

HERETICS HERALDED

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PREFACE

Our Thursday morning study group, initiated by Dr. Lawrence Read in the 1990s, has never been formally named; the original version was listed in any church reference as “Thursday Morning Bible Study Group” identifying the time of our meetings and our purpose. Over the years, after we had moved through a study of the gospels based on the use of “Gospel Parallels”, we turned to other topics, not necessarily tied to the scriptures, and the word “Bible’ was gradually dropped from its identification.

From time to time we discussed more creative designations, but the only suggestion that caught our imagination was “The Heretics” - a name that I had jokingly used to describe us in a conversation with John Shelby Spong. The fact that it was such a brief yet descriptive appellation helped it “stick”.

There were, however, in the congregation, some who objected to such “sacrilege”. It is in response to this misunderstanding of our purpose and our name, that I decided to prepare a brief history of heresy as my contribution to our agenda in the autumn of 2013. It is my hope that it will not only clarify what “heresy” is, but help us understand how much heretics have contributed to the Christian church.

The words “heresy” and “heretic” have such a negative connotation that it is difficult for some to understand why many heretics need to be heralded.

Part 1

WHAT IS HERESY ?

According to The Canadian Oxford Dictionary, heresy is:

- a. belief or practice contrary to the orthodox doctrine of a given religion
- a. an opinion contrary to what is normally accepted or maintained in any subject field

A heretic is:

- a. the holder of an unorthodox opinion in a subject field
- a. a person believing or practising religious heresy

The Merriam Webster Dictionary makes the definition more precise by saying that in any particular religion, it is only a professed believer in that religion who can be designated a “heretic”, indicating that the person maintains an opinion contrary to that accepted by his or her church, or rejects doctrine presented by that church.

In the Roman Catholic church a heretic is any baptized member of the church who wilfully or persistently rejects the articles of faith of that denomination.

Wikipedia spells out the difference between heresy and apostasy by indicating that heresy is any belief that is strongly at variance with established belief or custom, while apostasy is an explicit denunciation of the church’s religious principles.

As the definitions suggest, heresy cannot exist without an orthodoxy to question or to oppose. In the Hebrew scripture there is no reference to heresy, and in the New Testament the word appears only in reference to sects and factions that broke away from the original body of believers. It was only as Christianity became structured and officially recognized by existing powers that it gradually moved into what became accepted as “orthodoxy”.

It was much later that all of the Abramic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) developed their individual orthodox positions and that there was also a growing identification of the heretic as being in alliance with the devil.

The word “heresy” developed from a Greek word which originally meant “choices” or “things chosen” and eventually developed into meaning “party or school of a man’s (sic) choice”, referring to a person’s examination of various philosophies to determine how to live. Ironic to see how “choices” became “no choice” in an orthodox community.

Part 2

THE DEVELOPMENT OF ORTHODOXY

The concept of orthodoxy was not evident in the earliest days of the development of Christianity. As the Christian faith spread across Europe and Asia Minor it took on a great variety of forms depending on who was spreading the “Good News”. It was only as these forms began to compete with each other, as each proclaimed itself to be the correct version, that the concept of orthodoxy developed. Which version of Christianity was correct?

During the same time period, all versions of Christianity were under attack and it was not until the Emperor Constantine had his conversion experience that the Roman Empire withdrew its antagonism. After Emperor Constantine, in A.D 312, issued the Edict of Milan, the aggression against Christians ended and religious tolerance replaced negativity.

The first use of the word “heresy” in an official document was also instigated by Constantine in the Edict of Thessalonika of Theodosius which made Christianity the state religion of the Roman Empire. To put an end to wrangling, Constantine called a Council which enforced orthodoxy by Imperial authority, blurring the powers of church and state. One of the outcomes of this blurring was the sharing of power between the state and the church, and eventually it was the church that assumed the power of naming the heretic and introducing the death penalty as punishment for heresy.

(I am reminded of an important conversation between Alice in Wonderland and Humpty Dumpty, The conversation went something like this :

“When I use a word” said Humpty Dumpty “it means exactly what I choose it to mean”.

“The question is” says Alice, ‘whether you can make a word mean so many different things.’

“The question is,” says Humpty Dumpty “ who is the master?”)

In other words “Who has the power to name anyone a heretic ?”

IRENÆUS (A. D. 130 - 202)

The person who did the most to popularize the idea of heresy was Irenaeus, Bishop of Lugdunum, who wrote a document entitled "Against Heresy" in which he not only named all Gnostics as heretics, but he also spelled out the meaning of the word and suggested punishment for those who were labelled as heretics. He begins his treatise by writing :

"Inasmuch as certain men have set the truth aside, and living in lying words which as the apostle says, "minister questions rather than godly edification which is in the faith" and by means of craftily constructed possibilities, draw away the minds of the inexperienced and take them captives, I have felt constrained to construct, dear friends, the following treatise to counteract their malevolations."

Irenaeus, along with Clement and Ignasus, had a great influence on the development of Christian theology. As a youth Irenaeus had been influenced by Polycarp, a follower of John the Evangelist. Polycarp was one of the first Christian martyrs to be burned at the stake but Irenaeus escaped that fate and continued his work as a Christian. He is credited with being a great influence on his generation, especially because of his advocacy of the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John being accepted as canonical scripture. But it was his attack on heresy that has kept his memory alive.

Part 3

THE DEVELOPMENT OF HERESY

The history of the development of heresy and the punishment for it stretched gradually throughout the early development of Christianity culminating in the Inquisition in the

12th century. The Inquisition was an institution within the judicial system of the Roman Catholic Church, its purpose being to combat heresy and other offenders of the canon law.

Professor Teofile E. Ruiz, in his Great Courses lectures on “The Terrors of History” has identified five different types of heresy that developed during the Middle Ages:

1. Early attempts at reform of Christianity resulted in dissent. Those who were carried away by the ideas of reform often went too far for the authorities.
2. The eccentrics who were usually so isolated that they had no support for their views.
3. Those who practised some form of dualism.
4. Those who held heterodox views.
5. Those who objected to any reform.

By the end of the Middle Ages the concept and the scope of the Inquisition had been expanded because of the Protestant Reformation. By then, witches and magicians were included as heretical. (The witch craze deserves a presentation of its own.)

It is one of those ironies of history that so many of those who were punished for being Christian, became the ones who punished those who opposed it. And it was those who were called heretics who were often those who contributed most to its development. Two examples of this were Martin Luther and Galileo Galilei.

Part 4 -THE HERETICS

Martin Luther (1483- 1546)

Martin Luther was a brilliant young man who earned his Bachelors Degree after just one year of college. He had originally entered law school but changed to theology after a religious experience led him to a study of scripture. He is noted for his translation of scripture into German, and for introducing the singing of hymns into the liturgy. His marriage to Katherine von Boro also introduced the tradition of marriage within the clergy.

His greatest contribution to the Protestant Reformation, came as the result of his decision to nail his “95 Theses” to the door of Wittenberg Cathedral, making public all of his discontent with the Roman Catholic church. Others like John Wycliffe and John Hus had suggested the need for reform, but it was Luther’s dramatic act that caught the imagination of people who, like Luther, deplored the system of indulgences by which people could buy their way into forgiveness and salvation.

Luther’s act was considered heresy by church authorities, including Pope Leo X, and he was required to denounce or reaffirm his theses at the Diet of Worms. Luther apologized for the harshness of some of his writings but said he could not reject most of them. He said:

“Unless I am convinced by proofs from scripture, or by plain and clear reasons and arguments, I can and will not retract, for it is neither safe nor wise to do anything against conscience. Here I stand. I can do none other. God help me. Amen.”

Luther, who had already been named a heretic, now was declared an outlaw but before he was sentenced, he was whisked away by friends who kept him safe by protecting him in exile. He spent his time completing his translation of the Bible into the common spoken words of the Germans. His bible was published in 1534. This was followed by his books about church administration and about the Christian home. He is recognized today as a learned theologian who did not hesitate to use very earthy language and blunt truth, often without tact. For example he advised people to tell the devil to “kiss my ass.”

Luther has been criticized for his intolerant attitude toward the Jews but the records show that he originally did preach tolerance to them but grew frustrated when they did not respond to the gospels.

Martin Luther escaped martyrdom and died a natural death. His experiences and writings inspired many to accept the teachings of the Protestant Reformation.

Galileo Galelei (1564-1612)

Galileo was an Italian physicist, mathematician, philosopher and astronomer who played a major role in the Scientific Revolution. He is frequently called “The Father of Modern Science”, and, because of his support of the Copernican theory, he was frequently in dispute with the Roman Catholic Church.

Nicolai Copernicus (1473- 1543) was a Polish Astronomer, whose book, “On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Bodies”, was published as he lay on his deathbed. He wrote that the Sun and not the Earth was the centre of the Solar System. Copernicus insisted that it was not a question of the sun revolving around the earth but that the earth and all the other planets revolved around the sun. This was in contradiction of the teachings of Aristotle whose explanation of an earth centred universe had become religious dogma. Copernicus did not live long enough to see his scientific revolution result in a revolution of church teaching as well.

Galileo’s support of the Copernicus theory was the result of his observations with a new telescope through which he was able to observe the moons of Jupiter and the phases of Venus.

His publication of his observations enraged Catholic authorities and, in 1633, brought him before the Roman Inquisition, which pronounced him “gravely suspect of heresy”. He was sentenced to an indefinite imprisonment, which was later changed to house arrest under which he remained for the rest of his life.

Meanwhile the church continued to debate the question of whether the sun revolved around the earth or the earth revolved around the sun. As scientific evidence grew for a heliocentric universe, the geocentric model, supported by scripture, became suspect as far as scientists were concerned, but the church took much longer to change.

Indeed it was 1992 when Pope John Paul II made a statement which indicated that the Roman Catholic Church had turned around toward vindicating Galileo. The Pope wrote:

Thanks to his intuition as a brilliant physicist and by relying on different arguments, Galileo, who practically invented the experimental method, understood why only the sun could function as the centre of the world, as it was then known, that is to say as a planetary system. The error of the theology of that time, when they maintained the centrality of the Earth, was, to think that our understanding of the physical world’s structure was in some way imposed by the literal sense of Sacred Scripture.

In 2000 Pope John Paul II issued a formal apology for the mistakes of some Catholics in the last 2000 years of Catholic Church history, including the trial of Galileo.

Part 5

HERETICS TODAY

Today the term “heretic” is still used primarily in its religious sense, but rather than reserving it for naming those who disagree with the official doctrine of a particular church, it is more commonly used to refer to someone who does not agree with the ideas of the one who is labelling the so-called heretic. While I was Moderator of the United Church of Canada

(1986-88) I was called a heretic by many who objected to my stance on the ordination of gays and lesbians. In actual fact I was the one in tune with the recommendations of General Council on that issue. But my detractors used the word “heretic” to describe me simply because they did not agree with those who had authored the reports or who had voted for it. Because they were unaware of how little power a moderator has, and because they needed to blame someone for what they perceived to be heresy, they focussed on the one they thought did have power.

My use of the word “heretic” to describe myself and others in this group is based on the fact that we question some of the theology in “The Basis of Union” which is as close as the United Church has ever come to having an orthodox position. The Basis of Union is exactly that - the statement of the compromises that the three denominations involved in church union could accept in order to let that union happen. The mistake that has been made, and still is made by some, is thinking that the Basis of Union should be changed. It should not be so. The Basis of Union is a historic document that tells us what those who signed it believed in 1925. As such it should not be changed. But our church, through its General Council, can always issue other statements that update that belief.

The problem arises when candidates for ministry are asked as a part of their ordination vows, “Are you in essential agreement with the Basis of Union of the United Church of Canada ? ” Candidates must struggle with a definition of “essential” that lets them say “Yes” while their theological studies and their consciences are in conflict with this historic document. Over the years, since 1925, Christian theology has made many substantial changes based on developments in our social context, in archeological discoveries, in scientific advances, and other developments that impact our belief systems. Only those who can sing “Gimme that old time religion” could say “yes” to the total acceptance of the Basis of Union. Personally I know that I could never, in good conscience, answer that question in the affirmative.

John Wesley Oldham is an example of a candidate for ministry in the United Church of Canada who put his ordination at risk by being honest about his understanding of the Basis of Union.

JOHN WESLEY OLDHAM

John Wesley Oldham, as his name suggests, came from strong Methodist roots. He grew up in the United Church of Canada, as a child in Sarnia, and as a teenager in Dominion Chalmers in Ottawa. His mother Joanne was active in the WMS (Women's Missionary Society) and later in the UCW (United Church Women) . His father, Aubrey, was an active presbyter who, in 1974, nominated Wilbur Howard as Moderator, and who was himself, at one time, a candidate for Moderator.

John was active in Older Boys Parliament, a project in which Wilbur was very much involved, and John became a protege of Wilbur who urged him to enter into ministry. John became a candidate in 1960.

Through membership in Rotary International, John's father influenced him in ways that liberated him from church boundaries. John was impressed by the fact that the spokes of the Rotary wheel each represented a different religion. Many global visitors sat at the Oldham's dining room table. His mother took in boarders from varied traditions, and this meant that his spirit was influenced in international, inter-racial and inter-faith ways. Later it was readings from Ghandi and Matthew Fox that reinforced that outlook. He also became interested in politics while at university. John writes:

I got my BA.(History/Philosophy) from Carleton in 1966. And was called a Commie along with Tommy Douglas and about 20 people protesting the Vietnam War on Parliament Hill . In a couple of years there were thousands in the protest. Somehow I went through enough hoops to complete a BD, (now known as M.Div) from Emmanuel College in 1969. At U of T , I was more involved in the radical student movement than in orthodox theology, with Bob Rae as my campaign manager when I ran and lost the election for student president and so I was ordained instead.

That ordination service was like none other in the UCC. John had been married in May 1969 and had gone to Montreal/Ottawa Conference after a honeymoon in Quebec City. He had decided not to wear the Geneva gown and "dog collar" usually worn by ordinands, and chose instead to wear a suit and a turtleneck, which, for him, illustrated the slow way in which the church moved. He also chose to skip the rehearsal for the ordination, which did not endear him to the President of Conference.

He had asked Wilbur Howard to be one of those who "lay on hands" during the ceremony of ordination. When it was his turn to be questioned, he answered, not with the words printed in the bulletin, but by expressing his personal beliefs. He does not claim to remember his exact words, but as nearly as he can recall, the dialogue went like this:

Do you believe in Jesus.....? Yes, if by that you mean , he along with others like Mohammed were people of wisdom who spoke of love, peace and justice.

Do you believe in the Bible.....? Yes, if you mean by that , it along with the Koran and Hindu, Jewish and other writings contain spiritual insights.

Do you believe that you are called to ordained ministry.....? Yes, if by that you mean all people are called to ministry and the priesthood of all believers in altruistic service to all humanity.

John does not remember how he answered the question, “Are you in essential agreement.....?”, but whatever he said must have satisfied the authorities because he was called forth to be ordained. Just as the hands of the participants were ready to touch his head, a voice was heard from out in the congregation, stating an objection. When the President of Conference asked the person to state his objection, the voice said “He did not answer the questions properly as printed in the bulletin.” After a long pause the President explained that John had been interviewed by the Education and Students Committee and that it was his belief that sometimes God worked in mysterious ways.

The ordination proceeded and John was settled in Manitoba where he served a rural three-point charge for five years before joining a team ministry in Portage La Prairie for seven years, and in a suburban church in Winnipeg for 13 years.

In Winnipeg, John became intrigued with native spirituality, an interest sparked by the Oka crisis. With the help of Stan McKay, a Cree, he learned how to blend native spirituality with Christian teaching. He acquired a “spirit name” and as Owl Man Dancing, he participated in native ceremonies. In doing this he was one of a few who were taking seriously the 1986 apology to native people

Throughout his ministry, with the help of his “spirit muse”, he wrote the words for seven thousand hymns and poems. Four of his lyrics are in *More Voices*, (82;98;147;154) including “Deep in Our Hearts” which has become the “most sung” hymn in that book. It has been called the “unofficial anthem” of the UCC. He collaborated with many Canadian musicians, including Ron Klusmeier and Lori Erhardt, who wrote the music for his lyrics.

Another of his hymns, “May We Rise”, written in collaboration with Pat Mayberry, and arranged by David Kai, has been chosen as theme song for the 2014 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, celebrated around the world.

In January 1995 John moved to the church in Rama First Nations Reserve near Orillia, and

much closer to his mother's home. There he was welcomed by most of the members but not by the three most powerful women in the church, who complained to the Great Lakes Waterways Presbytery about his leadership. Not having access to the official reports and not willing to rely on rumour or innuendo, I will not comment on the details of his trial nor the treatment required by the authorities, but the end result was that John was placed on the Discontinued Service List of the United Church of Canada. This meant that he is not allowed to minister in any United Church. He felt betrayed by the church system.

At that time several people wrote to him congratulating him for being a heretic. It was another church heretic who helped him find a way to earn a living. Casey McKibbon, who was also on the United Church's DSL had become quite notorious for his organization to make public

"Clergy Abuse". He had founded what was called "All Season's Church" which was granted permission to perform wedding ceremonies and John was able to open a successful wedding business in Muskoka. He became the first to conduct a gay marriage in that district.

All of this helped him survive what he considered desertion by the church. When he was facing a long and expensive trial, he had agreed to go on the DSL because he had decided not to go emotionally and financially bankrupt. In keeping with John's considerable wit, he agreed to meet church officials to sign the documents in Barrie's Chapters book store in the section labelled "Freedom from Bondage to Organized Religion."

Meanwhile, as the story unfolded, the press and television, both local and national, made John the subject of both scorn and gratitude.
(The CBC, on Fifth Estate, called John's treatment "Dirty Church Politics").

Most of those who were subject to what was termed "clergy abuse" never could return to worship in their own faith tradition, but John and his wife, Marlene, missed what they called the "fellowship, community, koinonia" of the church. They found what they needed in a small, welcoming congregation in Winnipeg where John sings in the choir and plays the trumpet on Sundays, and both do volunteer work in the name and spirit of their congregation. Both have been more forgiving than some church officials who complained when John participated in leadership of worship one day. Their minister supported him by telling the complainers that in their church lay people often led worship.

John eventually realized that he was usually at least one step ahead of his time - both in terms of ecumenical, interfaith and inter-racial relations, and in putting into practice all that needed to be done to live out the church's apologies to aboriginal people. Like many of the heretics before him, the world of the church, over time, caught up with his vision. To what extent his own exuberant personality became a feature in all of the strained relationships

cannot be judged at a distance, but there is little doubt that John's contributions will leave a positive legacy.

Since his "defrocking" after 30 years of ordained service, John has often pondered the bittersweet irony that while he was considered unfit for ministry, his songs have been considered fit to be sung.

PART 6

CONCLUSION

It would seem that “heresy” is in the eye of the beholder, and those who name others as heretics are refusing to accept that people with theological differences can still live together if tolerance were to replace insistence on one’s own point of view.

There is an old poem, named “Outwitted”, written by Henry Markham that says

this: He drew a circle that shut me out -
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win;
We drew a circle and took him in.

The person who at one time wrote of his abandonment by the church was able, over time, to write “May we Rise”.

BETRAYED

Betrayed by a church so disunited and dysfunctional.

Betrayed by a people who I thought knew better.

Betrayed by myself and my naive hope that there is a place in the church for an outspoken prophet and a poet of challenge and change.
Betrayed by my own behaviour which antagonized some, upset others and offends those who choose to be.

Betrayed by a religious system that seems to be bankrupt of any spirituality.
Hello Judas.

MAY WE RISE

Sisters, Brothers, We are One

Words: John Wesley Oldham and Pat Mayberry. Music: Pat Mayberry.

May we rise with all creation as the spirit gives us strength.
May we heed the inner wisdom that God's loving knows no length.
May we be a faith-filled people, living out compassion's way.
May we find the heartfelt courage to embrace the dawning day.

Refrain:

May we rise ! Let the songs of love be sung.
May we rise ! Sisters, brothers we are one. We are one !

May we walk to meet the shadows of our woundedness and grief.
My we trust the Holy Spirit to bring healing and relief.
May we live with Love and justice, bring your messages of peace.
May we know the guiding power of your gift of Grace released.

Refrain:

May we reach beyond the bound'ries and the walls that do divide.
May we feel the gift of Presence in life's circle of no sides.
May we listen to Your calling, hearts be open to Your Way.
May we live as one in Christ as one people, God we pray.

Refrain

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Questions

1. Heresy is not an issue where there is no orthodoxy. Are there doctrines codified in the United Church Statement of Faith *requiring* the essential agreement of communicants?
2. Many denominational Christian orthodoxies — Roman, Eastern, Protestant or whatever — have been codified. What persistent fundamental elements of Christianity may be shared by the heretics or the unorthodox *and* the orthodox?
3. Are there believers in our congregation who are troubled by perceived heretics or apostates among us? If so, have the disagreeing parties any Christian responsibility to each other?
4. Is orthodoxy a factor that limits the effectiveness of the Church, or is some rigorously defined doctrine necessary?