



HERESY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Heresy is not a word much used today. It refers to an opinion or belief contrary to orthodoxy. And orthodoxy is a word that comes from the Greek "ortho" – right – "doxia" – opinion. But in the modern world there seem few if any "right" opinions. Rather, people choose their opinions and not always by drawing reasonable conclusions from reliable facts. But most do consider their own opinions to be the only "right" ones.

A modern dictionary gives the meaning of orthodoxy as "adherence to correct or accepted creeds." Heresy, then, is contrary to what are considered "correct" or "accepted" religious opinions. But so considered by whom? By those who claim to speak for each creed or for each religious tradition. The terms "heterodox" and "unorthodox" are also used to refer to what is at odds with orthodoxy. The Catholic Church, which still maintains that it is the only authentic Christian Church, has the longest history and experience with heresy. Indeed, it may be fairly said that its insistence on specific doctrines and their details, especially that of papal infallibility, brought heresy into being in the same way that a law can make anything a crime. Had differences of opinion in Christianity been tolerated the worst result would have been a few more splinter religions besides the Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox churches. As it is, we get the saying of "an iota of difference," meaning a trivial difference, from the ferocious struggle in the 4th Century over whether the "substance" of Jesus and "God the Father" are the same or only similar. The two Greek words for this are "homoousios" and "homoiousios" which differ only by one letter. The first won out and the second, which became the heresy – known as Arianism after its chief proponent Arius – is often said to have been the worst heresy, one that supposedly endangered the very existence of Christianity.

The Vatican's preoccupation with heresy has never flagged. The official Catechism of the Catholic Church, which runs to hundreds of pages, is per-

haps the only document that authoritatively spells out in some detail what a particular religion is and requires. It states:

"Heresy is the obstinate post-baptismal denial of some truth which must be believed with divine and catholic faith, or it is likewise an obstinate doubt concerning the same;"

The news media often carries items featuring how folksy and friendly the Pope is. Seldom is it mentioned that he stands for doctrines "which must be believed" and that it is heresy even to have "obstinate doubt" about the Church's teachings. To be sure, the Catechism makes it clear that this is only if one has been baptized. But the Catechism describes other sins that apply to non-Catholics. For example, the crime of "incredulity," which "is the neglect of revealed truth or the willful refusal to assent to it." In addition, "atheism is a sin against the virtue of religion."

Protestants were no less vigorous in rooting out and destroying heretics when they rose to political power. While the Roman Inquisition burned Giordano Bruno in 1600, Calvin and his followers burned Servetus in 1553.* Calvin wrote of such matters:

"Whoever shall maintain that wrong is done to heretics and blasphemers in punishing them makes himself an accomplice in their crime ... it is God who speaks ... [and] demand[s] of us so extreme a severity ... so that we spare not kin, nor blood of any, and forget all humanity when the matter is to combat for His glory."

It should come as no surprise that the European religious wars of the 16th and 17th Century destroyed more lives and property than anything connected with the Crusades or perpetrated in modern times by Islamic extremists such as Al Qaeda and ISIS. Indeed, it was this recent history which, in the 18th Century, motivated the American innovation of separation of state and church.

Muslims, too, have and struggle against their heretics. The 1989 death sentence fatwa issued by the Ayatollah Khomeini against British-Indian writer Salman Rushdie is well known. Rushdie remains alive while Egyptian writer Farag Foda was murdered in 1992 following a similar fatwa against him by clerics at an Egyptian university. Another death sentence fatwa issued by Indian Muslim scholars remains outstanding against Bangladeshi physician and writer Taslima Nasreen. Other fatwas have been issued against the Pokemon game, TV shows, Israeli and American products, and calling for the destruction of the Egyptian pyramids and Sphinx. One fatwa issued by a Moroccan cleric pronounced it acceptable for a man to have sex with his wife's corpse up to six hours after her death. The situation with fatwas, though, is that any Islamic cleric can issue them. Nor is there a clerical hierarchy in Islam or even any authority to say who is or is not qualified to pronounce fatwas. A TV channel in India in 2008 aired a story showing respected Muslim clerics demanding and receiving cash for issuing fatwas. There are deeper divisions in Islam than these, though. The most prominent is certainly that between Sunni and Shia Muslims. Both groups regard the other as heretical.

The important thing about heresies is their diminished importance in the modern world. But perhaps more important is the lessons offered by the conflicts and violence that heresies – which is to say efforts to combat heresies – bring about. In particular, renaming orthodoxy – whether calling it sharia, “murder” of an embryo or “the gender on your birth certificate” – does little to elevate the best thinking over the worst.

* Violent Jewish suppression of its dissenters has not been practiced since Jews enjoyed political dominance in biblical times. Jesus – allegedly – was perhaps the most famous example. Nevertheless, the Jewish authorities of Amsterdam in 1656 officially excommunicated and cursed Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza.

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All NTCOF events can be found through our website calendar , or our meetup page, from which you can RSVP, at:

- www.meetup.com/church-of-freethought - JOIN THE NTCOF MEETUP GROUP !!!

Social Luncheon: Today, immediately after our Service, join us for lunch and discussion at the Jason's Deli on MacArthur Blvd just south of 635, at 7707 N MacArthur Blvd, phone (972) 432-0555.

Freethought Salon: Discuss today's service topic or other conundrums of interest. It happens most non-first Sundays of the month, over breakfast, at the Hilton DFW Lakes Hotel restaurant “The Vineyard” - inside the hotel - in Grapevine beginning 10:30 AM.

Game Night: Nearly every Friday night at the IHOP on 2310 Stemmons Trail (I-35), near Northwest Highway (Loop 12). Plan to arrive at about 7:30 PM, and stay late playing Le Havre, Carcassonne, and other fun games!

Freethought Book Club March 25, 2017 5 pm, THE CLASSIC BOOK: If You Meet The Buddha on the Road, Kill Him by Sheldon Kopp, Location: Lynda Koshy's residence at 331 Pecan Hollow Drive, Coppell, TX **Communitas Dinner Group: (To be Announced)**

Have Another Idea? Email or call! Read bulletins & presentations and post on the FORUM at www.churchoffreethought.org LIKE US at www.facebook.com/northtexaschurchoffreethought/ and sign up for our Twitter feed at twitter.com/ntcof !

PLANNED FOR NEXT MONTH:

“WHY BE REASONABLE?”

> Sunday, April 2, 2017 <

COMFORT INN DFW AIRPORT NORTH

(Take the Freeport Parkway exit, then the frontage road east just past Best Western; service starts at 10:30 but come early for coffee, snacks - you can bring some! - and conversation)

The North Texas Church of Freethought
The Fellowship of Unbelievers

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