

Heretical Roots

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First Unitarian Fellowship of Nanaimo

## **READING**

From “The Truth about Heresy” in the July/August 2006 issue of *Philosophy Now*.

Pg. 7.

“Religions are kept alive by heresies, which are really sudden explosions of faith. Dead religions do not produce them.” Gerald Brenan *Thoughts in a Dry Season*.

“A heretic is a person who offers too good a criticism of the authorities.” Brant Gartley, fictional documentary telejournalist.

Advances in rational understanding can be achieved in at least three ways:

1. Through novel ideas popping up, their rationale unentangled by old proofs;
2. Through the refinement of an existing set of ideas; or
3. Through heresy.

“Heresy’ can be defined most simply as a challenge to orthodoxy. A set of beliefs is called an orthodoxy when it becomes the official line of those who have the power to plausibly say where the official line is to be drawn. Or for a more precise and more useful definition, an orthodoxy might be thought of as ‘a publicly-shared official belief system’. For a view to be heretical presupposes a canon of opinions held by those claiming, and sometimes having, authority about the subject in question. The basic type of heresy then, is at least two people who share a common opinion, and someone else who disagrees with them.

## SERMON

My life as a heretic began in grade school. I remember coming home from church one day and asking Mom a question: “Why do we believe in God?” You would have thought I had uttered the worst blasphemy ever – I was sent off to my room and was not invited to dinner.

By asking the question “Why do we believe in God?” my young mind must have been processing some disconnect between the stories I was learning in Sunday school and the world around me. Sometimes connections are difficult to make. On Sunday morning I was learning that Jesus taught us to love our neighbors and on Sunday night, the carnage of Vietnam was on TV. In school I was learning about stars and planets but no one could tell me the address of heaven. Who knows, I also might have been expecting God to have the same fate as Santa Claus – a very real belief - enhanced by shopping mall visits - only to hear more enlightened children dismiss the jolly old Saint Nick. I wanted some rational reason to support a belief in God. I was not unwilling to believe in God, I just needed dialogue – a willingness to have conversation that reached beyond the picture book stories.

Just asking the question “Why do we believe in God?” was not a heresy in itself. I didn’t have an alternative view that challenged, reshaped or enlightened my understanding of God. But the question itself was not acceptable to the powers that be – in my case, my mother who took us kids to church, and the church itself by extension. I was a heretic-in-the-making. I was a budding Unitarian and didn’t even know it!

This impulse I had as a child reminds me of how we are as Unitarians. Often, our questions arise out of curiosity and a willingness to step outside and examine prevailing truths. We like to ask the hard questions, are willing to listen and, if necessary, we discard, expand or revise our views. We value the search for deeper meaning and truth for our lives.

We have a long tradition of searching for religious truths. In fact, as Unitarians and Universalists we trace our roots back a few thousand years to the early days of Christianity. Since this time in history pre-dates the invention of the printing press, people communicated by writing letters and telling stories. They also debated. Some people had original ideas and were brave enough to be public with their thoughts, opinions and questions. Of course, this often branded them as a heretic and sometimes meant death.

In the early days of the Christian church, there was no set dogma and no creeds. The New Testament portion of the Bible was not even written until decades after Jesus died. There were debates over how best to practice the teachings of Jesus. There was very little agreement. Christianity as we know it did not yet exist.

In the year 325C.E. in the town of Nicea, a council was gathered to consider the divine nature of Jesus. The Roman government needed direction to clear up concerns over who the fledgling Christians should serve: Jesus or Caesar. Recognizing that no one can serve two masters, one side of the debate wanted to promote Jesus to God-like status. In that way, Christians could have a heavenly master in Jesus and pay taxes to Caesar.

Another side of the debate, a north-African named Arius, focused on Jesus more as a prophet. He acknowledged Jesus as being from God but he did not elevate Jesus beyond being human. This viewpoint was referred to as unitarian – with God being a single and unparalleled entity.

In those days, questions such as the divinity of Jesus were debated until a winner was declared. Debates tended to draw dramatic and effusive orators. The debaters were often colorful characters with strong opinion and creative use of words. Audiences could be raucous: cheering, booing and not always orderly. In the question of the divinity of Jesus, the debaters were bishops of the new church. The debate was held in the court of Constantine, the Roman emperor who had recently converted to Christianity. The debate lasted for several weeks. At the end, an exhausted Arius, who argued the unitarian viewpoint was declared the loser and so Jesus was elevated to divine status. It was the official birth of the Trinity.

The Council of Nicea also gave power to what we know today as the Catholic church. In the early centuries, it was referred to as the Roman church. To consolidate power and influence, the Roman church created structure and formality. Christianity was now defined by the church and its beliefs were centered on the doctrine of the Trinity. The eastern orthodox church held on to a unitarian viewpoint much longer. Even in the Roman church, it took quite a while for the doctrine of the Trinity to be widely accepted. It was not until St. Augustine wrote on the importance of the Trinity that it became firmly entrenched in the church.

As the Roman church grew in strength and influence, it created a formal religion complete with creeds, dogmas and ritual. Over time, abuses of power began to occur. In 1517 Martin Luther nailed his famous 95 Theses to the church door in Wittenberg, demanding reform. Luther argued against the practice of indulgences or fees where priests charged parishioners for services including blessings, rites of passage and prayer. More importantly, Luther's arguments led to a theology based on the faith of the believer instead of obedience to the practices of the church. This elevated the importance of individual involvement in matters of faith. Martin Luther did not seek to destroy the church but to reform it. Much to Luther's dismay, the church did not take kindly to suggestions of reform. And so, the Protestant Reformation began.

As radical as Luther was, there were reformers even more radical. One of these was Michael Servetus. Luther's 95 Theses had been nailed to the church door just fourteen years earlier when 20-year old Michael Servetus published a book entitled "On the Errors of the Trinity". Promoting the unitarian view, Servetus revived the old debate over the divinity of Jesus.

At age twenty, Servetus was very brave – or perhaps foolish - to have written such a book. Regardless of the content, he would have known that the title "On the Errors of the Trinity" would incite calls for his death. But Servetus was no ordinary man. He was born in Spain in 1511 during the Inquisition – a time when the Roman church was expelling Muslims and Jews from their homes and country, and upon the threat of death, forcing Christianity on those who remained behind. During his school years, Servetus became well-read and knew Greek, Hebrew and Latin in addition

to his native language. He not only read the Bible in Hebrew and Greek but also read the Koran. He entered law school at the age of fifteen. Servetus was also a scientist and studied medicine. In a time when it was against church law to cut into a cadaver, Servetus was the first person to propose that blood flowed through a circulatory system.

Servetus also thought and wrote about religious matters. It didn't take long for Servetus to be branded a heretic. His book "On the Errors of the Trinity" challenged the orthodoxy of the church. Servetus believed in God and did not seek to destroy the church. What he wanted was to promote a belief system based on the teachings of Jesus, not doctrine. Servetus supported the radical notion that a person could know God through faith.

Servetus' views were not popular. John Calvin, a leading Protestant reformer, was adamantly opposed to Servetus' writings and viewed them as a threat to his own teachings and to the reformed church Calvin was shaping. Calvin believed only a few were chosen by God and the suggestion that individual faith mattered was not acceptable. Of course, obedience did matter and since no one knew who had been chosen, everyone had to be good or risk hellfire and damnation. For the Roman church, the priests and the elite were the chosen ones. Ultimately, Calvin used his authority and brought Servetus to trial for heresy. Calvin had Servetus slowly burned alive at the stake, with his banned books strapped to his thigh.

A monument erected in Servetus' honor is inscribed:

The arrest in Geneva, where he did neither publish nor dogmatize, hence he was not subject to its laws, has to be considered a barbaric act and an insult to the right of Nations.

On the back of the monument are a few lines from the last letter of Servetus addressing the conditions of his incarceration:

I beg you, shorten please these deliberations. It is clear that Calvin for his pleasure wishes to make me rot in this prison. The lice eat me alive. My clothes are torn and I have nothing for a change, no shirt, only a worn out vest.

Servetus was a heretic. Our Unitarian and Universalist history is full of heretics and accounts of heresy. Not all heretics were burned at the stake, but nevertheless they were often outcast from the very system they sought to reform.

Universalist theologians countered the doctrine of original sin, which entailed hereditary corruption and the depravity of human nature. In other words, the sins of the parents are passed on to their newborn infant, negating the innocence of birth. According to this view, humankind is not worthy of God's love. The concept of original sin was authored by St. Augustine and is not found in the Bible. Universalists claim all are born worthy, thus promoting the heretical doctrine of universal salvation.

In the 1700's George de Benneville preached Universalism. After traveling as a youth to Algiers and seeing people being better Christians than himself, he confessed to a priest that if a person as sinful as himself could be saved,

than everyone could be saved. This view was against the prevailing Calvinist doctrine of predestination and de Benneville was denied church membership. He then left England and traveled France and Germany preaching his universalist message. He was arrested and jailed several times for his heresy. Once having already bent down for the executioner's axe, he was spared by a last-second decree from the king.

Before migrating to America, de Benneville had a dream. De Benneville was near death and in the dream he was taken to a "dreamlike region where the inhabitants, "clothed in garments as white as snow," proclaimed to him the good news of "the restoration of all the human species without exception." After saying farewell to [his] friends, de Benneville felt himself "die by degrees" and felt his spirit depart from his body. He was escorted by guardians through the regions traditionally called "heaven" and "hell." In hell his compassion was such that "I took it so to heart that I believed my happiness would be incomplete while one creature remained miserable." One of his guardians comforted him with a vision of the eventual restoration of all life. Forty-two hours after he had been declared dead, de Benneville awoke in his coffin. He returned to life with a renewed mission: to preach "the universal and everlasting gospel of boundless, universal love for the entire human race." [www.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/georgedebenneville.html](http://www.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/georgedebenneville.html)

While de Benneville and later Universalists taught universal salvation, Unitarians taught an individual responsibility. The Unitarians encouraged each person to read for themselves and then decide what to believe. Reason, science and continuing revelation are to be used to support (or debunk)

religious convictions. This individual responsibility was in opposition to the church control of scripture and faith.

I could tell you about many other brave souls, but I want to point out a thread of heresy in our Unitarian Universalist history that might be overlooked. It is obvious that there are many viewpoints on religious matters. Some views gain wide acceptance while others are deemed a threat to the religious establishment. While the church and its leaders might have considered the heretics and their heresy a threat to the church itself, the heretics were fighting for, not against, religious purity and freedom.

This is important. Often I hear people today declare that they are in opposition to something. Usually this something has to do with authority or perceived authority - government, corporations, church. The excuse for excessive individualism is "I don't believe in (fill in the blank)." "They are all corrupt." "They are only after their own good." "They can't tell me what to do or believe." The object seems to be to argue against or to tear down.

What is missing? After the excuse, nothing comes forth. There is an emptiness, a void. When all the complaining and blaming against these things is over, there is nothing left. It is no wonder that many people today are clamoring for spirituality. We all know there is something beyond the frail human systems we create. We discard the theories, systems and beliefs that seem too outdated, mundane or dictatorial. Where does that leave us? Once our religious slate is wiped clean, what do we do?

We, as individuals and as community, must engage in the search. I believe spirituality is a process of discovery. It is stepping into the mystery and being open to it. We must be willing to be surprised, to be awed and to be transformed. For many of us it is going into unknown territory. There is no map and it doesn't come from the store. There are markers however. Scriptures, gurus and prophets all point the way. We must also listen to our hearts. Spirituality is ours to discover. Spiritual growth is a very personal venture. It is also a process that is supported by our religious community.

Let us not tear down for the sake of tearing down but instead, use our minds, hearts and bodies to search for spiritual truth. Don't be afraid to go beyond the comfortable. The goal is not to leave a trail of destruction. Spiritual search is about allowing for the possibility of being transformed, awed and loved.

Go and be curious, ask questions and dare to be changed. Let the heretic in each of us come out in our search for truth and meaning.

Blessed be and amen.

**BENEDICTION** Theodore Parker (#683)

Be ours a religion which, like sunshine, goes everywhere;  
Its temple, all space;  
Its shrine, the good heart;  
Its creed, all truth;  
Its ritual, works of love,  
Its profession of faith, divine living.