations and other Unitarian ministers alike, for a sermon he gave called “The Transient and the Permanent within Christianity.” Some of his supposedly incendiary remarks included the following: “It must be confessed, though with sorrow, that transient things form a great part of what is commonly taught as religion. An undue place has often been assigned for forms and doctrines, while too little stress has been laid on the divine life of the soul, love to God, and love to man. . . . Men

have distorted the history of the world and man's nature besides, to make religion conform to their notions.....Need we accept the commandments of men as the doctrine of God?" I would venture that these same comments would not cause Parker so much trouble today. They do illustrate, however, that even within the supposedly more liberal Protestant tradition, of which we were then a part, new ideas require time to take root.

But if no one has the courage to begin the conversation, it takes even longer.

I have to admit that I was tempted to title this sermon "The Heretic Gene." If it exists, I am fairly sure I have it. In fact, maybe one from each of my parents. We already know there are genes for personality traits like risk taking and people pleasing. I suspect this room is full of heretic genes, encouraging us to resist the status quo and formulate our own opinions. Jesus must have had a heretic gene and a risk taking gene.

Interestingly, for my ministerial training I attended a Theological School, Andover Newton, founded in part by the American Baptists and in part by the Congregationalists, now the United Church of Christ. The Congregationalists had originally left Harvard College in a huff back in the early 1800s when the school appointed a Unitarian, Henry Ware, to a prestigious faculty position. The conservative, Trinitarian Congregationalists felt it necessary to leave. At that time Unitarianism was often still referred to as the Unitarian Heresy. The irony of the situation is that Andover Newton, while always maintaining its Christian, Christ centered, mission, nevertheless had the second largest population of UU seminary students of any school in the country during the years I was attending. In fact, the Unitarian Universalists outnumbered the Baptists on campus.

In my classes I was considered extremely liberal in my theology, if not heretical, by many of the Christian students. In fact there were two distinct occasions when I was asked, by other students, (not UUs) why I was in Seminary if I believe as I do. Once was when I suggested in Systematic Theology class that the idea of God and religion might be a human construct, born of the needs of our human psychologies and questioning minds. The other was in a class on Religion, Theology and American Public Life when I expressed the opinion that it was possible to develop a conscience and a knowledge of right and wrong outside of a tradition that included a belief in God. Some of the conservative students refused to believe me, even though I believe myself to be a living example of such a person.

I'm sure many of you here this morning have your own examples of running into more conservative viewpoints. You probably also know of friends within more conservative traditions who are being persecuted for their refusal to blindly accept what they are told by their religion is the truth.

I would like to tell you a story about a friend of mine at Seminary. Mark was raised in Tennessee as a Southern Baptist. In fact his father was a Southern Baptist minister. My friend is openly gay and because he was determined to go into ministry, he left his very conservative religious tradition to become a UU. I want to read for you

some excerpts from two emails I received from my friend, Mark, about three years ago now. He was writing about his mother, who had remained a Southern Baptist.

“My mother has been asked, by a unanimous vote of the deacons, to resign from her position on the Pastor Search Committee because of her enlightened viewpoints on homosexuality. She has thus far refused to resign because she was elected to this committee, not appointed, and the deacons do not have the authority to remove her. Tomorrow, however, there will be a motion made at the monthly church business meeting to remove her from the committee. Regardless of what happens, this is a potential teaching moment for this Southern Baptist congregation. My mother is going to attempt to have a resource packet made available for the meeting and for the church library, which explains how she can believe as she does. She will also speak in her own defense.”

Another message, two days later, continued:

“A seed was sown. Let us continue to pray that it will someday bring forth fruit. At the business meeting, the motion was made to remove my mother from all positions of leadership in the church at which she had been a member since she was nine years old. She presented a statement and proceeded to read a moving and eloquent letter describing her spiritual journey, in which God has continued to open her eyes and teach her the lessons of unconditional love. She was interrupted several times by individuals trying to silence her and call the motion to a vote, but she persisted, and finally they relented until she had finished. She presented the church with two resource packets, to help explain her position that homosexuality is neither a choice nor a sin and to provide the members with the opportunity to evaluate the evidence for themselves. I do not know if the packets will even be kept, or read by anyone. Maybe, when the rest of church finds out what happened, some will request to see it. When she had finished, my mother left the meeting. By a vote of 28 to 2 (my father being one of the two), those present voted to bar my mother from any position of leadership in the church, including her position as organist (she had played either the piano or the organ for the church since she was twelve years old) and her position as leader of the Woman’s Prayer Group, a group she founded seven years ago.”

Mark was writing to his friends asking for our prayers for his mother. He didn’t know if she would be able to continue attending this church. But he was also making another point. He called his mother a modern day prophet and admitted, with some guilt I think, how much more difficult it was to stay and face the hard work from within a group than it is to leave and join a more liberal faith like Unitarian Universalism, as he had done.

I cried when I read what was happening to Mark’s mother. I sent her a message of encouragement at the time and asked if her story could be an example for a sermon some day; that I wanted to lift up the need for courageous people, like herself, who have stood up for their liberal beliefs and opinions. Bucking the system is a very difficult and brave thing to do. Especially when it means losing your church community.

Which brings me to the emphasis of this sermon. An opinion that is different, from either the status quo or religious dogmatic belief, is not necessarily wrong or less valid. We believe, in the liberal religious tradition that it is a matter of your personal experience. But, articulating theological and ethical reasons for an opinion has become every bit as important as making the position itself known to the public. Ethicist, Peter Singer, has written about his own ethical conclusions: “Some of them are very different from the ethical view most people hold today. That, however, is not a ground for dismissing them. If every proposal for reform in ethics that differed from accepted moral views had been rejected for that reason alone, we would still be torturing heretics, enslaving members of conquered races, and treating women as the property of their husbands.” Singer believes that the only reason to express an opinion is in the hopes of having influence. Without a good argument, however, no one will be persuaded.

Mark’s mother did not just get up and state her opinion and expect people to change their minds on her account. She prepared a packet of information that others could read to understand her viewpoint, plus she gave an impassioned presentation.

It has been said that a liberal is someone who cannot take his or her own side in an argument. Why does this seem funny in a sad sort of way? Why is it so hard for us liberals, within the religious world, to speak with authority? And why have some religious traditions continually had more influence than others in forming public opinion? One reason for this is that the Roman Catholic church (for example) is characterized by considerable unanimity. There is, on a number of issues, an official church doctrine. This is not generally true of Protestantism, which has a great many denominations, or Judaism, which is divided into Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform. Another reason for the more powerful influence of Roman Catholicism is that it includes a well-developed, written body of thought which has had considerable influence on prevailing attitudes (even among non-Catholics) as well as on legal doctrine. It may also be that the memory of how dissenters and heretics have been treated through history, indeed recent history, thinking about the witchcraft trials in this country, lingers on in way that will not easily go away. What happened to Mark’s mother is not much different from the treatment of similar heretics 1000 years ago.

Within our tradition, Unitarian Universalism, the tendency is to avoid making sweeping statements of opinion or belief, because we are by definition an association of uniquely individualist thinkers. It seems difficult to come up with much of anything on which we can all agree. It is my opinion that if the liberal voice is to be heard in the world today, we may need to overcome this difficulty. Certainly there are issues of ethics and freedom and justice about which we agree and from which we could make public commentary. I do think that our current UUA president, Bill Sinkford, is doing quite a bit to keep the voice of liberal religious opinion in the news.

Our liberal voice is an essential voice that needs to be heard, along with persuasive reasons behind that voice, in order that change will eventually happen where it need to happen. This is the way it has always been, and this is the way it will always be. History has shown us that progress needs voices of dissent, otherwise the most organized

and powerful and authoritative sounding group gets their way. Liberalism has a responsibility to find its authoritative voice and learn to speak up, starting with you and me. The conservatives have been doing the loudest talking for too long and other voices need to be heard. There will soon be an open letter to the newspapers in this area from many of the local clergy denouncing, among other things, “the exploitation of [religion] to camouflage unworthy deeds. It is a letter about principles – and my name is on it.

A hundred and fifty years ago, Theodore Parker made this excellent point: “Terror has sometimes palsied tongues that, before, were eloquent as the voice of persuasion. But truth speaks in a thousand tongues. If a man sees the truth, and is scared by worldly motives, and will not tell it, alas for him! If the watchman sees the foe coming and blows not the trumpet, the blood of the innocent is on him.”

May we find the strength to speak the truth as we see it.