



Heresy: A Spiritual Value

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I have had many highlights in my ministry, the greatest being our giving sanctuary to the Indian students, but that is closely followed by two instances of delegations approaching the Anglican bishop to demand that I be tried for heresy. I was truly disappointed when the bishop chose not to meet their demand. Their case seemed reasonable to me, but he didn't pursue it. He did not say why other than he wasn't going to muzzle one of his priests, but it wouldn't have been because he thought I was not guilty. I was. I had already eliminated the creed from the liturgy. I had mocked the virgin birth on a billboard that went viral globally. I refused to refer to the Bible as the "Word of God." I had preached a series of sermons on Jesus being just a man. I regularly preached that a bodily resurrection had not happened, which is what got Lloyd Geering tried for heresy 50 years ago this year. What more did I have to do to get tried? Oh yes, I took the bishop to the Human Rights Tribunal for discrimination against a gay man in a committed relationship who sought to be in the ordination process. But nothing worked. There was to be no trial.

I doubt I would have been quite so much in favour of being tried if heretics were still burned at the stake. In 1826, the last heretic was executed under the banner of Christianity. A trial would have been an opportunity to challenge the whole notion that heresy is contrary to the best interests of religion and its institutions. No matter how many heretics the church burned they could not stamp out the human thought and knowledge they found inconvenient. In 1615, Galileo was found guilty of heresy by the church for maintaining that the sun did not revolve around the earth. No matter how many times his works were banned, the earth still circled the sun, insolently defying church dogma. To the church's credit, John Paul II acknowledged as much in 1992, exonerating Galileo.

While heresy originally meant the act of choosing what school of philosophy a young man in ancient Greece would follow, it came to mean being any theory or belief that is strongly at variance with established beliefs and customs. By this definition, Unitarians are heretics. It is part of our DNA. Unitarians have always resisted coercion to follow the crowd. Francis David died in a Catholic dungeon for the crime of innovation, another word for heresy. Michael Servetus was burned by John Calvin in Geneva for the heresy of denying the Trinity. Numerous English heretics who had Unitarian beliefs were executed by the Church of England.

Considering our history, it is sadly ironic that Unitarians have also declared other Unitarians to be heretics. Two in particular have done more than anyone else to shape modern Unitarian thought. One is well known, Ralph Waldo Emerson—Waldo to his family and friends—and the other has by in large been forgotten by history, Theodore Parker. Both brilliant minds, they would cross the line of acceptable Unitarian theology at the time and suffered the consequences of being considered heretics.

Their story begins with Waldo. A graduate of both Harvard and Harvard Divinity School, the recently married Emerson accepted a call as a junior minister at a prestigious Boston church. Not long afterwards, his beloved wife died, creating a crisis of faith; with Waldo doubting his own beliefs. He began to disagree with the church's methods, writing in his journal in June 1832, "I have sometimes thought that, in order to be a good minister, it was necessary to leave the ministry. The profession is antiquated. In an altered age, we worship in the dead forms of our forefathers." His

disagreements with church officials over the administration of the Communion service and misgivings about public prayer eventually led to his resignation in 1832. As he wrote, “This mode of commemorating Christ is not suitable to me. That is reason enough why I should abandon it.” As Alfred Ferguson, an Emerson scholar, has pointed out, “Doffing the decent black of the pastor, he was free to choose the gown of the lecturer and teacher, of the thinker not confined within the limits of an institution or a tradition.” He would quickly put his new found intellectual freedom to the test.

In 1836, Emerson published anonymously his essay “[Nature](#)”. In this essay, he put forth the foundation of Transcendentalism, a belief system that espouses a non-traditional appreciation of nature. Transcendentalism suggests that the divine, or God, suffuses nature, and suggests that reality can be understood by studying nature.

It created quite a stir in Boston’s intellectual circles, being considered quite controversial. Perhaps to give their faculty a poke, the 1838 graduating class from Harvard Divinity School invited Waldo to give the address. They were not disappointed. On the 100th anniversary of his address John Haynes Holmes had this to say about it, “It became the sensation of the hour, and remains to this day the most important religious utterance in the history of the American people... It now ranks with the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, Washington’s Farewell Address, and Lincoln’s Gettysburg and Second Inaugural Addresses, among [America’s] great documents... Its beauty alone would guarantee its immortality. There are sentences, indeed whole passages, as noble as Plato, as familiar as Shakespeare, which have long since become a permanent part of the language of our race. But more important than the style is the content. The [Divinity School Address](#) completed spiritually and intellectually what the Declaration of Independence had begun politically. It liberated a people inwardly as they had already been liberated outwardly. For Unitarians in particular, for Christians in general... it marked... the birth of a new consciousness of thought and life.”

It was also heresy. It outraged the older generation of Unitarians as much as it delighted the young graduates, among whom was Theodore Parker. He recounted in his journal that night his experience, “He surpassed himself as much as he surpasses others in the general way... So beautiful, so just, so true, and terribly sublime was his picture of the faults of the Church in its present position. My soul is roused.”

The address began safely enough when Emerson echoed the leading Unitarian theologian, William Ellery Channing, by describing our likeness to God. affirming “the greatness of the soul, its divinity, its union with God.” The greybeards in the audience would have nodded sagely in agreement until Emerson began to extol human intuition as the true source of knowledge of moral virtue. In essence, he denied the whole concept of God as creator, and the world as “the product of his creation.” This was at a time when the Unitarian Confession began, “We believe in one God, the creator and preserver of all things.” He went on to discredit the Bible as the word of God. Truth, Emerson was saying, “cannot be received at second hand. I must find truth within myself, not from any external sources, however august and sacred, else it is of no avail.”

In for a penny, in for a pound, Emerson then went on to share his internal truth about the defects of the Unitarian church. The first was its “exaggeration of the person of Jesus.” Every man may “expand to the full circle of the universe,” and, like Jesus, become one with God. The Nazarene was not unique.” Again, in this day it was Unitarian doctrine that Jesus had been adopted by God as his son at his baptism and in the words of the Unitarian Confession, Jesus Christ was “the one Lord of the Church”. Then Emerson made a direct assault on Jesus’ miracles by saying that “to aim to convert a man by miracles is a profanation of the soul.” Miracles were not only unnecessary—they were in the way. They interfered with the fulfilment of true religion. Even Channing, twenty years earlier, had accepted the importance of miracles. The greybeards were now grumbling audibly.

Without the miracles, how could the divinity of Christ be affirmed? To accept such a notion was to pronounce the death of Christianity.

But Emerson was not finished. The second defect of historic Christianity, according to Emerson, is that it fails to use the present reality of God as “the fountain of the established teaching in society.” Men speak of “revelation as... long ago given and done, as if God were dead.” This “throttles the preacher,” who tells an old story, instead of revealing a fresh witness to himself. “The soul is not preached,” cried Emerson.

As a result of these defects, he concluded, is “a decaying Church and a wasting unbelief.” The remedy he saw in the young graduates. He issued a clarion call to them, “Wherever a man comes, there comes revolution.” “Cast behind you all conformity, and acquaint men at first hand with Deity.” “Live with the privilege of the immeasurable mind.” “See the world to be the mirror of the soul.” Horrified, the establishment denounced him as an atheist, a poisoner of young men’s minds, and a heretic. He would not be asked back to Harvard for thirty years. His response, “Do not go where the path may lead; go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.” Within forty years, Waldo Emerson’s heresies were the norm in Unitarianism, not that he particularly cared. He was devoted to his writings and lectures on Transcendentalism, which would not only shape Unitarian thought but the essence of the American character. Within the church, his mantle was picked up by one who heard him that day, Theodore Parker. He built on Emerson’s thoughts and then blazed a trail of his own.

Parker, now known as a firebrand, radical reformer, scholar, and heretic who influenced the likes of Julia Ward Howe, Louisa May Alcott, and Abraham Lincoln, was a brilliant man who read over 13,000 books, taught himself to read – in twenty languages, and could not afford Harvard, so learned the entire curricula on his own.

David Parke, in his book “The Epic of Unitarianism” writes that, “in an hour and a half Emerson had in effect demolished what had taken eighteen centuries to build and maintain – the authority of Christian faith based on the miracles of Jesus.”

David Dunn argues this slightly. “William Ellery Channing, the most respected minister in Boston and regarded as the father of American Unitarianism hinted at many of the same Transcendentalist ideas in an earlier sermon entitled, ‘Likeness to God.’

“Rather than demolish Unitarian Christianity, Emerson merely pushed it to the edge of the cliff and walked away. Later, Theodore Parker came along and kicked it over that edge all the while maintaining his Christianity and his Unitarian ministry. Unlike Emerson though, as a Unitarian minister, Parker had to face the consequences and reprisals of his colleagues.”

His road to heresy began on 19 May, 1841, three years after Emerson’s address. Parker delivered an ordination sermon entitled “[The Transient and Permanent in Christianity](#).” To illustrate the permanence of Christianity, he reflected on religion taught by Jesus and the ministry of Jesus. He then sought to illustrate the transient aspects of Christianity by showing how doctrines and beliefs can change over time. Parker saw things differently. So much differently that, many in the audience became upset with the examples he chose to illustrate this transience. Parker called into question the supposed miraculous nature of Jesus. He placed Jesus’ miracles in the transient category. By doing so, Parker was questioning Jesus’ authority.

Conrad Wright summarises Parkers’ argument: “Why should moral and religious truths depend on the personal authority of their revealer, any more than scientific truths depend on the personal

authority of the investigator who discovers them?” In other words, Gravity exists with or without Newton. Parker then went further by ‘maintaining that even if Jesus had not existed, the story, example and meaning of Jesus portrayed in the Gospels was all that was necessary for Christianity to exist. Divine living realised.’ Heresy!”

Wright states that it was said that “one person rose during the sermon and walked out; but whether this was on account of ‘a badly ventilated building, or a heresy ventilated but too well,’ one did not know.”

But after the sermon he was no longer invited to preach in Unitarian pulpits and his colleagues refused to associate with him. The few who did, lost congregants. Newspapers rejected his submissions outright. Dear friends abandoned him. His own in-laws scolded him

The Boston Association of Unitarian Ministers met on the afternoon of January 23, 1843 to hold a *de facto* heresy trial. In front of twenty of his colleagues and without support, he was faced with a barrage of questions and was called to explain himself.

One minister, Nathaniel Frothingham, stated “The difference between Trinitarians and Unitarians is a difference in Christianity. The difference between Mr. Parker and the Association is a difference between no Christianity and Christianity.”

Another of his brother clergy, Chandler Robbins, demanded, “It is his duty to withdraw from the Association. Parker refuses. Tries to explain himself and eventually bursts into tears and the meeting is adjourned.”

At the time of this heresy trial, Parker had become more famous than any of his colleagues. Several of his supporters banded together and offered Parker the opportunity to preach in Boston early on Sunday mornings. Parker agreed and crowds in excess of 2000 would routinely show up at the Boston Music Hall.

Preaching in Boston allowed him to expand his viewpoints and reach a wider audience. Parker also began to preach throughout the northern states. He began to explore ideas about America and democracy. He began to advocate social causes; for better schools, for the elimination of poverty, women’s suffrage and, most passionately, for the abolition of slavery.

To the end, he remained an outcast to the powers that be within Unitarianism. To the young, up and coming seminarians and ministers of the next generation, however, Parker was considered to be a prophetic minister of vision and action. His ministry became the blueprint for a ministry characterized by a free pulpit, a free faith and social justice through direct action.

These two heretics are my heroes and my models for spiritual leadership. Ironically, the evangelical seminary that formed me for ministry, planted the seed for my becoming a heretic. On the cornerstone of the library that I virtually lived in was the seminary motto: *Seek the Truth, come whence it may, cost what it will.* I invite you to live out your Unitarian birth right and do the same.