

In Defense of Heresy

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All great truths begin as blasphemies. —George Bernard Shaw

Invitation to Worship: (Kabir)

Inside this clay jug there are canyons and pine mountains, and the maker of canyons and pine mountains!

All seven oceans are inside, and hundreds of millions of stars.

The acid that tests gold is there, and the one who judges jewels.

And the music from the strings no one touches, and the source of all water.

If you want truth, I will tell you the truth:

Friend, listen: the God whom I love is inside.

Ancient Witness: Acts 6:8, 11-12, 7:58-60

It was the summer of 1988, and I was a young pastor in the Cincinnati area. A new, controversial film, based on a book by the Greek mystical writer, Nikos Kazantzakis, called, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, was about to be released. The film, directed by Martin Scorsese, was causing a major stir, and many conservative and orthodox Christians were calling for it to be banned.

The day of the movie's premiere, it was shown in only a few cities, including the famous Biograph Theater in Chicago, where John Dillinger was gunned down by the FBI. So the Cincinnati Enquirer wanted to do a story, and they asked me and a Catholic priest if we would fly up to Chicago with a reporter to view the film and then share our reactions. I said, "Sure!"

There were T.V. reporters and police everywhere. And angry protesters lined the sidewalk and tried to block us from entering. They had signs that said, "Blasphemy!" and "Heresy!" They were shouting and jeering at us as we walked in. And I thought, "What have I gotten myself into?"

After we were seated, Oprah Winfrey, who was a Chicago icon even then, was sitting near the front, and she stood and welcomed us all.

On the flight home the reporter interviewed us, and asked how we liked the film. I gave it a thumbs up and rated it as an 8 or a 9. And I talked about the importance of using our imaginations with matters of faith.

Kazantzakis imagined a human Jesus, who struggled and was tempted not to be the Messenger of God, to have a normal life, to experience sexual intimacy, to have a family and to grow old. He shows Jesus fantasizing about this, as any human being would.

The next day they ran the story. On the front page. With head shots of me and the priest. And then the phone calls started to come. Some anonymous voices wanted to know how I could call myself a Christian minister, telling me I'm heading straight to hell for leading so many people astray. They accused me of being a heretic. It would not be the last time.

When I was a student at Calvin College, a small liberal arts school in Michigan, I remember when the editor of the school newspaper interviewed people and asked them to name their favorite heretic. Now, this was kind of a playful thing to do, since the Calvin community was part of a tightly-strung and conservative Christian Reformed Church. A couple of my philosophy professors noted that the definition of heresy is, "the formal denial or doubt of any defined doctrine of the Catholic faith," and they therefore named the venerable John Calvin, himself, the father of the reformation, as their favorite heretic! Needless to say, this irritated some of the more staid members of the community. Today, I still see heretics as the life of the party. *Without them, religious faith would surely dry up and blow away.*

Now, I need to note that this topic of heresy is not just an abstract issue for me. Over 20 years ago I was put on trial in the church courts of the Presbyterian Church (USA) for performing same-sex marriages and ordaining non-celibate gay and lesbian elders and deacons, "heresy" was actually one of the original charges against me. So I know what it's like to be formally accused of heresy. I would eventually be defrocked and lose my pastorate. Those were some very difficult years for me.

The word, "heresy," is derived from the Greek word, *hiresis*, which means "choice" or "thing chosen." And it wasn't until the creeds emerged from the great councils of the 4th and 5th centuries that an orthodoxy, defined in words and capable of being forced on believers, was widely accepted. "Orthodoxy" or "straight thinking" didn't exist until this late date. The canon itself wasn't even formed until then, either.

Scholars such as Elaine Pagels at Princeton and Karen King at Harvard, note that the early Christian communities were very diverse. The primary impetus came from Constantine, who after adopting Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire, needed uniformity so it could serve as a uniting force of the empire. So for the first three or four centuries, the Christian movement was wildly diverse. But the emperor felt that this needed to change in order to hold the nation together, and so in 325 he ordered that some bishops convene a council at Nicaea.

To call something *heresy* goes beyond merely saying something is wrong; it calls for the eradication, the elimination, and the condemnation of these things. So to talk about heresy is to purge, to remove and to purify the community from certain people who hold certain views.

G.K Chesterton described the person who "says, with a conscious laugh, 'I suppose I am very heretical,' and looks round for applause." True heresy challenges established ideas in a meaningful way and receives the wrath of those in power and control. Anything but applause. Heresy always exacts a price, and therefore, always requires courage.

Dava Sobel's book, *Galileo's Daughter: A Historical Memoir of Science, Faith and Love* (1999), is a fascinating look at the life of one of the church's most celebrated heretics.

Galileo, I should note, was a good Catholic, a man of piety. He considered heresy "more abhorrent than death itself." In 1609 he set a telescope in the garden behind his house and turned it skyward. Never-before-seen stars leaped out of the darkness.

"I render infinite thanks to God," Galileo intoned after those nights of wonder, "for being so kind as to make me alone the first observer of marvels kept hidden in obscurity for all previous centuries."

In 1610 he won an appointment as chief mathematician and philosopher and was lionized as another Columbus for his conquests. All his observations seemed to support the Sun-centered universe proposed by Nicolaus Copernicus, which had been introduced over a half century previously. And in 1616, a cardinal inquisitor warned Galileo to stop his work. The motions of the heavenly bodies, they said, having been touched upon in the Bible such as the Psalms and the Book of Joshua, were matters best left to the Holy Fathers of the Church. So Galileo obeyed the order, and for seven years he did not speak on the subject.

But in 1623, something happened. A new pope came to St. Peter's in Rome. Pope Urban VIII was an intellectual and had an interest in scientific investigation. So Galileo returned to the Sun-centered universe until the repression of the next administration.

On June 22, 1633, Galileo found himself before the Holy Tribunal, "vehemently suspected of heresy," on one of the darkest days in church history. Dressed in the white robe of the penitent, he knelt and read this statement:

I, Galileo, son of the late Vincenzio Galilei, Florentine, aged 70 years, arraigned personally before this tribunal, and kneeling before You, Most Eminent and Reverend Lord Cardinals, Inquisitors-General against heretical depravity throughout the Christian commonwealth, having before my eyes and touching with my hands the Holy Gospels, swear that I have always believed, I believe now, and with God's help I will in the future believe all that is held, preached, and taught by the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church...

I curse and detest the said errors and heresies, and generally all and every error and sect contrary to the Holy Catholic Church. And I swear that for the future I will never again say nor assert in speaking or writing such things as may bring upon me similar suspicion...

And so Galileo caves in to what must have been tremendous threats and pressure.

Similarly, in our ancient witness this morning we have the story of Stephen. Stephen also finds himself before a Holy Tribunal. The charge against him was religious innovation. He refutes this charge by showing that he was faithful to the tradition while his accusers were not.

Stephen's speech essentially says this: "You have a lot of nerve to charge *me* with violating Moses and his law—look at you! Which one of the prophets did your ancestors *not* persecute?"

Now it's important to realize that Luke was writing this story of Stephen *after* Jerusalem was defeated and the temple destroyed in the year 70. This is the speech of a persecuted church. That early community was being hunted down and scattered to the ends of the earth. And so the early church was persecuted for their beliefs.

Blasphemy and treason were the twin charges leveled not just at Jesus, but at his early followers, as well. In the gospels, Jesus is at odds with his religious environment in matters like fasting and Sabbath observance. Jesus, who thought of himself as a good Jew, challenged and replaced a system of purity with an ethic of compassion. And so Stephen, representing the early followers of Jesus, does not back down and is violently extinguished.

And in many ways, the story of Jesus and the story of Christianity is about the struggle of the Spirit of God breaking through the status quo. But there have always been and always will be powerful forces that resist change and fear what is new. There will always be, I suppose, charges of heresy.

Now, our worldview has changed from that of the biblical writers. We no longer believe in an earth-centered universe, or that women are property or derivative in status, or that slavery is justifiable as a cultural institution. *Yet, without the heresies of the past, the church would not have changed on these issues.* Today, the emerging worldview is that LGBTQ persons are not willful and threatening deviations from the norm, but naturally occurring aspects of human life. This, too, is considered heresy to some, but just as scripture does not call for an earth-centered universe, we now understand it does not condemn homosexuality and different gender expressions. As George Bernard Shaw wrote, "All great truths begin as blasphemes."

Without the brave heretics the church is doomed to become stagnant and irrelevant to our ever-evolving world. The living Word will become a dead letter if we cannot honor religious innovation. So having free thinking churches like ours is so important, and I'd like to put up a sign that says, "Heretics Welcome!"

What will be the next heresy God is calling us to, as we challenge today's orthodoxy of a Christianity merged with militarism, patriotism and capitalism? Those who fear change and do not tolerate difference will fight and resist to protect the status quo, but the Spirit calls us to think, to dream, to imagine, to risk.

Through the years I've been refining and clarifying my own heretical views: I don't believe in a God who is an omnipotent, all-powerful, supernatural being that intervenes into the course of events. I don't believe Jesus was God but rather someone who leads us to experience God. I believe that Christianity is not the only way, and there are other spiritual pathways leading us to experience the Divine. I don't believe in hell or heaven as they are typically construed. And I don't believe that prayer changes anything except the internal state of the one who prays.

By the way, in 1966 the Index of Prohibited Books, that listed one of Galileo's books, was finally abolished! And in 1992, the pope publicly endorsed Galileo's philosophy, noting, how "intelligibility, attested to by the marvelous discoveries of science and technology, leads us, in the last analysis, to the transcendent and primordial thought imprinted on all things."

In the tradition of Kazantzakis and Galileo, in the tradition of Stephen and of Jesus, himself, we have a lot to live up to!

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, also available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)