

The Art of Heresy

A Sermon Delivered on May 16, 2010
by
The Reverend Axel H. Gehrmann

*“The heresy of one age
becomes the orthodoxy of the next.”
-- Helen Keller*

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Reading: by Mark W. Harris from “Unitarian Universalist Origins: Our Historic Faith”

Unitarians and Universalists have always been heretics. We are heretics because we want to choose our faith, not because we desire to be rebellious. “Heresy” in Greek means “choice.” During the first three centuries of the Christian church, believers could choose from a variety of tenets about Jesus. Among these was a belief that Jesus was an entity sent by God on a divine mission. Thus the word “Unitarian” developed, meaning the oneness of God. Another religious choice in the first three centuries of the Common Era was universal salvation. This was the belief that no person would be condemned by God to eternal damnation in a fiery pit. Thus a Universalist believed that all people will be saved. Christianity lost its element of choice in 325 CE when the Nicene Creed established the Trinity as dogma. For centuries thereafter, people who professed Unitarian or Universalist beliefs were persecuted.

Reading: by Barry Schwartz from *The Paradox of Choice* (p. 1)

About six years ago, I went to the GAP to buy a pair of jeans. I tend to wear my jeans until they’re falling apart, so it had been quite a while since my last purchase. A nice young salesperson walked up to me and asked if she could help.

“I want a pair of jeans - 32-28,” I said.

“Do you want them slim fit, easy fit, relaxed fit, baggy, or extra baggy?” she replied. “Do you want them stonewashed, acid-washed, or distressed? Do you want them button-fly or zipper-fly? Do you want them faded or regular?”

I was stunned. A moment or two later I sputtered out something like, “I just want regular jeans. You know, the kind that used to be the only kind.” It turned out she didn’t know, but after consulting one of her older colleagues, she was able to figure out what “regular” jeans used to be, and she pointed me in the right direction.

The trouble was that with all these options available to me now, I was no longer sure that “regular” jeans were what I wanted. Perhaps the easy fit or the relaxed fit would be more comfortable. Having already demonstrated how out of touch I was with modern fashion, I persisted. I went back to her and asked what difference there was between regular jeans, relaxed fit, and easy fit. She referred me to a diagram that showed how the different cuts varied. It didn’t help narrow the choice, so I decided to try them all...

The jeans I chose turned out just fine, but it occurred to me that day that buying a pair of pants should not be a daylong project. By creating all these options, the store undoubtedly had done a favor for customers with varied tastes and body types. However, by vastly expanding the range of choices, they had also created a new problem that needed to be solved...

Buying jeans is a trivial matter, but it suggests a much larger theme..., which is this: When people have no choice, life is almost unbearable. As the number of available choices increases, as it has in our consumer culture, the autonomy, control and liberation this variety brings are powerful and positive. But as the number of choices keeps growing, negative aspects of having a multitude of options begin to appear. As the number of choices grows further, the negatives escalate until we become overloaded. At this point, choice no longer liberates, but debilitates. It might even be said to tyrannize.

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I can relate to the story Barry Schwartz tells about trying to buy a pair “regular” jeans. It reminds me of my own experience, having tried to purchase some pants, and struggling to find a pair like the one I had bought long ago. And though I was never quite as thorough and methodical as he was, I have been equally overwhelmed by the options available to me. And frustrated at the difficulty of accomplishing a task that seemed so simple: buy a pair of pants. It didn’t used to be this difficult.

I am not sure whether our experience is a sign that the world is changing, and our consumer culture is becoming more and more over-blown, confronting us with a ridiculous and ever-increasing number of choices. Or whether it is that I am simply getting older, and with every year I am less interested in endless options, decisions and choices.

So, for instance, those of you who have attended this church regularly over the past few years, you may have noticed that choosing which suit I will wear on Sunday mornings is not a decision I need to mull over. This black suit is the same one I wore last week, and the week before that, and the week before that. And the month before that, and the year before that. And with any luck, I will wear it for many years to come.

The tie I am wearing this morning, is not the same I wore last week. And it is probably not the same one I will wear next week. This is a decision that is made afresh every Sunday morning. Despite the fact that I have a sizeable collection of ties, the weekly selection is not a problem for me. You see, my wife, Elaine, picks which one I will wear. And that works just fine.

Likewise, when Elaine and I want to treat ourselves to a special evening out, and go to a fancy restaurant, maybe one of the Tapas places, where you order a whole assortment of small dishes, the best part - for me - is when I don’t even need to look at the menu. Elaine selects everything for us. From beverages and hors d’oeuvres to coffee and dessert. We are perfect a team, because Elaine really likes to choose, and I enjoy being spared the task. And, of course, because she has good taste.

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In some ways it is odd that I would be so indifferent to these choices, at this stage in my life. I am a Unitarian Universalist, after all.

For Unitarian Universalists, freedom of choice is an essential tenet of our faith. More than that, creating an environment of tolerance, and a spirit of open-mindedness that allows for a diversity of choices, has long been a key aspect of our identity and self-understanding. That’s what makes us heretics.

Many of our forebears were considered heretics by their contemporaries. Perhaps the bestknown is Michael Servetus, a Spaniard who lived in the sixteenth century, and came of age in the midst of the Christian Reformation. Servetus was a classic “Renaissance Man,” educated in a wide array of disciplines, including medicine, geography, Biblical scholarship, and theology. In his life the diverse dimensions of the Renaissance and the Reformation were blended.

As a young man, Servetus published a book entitled *On the Errors of the Trinity*, in which he sharply criticized prevailing church doctrines and church authorities. He adamantly defended his theological convictions. In the end, he remained true to his beliefs, even in the face of death. He was burned at the stake in Geneva in 1553.

In a book entitled *The Hunted Heretic*, the church historian Roland Bainton, points out that Servetus “has the singular distinction of having been burned by the Catholics in effigy and by the Protestants in actuality.”

From a historical perspective the life and death of Servetus is significant, because he embodied a critical juncture in which Christianity grappled with the issue of religious tolerance. His main legacy is the case he made for a radical religious search for truth and the right for freedom of conscience.

As scholar Marian Hillar writes, “historically speaking, Servetus died so that freedom of conscience could become a civil right in modern society.”

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The heresy of asserting the authority of conscience, freedom and self-determination in matters of religion - the heresy of saying, we each have the right to choose what we believe, defines Unitarian Universalists to this day.

And yet today, even though we may think of ourselves as radical heretics, taking these positions is not a radical heresy at all. Today, this is the status quo.

In his book *The Paradox of Choice*, Barry Schwartz describes contemporary views on religion. In his research he finds that the vast majority of Americans today don’t think of religious teachings as *commandments*, about which we have no choice, but rather as *suggestions*, which we may choose to follow, or not.

Schwartz says, most Americans see their involvement in a religious community as “an opportunity to choose just the form of community that gives us what we want of our religion. Some of us may be seeking emotional fulfillment. Some may be seeking social connection. Some may be seeking ethical guidance and assistance with specific problems in our lives. Religious institutions then become a kind of market for comfort, tranquility, spirituality and ethical reflection, and we “religion consumers” shop in that market until we find what we like... This is not surprising,

given the dominance of individual choice and personal satisfaction as values in our culture.” (p. 39)

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Sheena Iyengar is author of the recently published book *The Art of Choosing*. As she sees it, humans are uniquely attracted to the act of choosing. Neuroscience tells us, there are two distinct brain regions involved when we make choices. The first is the so-called striatum, which is buried in the mid-brain. Birds, reptiles and mammals have a similar area in their brains. Its main function is to help us evaluate the reward associated with a particular experience. This area of the brain alerts us that sugar is delicious, but that a root canal is painful. It is basically the part of the brain that makes the mental connections needed for us to want what we want, and avoid what we don't.

The second area of the brain involved in decision-making is the pre-frontal cortex. This part of the brain is associated with higher thought, with evaluating a great breadth of information, and making cost-benefit analyses about future consequences of our actions. It helps us control our most immediate short-term impulses, and determine what will serve us best in the long run.

As Iyengar puts it,

“the development of the prefrontal cortex is a perfect example of natural selection in action. While humans and animals both possess a prefrontal cortex, the percentage of the brain it occupies in humans is larger than in any other species, granting us an unparalleled ability to choose “rationally,” superseding all other competing instincts.” (p. 8)

We humans have become the dominant species on the planet, because our ability to choose well is the most powerful tool for controlling our environment. We are born with the desire to choose. Even in situations in which there is no benefit in having a choice, and in which the time and energy spent choosing is actually costly and unproductive, still we instinctively want to choose.

These biological and neurological facts of our humanity contribute both to our economic efforts to provide consumers with an every increasing array of choices, and the reality that an abundance of choices can, at times, overwhelm us, or tyrannize us.

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Sheena Iyengar was born in Toronto, Canada. Her parents immigrated from India to America in 1971, both of them are observant Sikhs, who have held onto many of their cultural and religious traditions. While growing up in America, Iyengar's parents expected her to do likewise. They taught her the value of obedience, and had her closely follow their religious proscriptions and family wishes about what to eat, wear, study, where to work and whom to marry.

As Iyengar became familiar with American society, she learned of our cultural expectations around autonomy, individualism and free choice. These were powerful new ideas for her. American notions of self-determination stood in stark contrast to the experience of her parents. But despite the many cultural and religious restrictions, which governed her parents' lives, they were not unhappy. Quite the opposite.

Later in life, Iyengar wondered whether there was a correlation between the degree of choice permitted in religious observance and a person's health and happiness. She interviewed 600 people from 9 different religions - from fundamentalist Christian to Orthodox Jew and Muslim, to Catholic and Methodist, to Unitarian Universalist.

She asked worshippers to fill out three surveys. The first asked about the impact of their religion on their life. Does it influence their daily conduct in terms of what they eat or drink or wear or with whom they associate? A second survey examined a person's degree of optimism, by asking about their response to hypothetical life crises. For instance, what would you do if you were fired from your job? Finally she had her subjects fill out a commonly used mental health survey that inquires about symptoms of depression, sleeplessness or weight loss.

After compiling the results of these questionnaires, Iyengar was surprised to learn that people from fundamentalist faiths tended to be more hopeful and optimistic in the face of adversity, and less likely to get depressed. She writes,

“Indeed, the people most susceptible to pessimism and depression were the Unitarians, especially those who were atheists. The presence of so many rules didn't debilitate people; instead, it seemed to empower them. Many of their choices were taken away, and yet they experienced a sense of control over their lives.” (p. 28)

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Today we are confronted with a mind-boggling array of choices. These choices are presented as surefire paths to happiness. But an over-abundance of choice does not necessarily lead to an over-abundance of happiness. Quite the opposite, by overwhelming us with trivial choices, we are led to lose sight of the choices that truly matter.

In our world today, asserting choice in matters of religion is hardly more radical than choosing to wear a different kind of jeans.

What distinguishes us as a religious community, is not *that* we make choices, but rather *how* we make them, and what we make choices about.

Do we spend our energies focusing on the trivial or the profound? Do we make choices that revolve only around our own personal comfort, or do our choices express a concern for the well-being of others? Do our choices revolve around our own habits of consumption and entertainment, or do they revolve around our struggles to engage meaningfully in the issues that make or break our communities, and our world.

Heresy means choosing, but it means more than that. It is the act of choosing a challenging path. It means being willing to fly in the face of convention for the sake of a deeper truth. It means being able to discern a more compelling vision of the good life, a more compelling vision of peace and justice, and having the courage to share that vision, it means daring to work to make it a reality.

The choices that truly matter are the ones that demand something of us. These are the choices that are grounded in our deepest being, and have consequences that reach far beyond the small preoccupations of our lives. The choices that truly matter are the ones that have the power to transform our lives. The choices that truly matter are the ones we will remain true to, even in the face of death.

Maybe today's heresy is not "choice," but rather challenging a culture in which our human instinct to choose, our human desire to choose wisely, has been trivialized. Perhaps today's heresy is to acknowledge that our deep human desire to choose wisely has been exploited for the sake of economic growth and manipulated for political gain.

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I am happy to forego the choice of which suit and which tie to wear. I am happy to give up the choice of which dish to order at a restaurant.

A choice I am not willing to give up, is the choice of partner with whom I will live my life. A choice I am not willing to give up, is how much time I will spend with my children, and what kind of a father I choose to be for them. A choice I am not willing to give up, is what kind of a home I want to create, and what values will guide my actions and interactions.

May we be mindful of the many choices we have,
Every moment of every day,
Through which we shape the substance of our lives.
May we be mindful of the choices that truly matter,
And may we have the vision and courage to choose wisely.

Amen.