

Heretic: 1. The holder of an unorthodox opinion in a subject, field, etc. 2. person believing in or practising religious heresy. From old French heretique from ecclesiastical Latin hereticus, from Greek haeretikos: able to choose. Canadian Oxford Dictionary

**All Heretics Day” a sermon by Rev. Brian J. Kiely
Unitarian Church of Edmonton September 14, 2008**

Growing up Irish Catholic in Montreal, I think I always knew what a heretic was. It was just sort of always there. A heretic was a bad person, someone who did not believe in the one true faith. Well, no, it was more complicated than even that. Heretics didn't include those poor benighted people in remote and faraway places who had not yet heard of the one true faith. As charitable believers we had to take their ignorance into account. Their lack of salvation was not really their fault. No, a heretic was far worse. A heretic was someone who had received the one true religion, who had been blessed in the sacraments and who had then turned their back on the one true faith and chose not to believe. Can you imagine that? A heretic lived beyond the light of Christ in what had to be a dark and terrifying place, without protection, without hope, a place where the only sound was the gnashing of teeth and the lamenting cries of the truly wretched. Oh, and all the real heretics had been cast out or burned the stake during the Inquisition anyway.

I don't remember learning those facts for they became part of me about the same time as the discovery that sunshine was warm, rain was wet and that Santa looked out for the good children at Christmas.

Fast forward to another vignette about 18 years later. I am sitting in my family's living room with Dad and his lifelong friend Fr. Matt. Word had recently gotten around that I was getting married. "And what parish does she attend?" asked Matt. "She doesn't, Father, she's a Unitarian." "Ah," he commented without rancour, "The Arian heresy!"

Of course I had no idea what he was talking about, though I recall being impressed that he knew something about this small religion. And yet, I also felt a frisson of fear. Was it possible that all the heretics hadn't been eradicated way back when? In time, I would learn that Father Matt was, as usual, correct, at least in a broad sense.

More importantly, it introduced me to the notion that this new to me religion was thought by some to be buried under that oppressive label 'heretics'.

It was years before I would become interested enough to find out about Fr. Matt's heresy comment. By then I had become a Unitarian and was contemplating the ministry.

Our opening words were the dictionary definition of a heretic. Unvarnished, a heretic is simply this: someone who makes a choice. Granted, that choice is usually to walk away from a received orthodox position of some kind, so we might add that a heretic is someone who makes a risky decision to think for themselves to, as Thoreau once said, "Follow the beat of a different drummer."

And while heretic carries heavy religious overtones, it can be more broadly applied. The same Canadian Oxford Dictionary makes it clear that 'heresy' can offend any well entrenched idea citing the example, "It is heresy to suggest that instant coffee

is as good as the real thing.”

Choosing to think for oneself. Choosing to hold a different opinion from the majority...taking the risk to express that opinion in possibly unfriendly territory, all of those are the qualities that make a good heretic.

Rev. Derek McCulloch of Christchurch, New Zealand has decided that we need a good Unitarian religious holiday and has suggested All Heretic's Day to be celebrated in August. (Crafty New Zealander, he wanted it to be a winter holiday down under). He reasoned that when you look at the line connecting our historic figures, it was their willingness to think differently and to choose to speak their minds that connects them with us. Some of our most notable Unitarians and Universalists were heretics and, I would argue, so are most of us. Let's visit with a few of them starting with Father Matt's favourite, Arius:

Arius (256 - 336) was a Christian priest from Alexandria, Egypt in the early fourth century. He appears to have been a man of personal ascetic character, pure morals, and decided convictions. One opponent of Arius, describes him as “tall and lean, of distinguished appearance and polished address. Women doted on him, charmed by his beautiful manners, touched by his appearance of asceticism. Men were impressed by his aura of intellectual superiority.”

In about the year 318, he got into a dispute with the Bishop of Alexandria, maintaining that the Son of God was not consubstantial or coeternal with God the Father, but that there was once a time, before Jesus was begotten, that he did not exist. Now at this time the Christian church was still very much in flux, doctrines were passionately held, but not yet official. The basic creed would not be formed until seven years later at the Council of Nicea.

Still, the Bishop was powerful. Arius, with some followers, was excommunicated for his heresy, but the debate continued for his ideas were popular.

At Emperor Constantine's Council of Nicea, Arius's teachings were again condemned and he was exiled. For 11 years he tried to get reinstated. He was finally called before Constantine and judged suitably compliant, whereupon the emperor ordered Arius back into communion despite the objections of his detractors. On the day before he was to be readmitted, Arius is said to have died suddenly. One opponent, described his death as follows:

“(Arius was) going out of the imperial palace, attended by a crowd of ...partisans..., attracting the notice of all the people. As he approached the place called Constantine's Forum, a terror arising from the remorse of conscience seized Arius, and with the terror a violent relaxation of the bowels: he therefore enquired whether there was a convenient place near, and being directed to the back of Constantine's Forum, he hastened thither. Soon after a faintness came over him... followed by a copious hemorrhage... so that he almost immediately died.” (I have actually edited out some of the much more gruesome details.

Not surprisingly, many believed that Arius had been poisoned. The controversy about whether God was a unity or a trinity would bubble along in Christianity for awhile, but in time the Trinity of the Nicene creed would triumph. But it is my belief that ideas are never really lost. Hundreds of years later the idea of a unitary God would re-emerge with Michael Servetus during the Protestant Reformation.

Our second heretical ancestor from those early days managed to escape the

controversies of Arius by dying almost 80 years before Nicea. Ironically he died as the result of Roman torture for being a Christian in the first place.

Origen was a scholar, theologian, and one of the most distinguished of the early fathers of the Church. He is held to have been an Egyptian who also taught in Alexandria. Using his knowledge of Hebrew, he produced a corrected Bible and wrote commentaries on all the books.

Origen's father gave him a standard Hellenistic education, but also had him study the Christian Scriptures. In 202, Origen's father was killed in the Roman persecution. Origen wanted to join his dad in martyrdom, but was stopped when his mother hid all of his clothes. Apparently dying held no fear, but walking around naked did.

He would revive a famous Christian school in Alexandria closed because of a wave of persecutions. The young teacher also visited the prisoners, attended the courts, and comforted the condemned, himself preserved from harm as if by a miracle. His fame and the number of his pupils increased rapidly.

Origen became a prolific writer and defender of the faith. He was often invited to travel and preach and root out heresies and misunderstood doctrines. In this era of doctrinal flux, there were questions about the divine nature of Jesus as we saw with Arius, but also questions about the fate of souls and the whole meaning of salvation.

Today's church teaches that some are saved and some are condemned. Origen wrote that the every soul eventually reaches God. He imagined that all creatures, even demons would, in time, be saved. In plain English, everyone gets to heaven one day. This concept is called universal salvation, the 'Universalist' part of our name. For Origen like Arius, God came first with Christ subordinate to him. His views on a hierarchical Trinity and universal salvation were later declared anathema. In other words, Origen became a heretic 350 years after he died. And how did he die?

There was a plague outbreak which took the lives of 5,000 people a day in Rome. Emperor Decius, believing the plague was a curse caused by Christians not recognizing his personal divinity, began persecutions. Origen who had escaped persecution for 50 years despite his open teaching and preaching, was swept up. He was tortured, pilloried, and bound hand and foot to the block for days. He did not die then, but two years later from his injuries. Oddly, because of the gap in time, he never achieved the status of martyr he desired. Instead he became a posthumous heretic and a philosophical ancestor of our liberal faith. I expect he would have been surprised by both these facts.

Probably our most famous martyr was a Spanish physician and theologian named Michael Servetus.

Michael Servetus was born in 1511 to a well to do family in southeastern Spain at the start of the Protestant Reformation. By the time he reached manhood, various 'heresies' would be sweeping Europe with violent repercussions. Servetus trained as a lawyer and theologian, closely related fields in those days and began taking a rational approach to the Bible and the Christian tradition. He travelled southern Europe meeting with some of the foremost liberal reformers. In 1531 he published a book called "On the Errors of the Trinity" where he argued correctly, that the whole notion of the Trinity is unscriptural and does not make rational sense. Trinitarian arguments were borrowed from Greek philosophy and not from the Bible. He called for a return to the simple and

free study of the Gospels. Here Servetus revived the debates begun 1200 years before by Origen and Arius. Not surprisingly this caused a lot of upset and he was arrested and condemned by the French Inquisition...and then was permitted to escape.

He renamed himself Michel de Villeneuve after his hometown and studied medicine in Paris. He was a gifted student and even before his colleague Vesalius, discovered the circulation of blood and oxygen in the body. His research was well ahead of its time.

But religion continued to attract Servetus and in 1551 he published another book entitled *Christianismi Restitutio*, a work that sharply rejected John Calvin's idea of predestination and the notion that God had condemned souls to Hell regardless of worth or merit. God, insisted Servetus, condemns no one who does not condemn himself through thought, word or deed. To Calvin, this book was a slap in the face. An irate Calvin sent a copy of his own book as his reply. Servetus promptly returned it, thoroughly annotated with insulting observations.

Calvin wrote to Servetus, "I neither hate you nor despise you; nor do I wish to persecute you; but I would be as hard as iron when I behold you insulting sound doctrine with so great audacity."

Their correspondences grew more heated until Calvin ended it. Whereupon Servetus bombarded him with several extraordinarily unfriendly letters. Calvin stated, "Servetus has just sent me a long volume of his ravings. If I consent he will come here, but I will not give my word for if he comes here, if my authority is worth anything, I will never permit him to depart alive."

Servetus did go to Geneva, was arrested and tried in a prosecution directed by Calvin and burned at the stake in October, 1553. His death made other reformers nervous. Perhaps Servetus's greatest social contribution came from the Toleration Debate inspired by his death. It boiled down to the single question: Why should anyone be killed over religious belief? In time all the countries of western Europe would enact legislation ensuring freedom of religion.

Well, it's easy to stand here in a Unitarian church and wag a finger and those who persecuted our ancestors and called us heretics, so I would like to close with one of many stories from our internal church history. We like to think of our faith as being progressive and accepting of new ideas. Overall we are, but change is never easy. Like any church, ours is an institution and the natural tendency of any institution is to preserve the status quo. 'Status quo' means "the way things are". The way things are can easily become a kind of orthodoxy that needs to be challenged by different kinds of heretics. Our history boasts many such figures: Henry David Thoreau who advocated for a simpler life, Theodore Parker and Susan B. Anthony who advocated civil disobedience in the fight to end slavery, and Stephen Fritchman who was hounded for his communist beliefs in the 1950s. In Canada we had Joseph Workman, who while always accepted as a Unitarian, made waves in the medical profession for his 19th century advocacy on behalf of the mentally ill. There was Emily Stowe who became the first woman physician in Canada and more recently my late friend Mark DeWolfe who became the first openly gay minister serving in a Canadian church.

But I will close with the story of one of my favourite heroic figures, Olympia Brown.

Olympia Brown dedicated her life to opening doors for women.

She was born in 1835 to a Vermont Universalist farm family. They so believed in the value of education, that her father built a schoolhouse on the farm and then rode around to neighbours raising funds to hire a teacher.

Olympia was determined to go to college and persuaded her father to allow her and a younger sister to enter Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. After an unhappy year in the rigidly Calvinistic atmosphere there, Olympia went to Antioch College in Ohio, where progressive Universalist educator Horace Mann was president. Her experience there was so positive that her family moved to Yellow Springs for all four children to get a good education.

While at Antioch, Olympia invited Unitarian Antoinette Brown (no relation) to lecture and preach. "It was the first time I had heard a woman preach," she remembered, "and the sense of victory lifted me up. I felt as though the Kingdom of Heaven were at hand." Her next step was theological school, even though they did not welcome women.

Meadville, my alma mater, said, "the trustees thought it would be too great an experiment" to admit a woman. Oberlin said she could be admitted but could not participate in public exercises. Finally, Ebenezer Fisher, President of the Universalist Divinity School at St. Lawrence University, offered her admission but added that he, "did not think women were called to the ministry. But I leave that between you and the Great Head of the Church." This, Olympia thought, "was exactly where it should be left. But when I arrived, I was told I had not been expected and that Mr. Fisher had said I would not come as he had written so discouragingly to me. I had supposed his discouragement was my encouragement."

She graduated in 1863. She had to convince many that she could complete the required course of study as well as she had. Then she had to convince the reluctant ministers to ordain her and allow her to be called to the parish ministry. Despite considerable opposition, Brown prevailed and became the first woman to be ordained to any ministry in North America.

Brown would go on to serve congregations in Massachusetts, Connecticut and Wisconsin. Of her own 20 year full-time parish career she wrote, "Those who may read this will think it strange that I could only find a field in run-down or comatose churches, but they must remember that the pulpits of all the prosperous churches were already occupied by men, and were looked forward to as the goal of all the young men coming into the ministry with whom I, at first the only woman preacher in the denomination, had to compete. All I could do was to take some place that had been abandoned by others and make something of it, and this I was only too glad to do."

During her years in Massachusetts, Brown formed friendships with leading suffragists Susan B. Anthony, Julia Ward Howe and Lucy Stone. She became a passionate advocate for women's rights even getting leave to go to Kentucky to campaign for the voting rights amendment. In that quarter year she gave 300 speeches, and while the amendment was defeated, Susan Anthony declared Brown's work a 'glorious triumph'.

When the suffrage amendment was finally passed in 1919, Brown was one of the few original suffragists who was still alive to savour the triumph. She voted in her first presidential election at the age of 85.

Speaking in 1920 on the changes that had taken place over her life, she said,

"the grandest thing has been the lifting up of the gates and the opening of the doors to the women of America, giving liberty to twenty-seven million women, thus opening to them a new and larger life and a higher ideal."

In this sermon, she also testified to the importance in her life of Universalism, "the faith in which we have lived, for which we have worked, and which has bound us together as a church. . . . Dear Friends, stand by this faith. Work for it and sacrifice for it. There is nothing in all the world so important to you as to be loyal to this faith which has placed before you the loftiest ideal, which has comforted you in sorrow, strengthened you for the noble duty and made the world beautiful for you."

Olympia Brown was a heretic in that she refused to accept the social doctrines regarding women enshrined both by her nation and by her church. But unlike Arius, Origen and Servetus, she lived to see the success of her cause.

We are the inheritors of these heresies. The choices of belief those people made created change that we now consider foundational doctrines in our faith. We can celebrate their ideas and their courage and their stubbornness, but their examples also leave us with the question: How do we stand when presented with unorthodox ideas? Are we still heretics or do we unconsciously promote our own unchallenged orthodoxies? The call from the past is to take little at face value, but to give consideration and apply thoughtful reason to any new idea that comes our way. It is not an easy challenge.