

An Address given on 'traditional' Trinity Sunday, 16 June 2019

HERETICS, THE TRINITY, AND ECCLESIASTICAL POLITICS...

“Heresy is a cradle; orthodoxy, a coffin”
(Robert G. Ingersoll)

“Truth is rarely simple and seldom obvious, which is why mature institutions recognise the importance of conflict and disagreement. Christianity was born in conflict, and it has been characterised by conflict ever since. The Church's obsession with heresy is witness to this fact”
(Richard Holloway)

Do you consider yourself a heretic? You should.
The ancient Greek word for ‘choice’ is the word we know as ‘heresy’.
Heretics are people of choice.

Well, that all sounds benign. But it hasn't always been the case.
Indeed, since the late second century and maybe even earlier
a more negative or sinister interpretation has been give ‘heresy’.

(What follows on Irenaeus and Arius is adapted from Paul A Laughlin's, 'Heretics or Heroes?')
The whole idea of heresy in its negative sense
gained real momentum in the writings of the first important Christian apologist,
which is to say ‘defender’ of the faith.
He was Irenaeus (ca. 202 CE), a native of Asia Minor
who became the bishop of what is now Lyons, France.

He authored a book titled *Against Heresies*,
a vigorous attack upon the perceived threat of Gnosticism
to what he regarded as orthodoxy—that is, 'right belief'.

Irenaeus' book was so influential, it virtually defined heresy
not only among his contemporary defenders of orthodoxy,
but among Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and some Protestant Christians
well into modern times, including the 21st century!

Thus, with the imposition of ‘orthodoxy’,
all teachers, particularly those with original minds,
were exposed to possible accusations of heresy.

So thanks in large part to Irenaeus, the term “heresy” has been a pejorative...
A source of accusation, an indictable charge, and an occasion for censure
or some other dire punishment, in many cases including torture and death.

Now why all this ‘trinity’ stuff amid unitarianism...
“a featherbed to catch a falling Christian” as Erasmus Darwin was want to say?

Well, in the traditional Christian calendar, today is being celebrated as ‘Trinity Sunday’.
Trinity Sunday - or as a version of the Athanasian Creed likes to put it:

“The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible,
and the Holy Spirit incomprehensible...”

It is also the doctrine around which most 'progressives' have been charged with heresy.

Now I am old enough to remember the turbulent 1960s and a couple of challenging heroes:
Bishop John A. T. Robinson and German Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner.

Both offered 'heretical' opinions on the Trinity.

Robinson said during the *Honest to God* debates:

“I was once asked a question after one of my talks: 'How would you teach a
child the doctrine of the Trinity?' It was one of the easiest questions I have ever
received. The answer was: 'I wouldn't'”.(Robinson 1967:86)

While Rahner claimed that everyday devotional beliefs of most Catholics

“would not change at all if there was no Trinity, so little does the doctrine engage their
minds”. (Freeman 2009:168)

On this traditional Trinity Sunday I don't intend to canvas the entire history of heresy.

(I could not live that long!)

So let me start with one early heretic...

Arius (256-336 CE) Alexandria

Arius, a priest in the Church of Alexandria, Egypt,
is perhaps the most famous (or infamous) heretic in Christian history.

He lived at a time in which there was probably a general census among Christians
that Jesus had been—and due to the resurrection, still was—divine in some sense,
but his precise relationship as Son to the Father,
much less to the Holy Spirit, had not yet been officially established.

Arius maintained the Son and the Father were not of the same being or substance (*homo-ousios*),
but merely of similar being or substance (*homoi-ousios*)
—a verbal difference of one Greek letter.

Called 'subordination' it was not the so-called party line.

But his view gained great popularity throughout Europe, the Middle East and North Africa
and became so controversial that the Christian Emperor, Constantine,
convened the first ecumenical council - the Council of Nicea - in 325 CE to settle the matter.

It did, by imperial legislation, and against Arius and the emergent Arianism.

He and his followers and their views were pronounced *anathema*,

which by that time meant not only 'insane and demented heretics' but dangerous.

Their books were burned. Their bishops sacked or murdered.

Their churches suppressed by military conquest.

For all intents and purposes the Council of Nicea set the stage
for an official Trinitarian doctrine: one Godhead, but three co-eternal and co-equal Persons,
under one Name.

But the real tragedy of the imposition of the Nicene trinity and its aftermath
lay in the elimination of discussion, not only of spiritual matters,
but across the whole spectrum of human knowledge.

In its place stood a decision of mind-boggling philosophical complexity
“made more bitter and intense by ecclesiastical politics”. (*Freeman 2009:66*)

Both the term ‘heresy’ and the concept it represents
have been used relatively infrequently and mostly rhetorically
over the last two centuries.

Formal heresy trials have been infrequent and, more important, non-lethal.
Infrequently yes, but declared obsolete, no.

Charles Strong (1844-1942) Australia

Rev Charles Strong came to Australia from Scotland.

For some today, Strong is regarded as the first genuine theological progressive in Australia,
with comparisons to John Shelby Spong. (*Gardner 2006*)

Ordained into the broad Church of Scotland in 1868,
his success as a pastor, preacher, liberal theological teacher and social reformer
led to his appointment as minister of Scots Church, Melbourne in 1875.

For the next eight years Strong was never far away from controversy.
He described his theology as “broad or liberal” which, he said, was
“absolutely necessary to a minister of the gospel in order to the development of a
healthy Christian life”. (*Badger 1971:51*)

Such a theology had several characteristics:

- (i) it was fluid, anti-authoritarian, “being bound by neither creed, church, dogma nor council” (*Badger 1971:237*)
- (ii) thinks of God as an indwelling, energising Spirit
- (iii) God was manifested in Humanity – Humanity was God’s ‘Son’
- (iv) love and justice were always working together
- (v) it allied itself with science, and
- (vi) it is based on human experience rather than an infallible book. (*Badger 1971:285*)

Unable to resolve differences with the Presbyterian Church,
and with the threat of a charge of heresy for
promulgating and publishing heretical and unsound doctrine hanging over his head,
Strong resigned, and immediately returned to Scotland.

On his return to Australia in 1885, he assisted in founding the Australian Church
– a free, non-sectarian, undogmatically-based religious fellowship.¹

Over the ditch 80 years later in those turbulent 1960s...

Lloyd George Geering (1918 -) New Zealand

Born in New Zealand but having lived and taught in both Australia and New Zealand,
Rev Professor Sir Lloyd Geering is best remembered for his high-profile 1967 heresy trial
within the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand.

¹ The underlying idea of the Australian Church was that it should “attempt to provide a favourable climate and a home for those who were convinced of the significance and importance of religion, but who were unable to accept the traditional formulae of the churches and a theology derived from the past”. (*Badger 1971:106*)

In several sermons preached and articles written between 1965 and 1967 Geering suggested why a new reformation in the church was overdue.

“Is the Christian faith inextricably bound up with the world-view of ancient mankind, or can the substance of it be translated into the worldview of twentieth century mankind?”

He claimed the Bible was not literally inerrant, questioned the idea of a physical resurrection, and suggested humans had no ‘immortal soul’.

Hardly revolutionary to be honest. But a veritable storm erupted.

There was an immediate outbreak of calls for his resignation or at the very least, his dismissal. So following hours of debate in presbyteries, congregations, and in national newspapers, the Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, in heresy-hunting mode, in the full glare of television cameras and journalists, and having listened to both Geering and his detractors, declared that it found “no doctrinal error has been established, dismisses the charges, and declares the case closed.”

Geering had beaten the ‘heresy’ rap much to the disgust of those who brought forward the charge. One resigned and started his own church.

The Catholic newspaper *Zealander* wrote:

‘Where does this leave the Presbyterian church now that it has sold Christianity down the River?’ (*Geering 2006:164*)

Finally, let me jump ahead 50 years to 2016, in Canada...

Gretta Vosper (1958 -) Canada

Rev Gretta Vosper is a United Church of Canada ordained minister and founding President of the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity, who, since 2001, has labeled herself a non-theist or atheist.

And this so got up the nose of several of her Toronto Conference colleagues (a second time)—who concluded she was ‘unsuitable’ to be a minister—they petitioned the Assembly asking she be examined to determine if she should continue with the status of ‘minister’ in the church.

After more than two years of arguments, meetings and newspaper articles, her ‘trial’ was set for June 2016.

The first of five questions to her were taken from the church’s ordination vows:

‘Do you believe in God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?’

Let me share some edited comments from her very lengthy response...

IF by “God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” ...

...you expressly mean the Trinitarian God, composed of three persons equal in essence, a being who presides over Earth from another realm, a supernatural one, from which it has the power to intervene in the natural world—capriciously or by design—by responding to our prayerful requests, or altering our minds and so, too, our actions... no, I do not believe in that at all...

WHAT I do believe...

...has come to me through a heritage that is rich in church and in the religious denomination into which I was born and raised. It is rooted in a family that, like many families, transmitted positive values to its children. These same positive values have also been projected by humanity, alongside

other, more dangerous values, to become the attributes of the transcendent, divine, supernatural beings we have called gods...

It does not follow, however, that supernatural beings provided the moral codes or values by which we choose to live... And there are no moral codes that have been formed by the mind of a god. Rather, there is a morality that we have created and that transcends our personal circumstances...

Well, I think you get the drift...

In the end, and after more than an estimated \$500,000.00 in costs and thousands of words written and spoken,

the church and Vosper came to an agreement where the charges were dropped.

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That our energy is ancient and original, that our atoms are ancient and original, that our carbon-based chemical skeleton was a product of a grandmother sun's alchemy, does not necessarily satisfy another aspect of our nature.

We are not only *what* we are, but *who* we are. (*Fleischman 2013:164*)

Many of us are still prepared to say we are religious or spiritual.

But not satisfied with the theology we have inherited.

Many are looking for a religion/spirituality that is Earthy.

This is how Lloyd Geering talks about such a 'spirituality'. It includes:

- * An attitude of awe towards this self-evolving universe
- * An appreciation of the living ecosphere of this planet
- * An appreciation of the capacity of the earth to regenerate itself
- * The value to be found in life, in all of its diversity
- * An appreciation of the total cultural legacy we have received from our human forbears
- * Responsibility for the care of one another
- * Responsibility for the kind of planet we pass on to our descendants. (*Geering 2009:200*)

Geering calls such spirituality 'secular mysticism'.

Another, a mentor of mine during student days, called it 'mystical naturalism'.

Of course, such a spirituality of whatever name, is heretical!

I reckon it is high time for those of us who value progressive thought and action

to reclaim the many condemned as heretics in the past (and present),

and to acknowledge them for what they really are: heroes of reason and faith.

Under different circumstances, their free-thinking might well have

enriched religion in their own day, as it may do so for us today,

as we appreciate and celebrate what they modelled:

“not only the positive role of the intellect, of doubt, of freedom of thought, and of

differences of opinion about doctrines, theologies, creeds, and other components,

but the specific questions they raised and wrestled [with] as well. In their

honor, we may want to embrace for ourselves the label “heretic” and its root

connotation of freedom of choice, especially in matters of belief, and to take up

its banner, not in subversion of the faith, but in support of it.” (*Laughlin*

2013:109)

This is why today I have chosen to call and celebrate 'All Heretics Day'.

PS: And as an aside...

If you're not worried about the fact that the Australian Federal Police spent a good portion of a week raiding journalists who'd published stories that were clearly in the public interest, then we are in serious trouble over such issues as excessive state power verses freedom of thought.

Especially anything that can be vacuumed up under the heading of "national security".

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