

The Heretic Next Door – May 3, 2015

by **David Green**

Some of us might not like to think of ourselves as heretics. On the other hand, some might really love to be considered heretics. But trust me, we are indeed heretics, and not merely because we've gathered together in a Unitarian Universalist church.

The label of heretic also goes for anyone who belongs to a Baptist church, or any Episcopalian. The same is true for Lutherans, Presbyterians, Methodists, members of the Eastern Orthodox Church, certain Roman Catholics, Pentecostals, Evangelicals, and progressive and conservative Christians of every stripe.

Not to burst anyone's bubble, but if you're 100% atheist, you're not really a heretic. You're a heathen. Congratulations.

There is a difference between heretics and heathens. Strictly speaking – let's say for Christians – a heathen would also include anyone who's a Jew, Muslim, Hindu, or who practices Buddhism or follows an Earth-based religion.

This can get complicated. Take me, for instance. When I consider my personal beliefs, I'm kind of a hybrid. Depending on whom you ask, I'm both a heretic and a heathen. To many Christians, I'm a heretic because I consider myself a Christian Universalist. Because I adore the Buddha and also think of myself as a humanist, those same folks would call me a heathen.

Again, my status as a heretic or a heathen – or both – would just depend on whom you talk to.

Which is the point I'd like to make today. By the way, I hope any heathens among us don't feel left out, but we only have time to specifically discuss heretics. We'll heathen things up on another Sunday, I promise.

In our cultural context, practically all of us were born into a family belonging to a particular religious tradition. Even if your family didn't attend church very much, they still probably thought of themselves as one type of Christian or another.

If you grew up in a purely secular household with absolutely no religious affiliation, you ought to appreciate how rare that is. You're very unique. Although, these days that's becoming more common.

It could also be that whatever kind of home you were born into, at some later point in time you adopted a particular Christian belief. Maybe in high school or college, you joined a youth or young adult group with friends. Or perhaps you once fell in love with a really cute Pentecostal and went to their church. It happens.

Whatever the case may be, by being here you've made something of a journey. You might continue to think of yourself as a Christian, in the same way you respond when someone asks where you were born and raised, or what you consider to be your hometown.

When people ask me that question, I always say I'm from Austin, even though I haven't lived there for almost 12 years. Nonetheless, that's my hometown.

But someone who lives in Austin today could say to me – and rightfully so – “You’re not from Austin. You’re from Amarillo.” To them, I’d be a geographical heretic.

And that’s a common way of defining a heretic. It’s someone who was once firmly located in their faith, but who’s moved and now living in another way of believing.

That’s why, among the huge array of Christian belief and expression, each group – every distinct way of believing – is going to be heretical to someone, somewhere.

That’s because many folks take for granted religious belief is not only a way of thinking about your spiritual self. Just as importantly, religion is about your distinctive beliefs comprising the one and only valid way of being spiritual.

This attitude goes way back in western civilization, and we have our old friend, the Roman Emperor Constantine, largely to thank. In the Roman Empire, religious tolerance and diversity had been a longstanding tradition. As long as your primary allegiance was to Rome, you could practice pretty much any religion your heart desired, or at least pay lip service to whatever cult was in vogue with the powers that be.

By the Fourth Century, Constantine was trying to keep the far-flung Empire firmly under his control. One of the first things he did after coming to power was to make Christianity legal by issuing the Edict of Milan. That meant Christianity was no longer a mostly unorganized movement of small groups often meeting in secret, each with their unique set of beliefs and practices. Local Christian leaders were now free to operate in the open, and consolidate their communities around their doctrines.

But now that they were in the open, the huge variety of Christian communities in Europe, Asia Minor, and Africa were constantly bickering over proper beliefs. For instance, one of the most vexing issues had to do with the true nature of the relationship between God and Jesus Christ. If the Father begat the Son, then it follows the Son wasn’t around at the very beginning of time. Or was he?

That idea was called Arianism, and it was quite divisive. Questions like that probably don’t keep you up at night, but back then the many competing ideas floating around threatened stability between different parts of the Empire.

Constantine needed uniformity with this religious group, because he knew he could use them as a kind of political glue. If they could agree on and enforce one consistent doctrine, it would go a long way toward solidifying his own grip on power.

So, Constantine convened a meeting at a lakeside resort in Turkey called Nicea. He essentially forced the Christian leaders – or bishops – from all over the Empire to come together to iron out their differences. Publicly, Constantine claimed to be a Christian. But the evidence indicates he wasn’t very religious personally, and probably could’ve cared less what the bishops came up with. After all, he was a bloodthirsty tyrant who murdered his own wife and son. His agenda had everything to do with maintaining order.

He kept the bishops under house arrest, saying, in effect, “You guys aren’t leaving here until you agree on a uniform doctrine. It’ll then be official. And it’ll have the backing of the state. Those who don’t keep in line will be heretics.”

That first council in the city of Nicea was in the year 325, but they kept holding these gatherings every so often to clarify things, like what ought to be included in the Bible. Whenever something became official doctrine, with the endorsement of the government, anyone who disagreed could be brought up on charges and usually executed unless they recanted or escaped beyond the frontier.

Even so, that didn't squash different ways of believing. Our own heretic forebears – the Unitarians and the Universalists – became underground Christian movements that didn't re-emerge publicly for another 1,200 years or so.

The important thing is the early church councils set up an expectation about religion that so many of our friends and neighbors and family members continue to cling to as a given: there must only be one true way of belief.

When I was a full time hospice chaplain, whenever we accepted a new patient I was obliged to pay them and their family a visit. I performed an initial assessment to learn if they had any religious affiliation or spiritual needs, and would try to connect them with their own church or minister or some kind of spiritual resources if they wished. I was also available to visit them, or not. It was completely up to them.

You can imagine, there was quite a bit of diversity of belief in the patients I saw: everything from Atheists to Hindus to Buddhists to Jews to every variety of Christian under the Sun. It wasn't my role to share with them my personal beliefs, but only to be a listening ear and do my best to act as a sounding board.

It also wasn't necessary for me to find common ground with them – that wasn't the point. The point was to simply hear them out and assure them that whatever they believed – if that worked for them – was great.

Although a few patients did want to know about my beliefs, sometimes as a way of deciding if I was to be trusted. One gentleman, during my initial assessment with him, told me he was a Primitive Baptist, and had no need of a hospice chaplain ever visiting him. Unless of course, I was also a Primitive Baptist. I told him I was not, and he told me in no uncertain terms that I would not be welcome again in his home.

I said that was fine, but I was also curious. I only had a vague understanding of Primitive Baptists. I asked if he would mind sharing his beliefs with me. Innocently I said, "Are Primitive Baptists anything like Southern Baptists?"

At that question, he took on the appearance of having been stuck with a hot poker. He said, "Certainly not! The Southern Baptists are not Baptists at all. They're not even Christians. They are heretics. We are the only true believers."

He grabbed a well-worn Bible and launched into a two-hour lecture – quoting chapter and verse – to explain in detail why his brand of being Baptist was the one and only valid expression of Christianity.

According to him, anyone who was not a Primitive Baptist was misguided, and doomed to an excruciating eternity in hell. A special place in hell was reserved for Southern Baptists. In fact, there were even other Primitive Baptists he couldn't be entirely sure about. The only ones he was certain were going to heaven were members of his own congregation, where he was an elder.

I asked how many members his congregation had. "Forty," he said. I said, "Just to clarify things, only the forty members of your church are going to heaven." He said, "That's right. No one else will be saved that I can be sure of."

This patient clearly thought I was too far-gone and had no hope of eternal life, and he had no interest in trying to convert me. I had been corrupted beyond repair.

At the same time, he apparently enjoyed talking with me about his beliefs, because he changed his mind about me visiting him in the future. Over the months I knew him, every visit was pretty much the same. I listened while he offered a detailed discourse on the rightness of his beliefs and how all other Christians were heretics.

That gentleman might sound a bit extreme, and maybe he was. But extreme or not, he represented a way of thinking about religion that's very common: there can only be one true way of belief, and it's mine.

It comes right out of the broader assumption that in order for any faith to be valid, every other faith must be invalid.

I've struggled with how to best respond to people who hold that position. I've had discussions or debates with people who make the exclusivity of their faith their main argument.

I've found it almost impossible to discuss religion with folks like that, so we both go away not feeling as if anything's been resolved. They continue to think I'm a heretic. And I'm genuinely sorry for them because I can't imagine how hard it must be, to be so terribly afraid of God.

I'd love to offer a magic formula: some words of wisdom we can use to convince others that there really are a lot of perfectly fine ways of being spiritual, or not. That people are good. That everyone is loved. And, "Can't we all just get along and not condemn others or think they're going to fry in hell because they were baptized by sprinkling and not by dunking?"

But I'm not that wise. All I know to do is listen, and say, "Hmm. That's fascinating." And move on.

At the same time, I occasionally catch a glimmer of hope. As we all must, my Primitive Baptist hospice patient eventually died. I went to see his wife and kids and grandkids that day to offer my condolences. I asked about his funeral because I wanted to attend. She said it would be at the Primitive Baptist Church, conducted by one of the other elders there.

She then pulled me aside and whispered, "But I don't know if I'll be going back to that church. There are fewer and fewer people there. All these years I respected my husband's faith," she said. "But I look around at all the other people in the world and wonder, 'Can everyone else really be a heretic?'"

We exist as a Fellowship to help people like her consider that very question. So that we can live in a world where no one is called a heretic, but only people who are loved, no matter what they believe.