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Claire Navarro
Denison University

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*Note to the Reader: "Heresy," in this study ,is to be understood to signify the following. Within the context of ancient Palestine, "heresy" denotes all ideologies, beliefs and practices that did not fit within the agenda of the Early Church, this agenda being the unity of doctrine, belief and institution. Within the context of the more recent present and when referred to generally, "heresy" signifies all ideologies that are perceived as unacceptable by the mainstream and arguably exclusive understanding of God's Word by Christianity today. Such "unacceptable," "heretical" ideologies are vast in number and can be identified without much imagination on the part of the reader. One ideology, for example, might be the acceptance of homosexuals into the Church and the spiritual recognition of gay marriage. In this investigation, however, when referred to generally and in the present, "heresy" was imagined to mean, specifically, all ideologies that might clash with the following verse found in John 14:6: "<u>Jesus</u> answered, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. <u>No one</u> comes to the Father <u>except</u> through <u>me</u>.'"

Today, heresy and its cousin, blasphemy, are negatively connoted and recognized. Calling someone a heretic or referring to his or her work as heresy is not only insulting, but also a strike against his or her perceived reputation, morals, and individual persona, not to mention an erasure of any and all credibility that he or she held in the past, present and would have held in the future. To condemn the opinions, beliefs and ideologies of an individual as heresy, especially publically, is to exclude this individual and his or her opinions, banishing him or her to the recesses of society. Such exile labels this individual as "contaminated," a "poor influence," a "misguided soul" and someone who should be avoided if those remaining within society wish to retain their credibility and status as 'acceptable' community members. It is perhaps this long history of social ostracism and marginalization of heretics that has caused the traditional societal and ideological exclusion of these extreme, unconventional and/or 'bizarre' individuals to be considered legitimate and acceptable in the mind of the public.

The following questions are those that inspired this study: 1a) What has been and what is considered religious heresy? 1b) Why? and 2) Ultimately, is the marginalization of those considered heretical merited, or is it *political*? When used

in this way, "political" suggests that the assigned dominance of one ideology over another is due to merely the preference and perceived authority of the group in power. In short, this study explores the development and the history of the negative, condemnatory attitude against heresy, and then considers the implications that such an exploration holds for both today's society and religious institutions. The evaluation of the presence of heresy within the history of the Christian Church in particular should be perceived not as an attack, but rather as a case study for the way in which Christianity and, even more expansively, the religions of the world, approach the topic of heresy.

To begin answering the questions that prompted the study, an evaluation of the historical evolution of heresy is needed to document any changes in the form and/or understanding of the word "heresy"; such changes may hold implications for how heresy should be understood today. In his book, *Heresy: A History of Defending the Truth* (2009), Alister McGrath, the Chair of Theology at the University of Oxford in London reveals that in the original form of the Bible, the Greek word, *hairesis*, from which the term "'heresy' is derived…originally meant an 'act of choosing,' although over time it gradually developed the extended sense of 'choice,' 'a preferred course of action,' 'a school of thought,' and 'a philosophical or religious sect'" (qtd. on 36, 37). Heresy or *hairesis* was first identifiable with the word "choice," and then later developed the denotation of a particular religious group or sect. *Hairesis* was an alternative or a "separate, identifiable [group]… [It was] clearly understood to be a neutral nonpejorative term, implying neither praise nor criticism…The term [was] descriptive, not evaluative" (McGrath 37). There was no negative stigma or connotation associated with the word. When considering the word's origins, the possibility that "heresy" prompts not condemnatory judgment, but rather describes merely that which is "different," arises. A historical example that McGrath uses to support his terminological analysis of the word, *hairesis*, is the word's use by the first-century Jewish historian, Josephus, who referred to the different branches or "groupings" of Judaism – Sadducees, Pharisees, and Essenes – as *hairesis* (37).

As mentioned by Paul D. Hanson, Professor of Old Testament at Harvard Divinity school, in his book, *A People Called: The Growth of Community in the Bible*, these three branches of Judaism where different in their approach to Scripture and their interpretation of how they had been "called" to relate themselves and their religion to the surrounding world (467); however, all *hairesis* were sects within the Hasidim (*hăsîdîm*) movement. The *Hasidim* was "a community living in anticipation of what God would do to deliver and vindicate them" (Hanson 425);

it was formed by the Zadokite priests who had been expelled from the temple by the more Hellenistic and pragmatic Maccabees or *Hasmoneans* (Hanson 346); unlike the Hasmoneans, the exiled Zadokite priests and their *Hasidim* movement was less focused on human agency and more socially, politically and economically reliant on the divine providence and intervention of God. The three different *hairesis* that developed – the Sadducees, the Essenes, and the Pharisees – were thus sects of the single, overarching *Hasidim*. "Heresy" in this context denoted merely ideological and religious differences; it did not condemn the different sects of blasphemy and it did not denounce them for holding unconventional, alternative and/or threatening beliefs.

Of the three *hairesis*, the Sadducees participated the most in Hellenized society, economy and politics. For this reason, they were the most wealthy and aristocratic of the three *hairesis*. Because they understood the Law of Torah only literally and therefore rejected the oral, more interpretive tradition of their fellow *hairesis*, their faith remained inapplicable and separate to their social, economic and political involvement in Hellenized society (Brueggemann 2; Hanson 349, 380).

The Essenes were quite the opposite of the Sadducees. While the Sadducees were the most socially immersed of the three *hairesis*, the Essenes were the most socially isolated. The Essenes perceived the surrounding Hellenized culture and "polluted" Hasmonean temple tradition as threats to the preservation of the Yahwistic Law. Because they viewed Hellenized society and the misguided practices and beliefs of the temple as a faith contaminant that would surely be destroyed upon the arrival of the apocalypse, the Essenic *hairesis* receded from society to form the secluded city of Qumran (Hanson 492). In Qumran, the Essenes interpreted the Law in isolation, becoming increasingly apocalyptic, lawfully regimented and exclusive of all outsiders not of their Essenic *hairesis* (Hanson 347).

The religiosity of the third *hairesis*, the Pharisees, was located between that of the Sadducees and that of the Essenes. Unlike the Sadducees, the Pharisees did not completely immerse themselves in Hellenized society and banish their religiosity to the private realm; nor did they, like the Essenes, abandon the increasingly Hellenized community of ancient Palestine by withdrawing completely from the boundaries of society. Rather, when interpreting the Law, the Pharisees understood their religiosity to be *in relationship* with the secular world; their religious interpretations corresponded with and adapted to the present social, economic, political and historic climate. As a result of their ability to understand and interpret their faith amidst a time of constant change (Hanson 349), the Pharisees were the *hairesis* that sustained the Israelite-Jewish tradition by evolving and renewing the

Jewish tradition, and, because of their adaptability, eventually outlasted the other two sects within the *hăsîdîm* (Hasidim).

The Sadducees eventually became so immersed in Hellenistic culture that their religiosity became secondary, fading into the background and eventually disappearing. The Essenes, on the other hand, so severely excluded themselves from the rest of society and so strictly governed themselves (i.e. their practice of celibacy, making Qumran a dying community (Hanson 372)), that they soon faced extinction, only later to be wiped out by invaders during the 70 C.E temple destruction (Hanson 378). Regardless of their interpretive preferences, all three sects – *hairesis* – were members of the overarching *Hasidim* movement, which greatly valued the Torah and the maintenance of the authenticity and survival of the Jewish tradition amidst an expanding Hellenized world and a corrupted temple.

Given that *hairesis* originally meant "sect," denoting the mere presence of differences and not the presence of delinquency within a group, and given that without such *hairesis*, particularly the Pharisees, the Jewish tradition (from which the early Christian movement was born and/or continuous with) would have disappeared, it seems that the existence of *hairesis* or "heresy" was what ensured the survival of the Jewish tradition. By allowing the Jewish tradition to adapt and evolve in a way that made it relevant and applicable to the changing times, heresy permitted the dialogue between religion and the contemporary culture of the Hellenized world, ensuring the survival of the Jewish faith and making the future birth of Christianity possible. Considering that heresy historically served a very helpful and positive purpose, it is interesting that many people today believe that heresy should be avoided, especially if one wishes to evade post-mortem damnation.

It was not until the second century B.C.E. that the previously neutral meaning of the word, *hairesis*, began to adopt a more negative connotation. With "an increasing recognition of the importance of developing and sustaining a secure doctrinal core for the maintenance of Christian identity and coherence" (McGrath 23), the developing church began to identify alternative sects and religious groups negatively and target them as threats that would sabotage its attempts at doctrinal unity. During a time when the young, developing church was trying to institutionalize, organize and identify itself, there existed the concern that "*factionalization* [was] destructive of Christian unity and encourag[ed] rivalry and personal ambition" (McGrath 37, *emphasis added*). "Factionalization" was the division of Christianity into diverse *factions* or groups, each with its own opinions on how the message of Jesus should be interpreted and applied to the present. Though the early Church wished to avoided factionalization, it was not the existence of

multiple and diverse *hairesis* or factions that was problematic, but rather it was the negative *consequences* that such diverse groups would have on the unity of the Christian church (McGrath 37). In other words, diversity was not the issue, but rather the consequences that that diversity had on the agenda and particular goals of the Church was perceived as the problem.

With the expansion of the Early Church, the negativity associated with the consequences of diversity based upon the beliefs of the particular, dominant group began to prejudice the understanding of diversity itself. With diversity or "heresy" now considered negative, there began to arise a dominant strand of thought perceived as the positive, mainstream and favored religious ideology. The idea of *orthodoxia* was born; it was the "binary opposite" of *hairesis*; the former was considered "good," the latter was perceived as "bad." While the *orthodoxia* represented order, unity and a secure identity, *hairesis* signified chaos, factionalization and a confusion and disorganization of beliefs and practices. Eventually, the manner in which an ideology or person was judged as either heretical or orthodox "began to emerge as a way of excluding certain groups and individuals from the Christian church" (McGrath 39). With the perception of diversity and its consequences as a consolidated threat, a shift in understanding occurred; rather than regarding *hairesis* as a neutral alternative and diverse ideology that could compliment and contribute to religious dialogue and theological interpretation and evolution, "*hairesis* now meant a school of thought that developed ideas that were *subversive* of the Christian faith" (McGrath 39, *emphasis added*), while the *orthodoxia* constituted "an authentic and normative version of the Christian faith" (qtd. in McGrath 39). An orthodox criteria had been formed by the Church; to deviate from the criteria – from the mainstream thought and belief – was to be *heretical* and an enemy of the Church.

In addition to the risk posed by the expansion of Hellenism and the creation of a mainstream *orthodoxia*, the increasing military threat of foreign nations caused the Early Church intensify its focus on the establishment of a secure religious identity. "The struggle for survival in a hostile cultural and political environment often led to other issues being seen as of lesser significance" (McGrath 24); the rising tension with other nations further discouraged the existence of diverse understanding and *hairesis* and increased the myopic desire to create and maintain an identity and consistent creed.   As Alister McGrath wrote,

> The rise of controversy forced increasing precision of definition and formulation. And with this increasing concern for theological correctness came an inevitable tightening of the boundaries of what was considered as authentic Christianity. The periphery of the community

> of faith, once relatively loose and porous, came to be defined and
> policed with increasing rigor…An idea [*or hairesis*] that was once re-
> garded as mainstream thus gradually became sidelined, and eventu-
> ally rejected altogether (25).

Definition and formulation were of the utmost importance; if the faith did not have these, the Early Church believed it would become exposed to outside corruption and influence. Such exposure was a dangerous consequence that could be detrimental to the survival, expansion, promulgation, and proselytizing of the new, mainstream faith tradition. Thus, the *orthodoxia* was formed to protect the integrity of the Christian identity and to provide a defined, non-diverse religious community that could unite under a single identity in the face of adversity. The *hairesis*, alternatively, were exiled and marginalized to the excesses of society.

Given, however, that the term *hairesis* began as a neutral term that merely described the differing sects within a particular tradition; and provided that it was not the *hairesis* itself that spurned the development of a negative connotation, but rather the *consequences* of the diversity implicit within the *hairesis*; and considering that the most significant early English translation of the New Testament – published in 1526 by William Tyndale (c. 1494-1536) – interpreted the word *hairesis* to mean "sect," and it was not until the 1611 King James Bible version of the Bible that *hairesis* was referred to as "heresy" (McGrath 37-38), it is appropriate to ask the following: is the negation and negative connotation of heresy today as accurate and legitimate as presently thought?

It is important to remember that though the Bible is a holy doctrine, it is also a book that, though perhaps divinely inspired, was recorded, interpreted and translated by humanity. As Miroslav Volf notes in his book *Exclusion and Embrace* (1996),

> the lure of 'mimetic realism' – the belief that [people's] statements can
> correspond exactly to reality – must be resisted; the notion that [peo-
> ple] can hold a mirror to the past and behold it in 'pure facts' must be
> rejected. What [individuals] see in the mirror of [their] reconstructions
> is the past mixed with some present, [they] will behold the other upon
> whom [themselves] are dimly superimposed (244).

With regard to the Bible, which is a literary document that contains the writings and recordings of various authors spanning a diverse chronological spectrum of ancient history, it should be understood that the Bible is not without its own biases and shortcomings. It is the product of interpretations of individuals years

and centuries before. It is a particularized interpretation by individuals located in particular places within history, with biased backgrounds and specific experiences that have conditioned their life perspective. The world and how people perceive it, record it, and act in it is all based upon personal and biased interpretation and conditioning. For example, "history is…not denied or displaced; rather, it is *interpreted*, being seen in a particular way" (McGrath 23). That which is considered *orthodoxia* is really just *interpreted* as orthodoxy.

To use the terminology of theologians Paul Tillich (*Systematic Theology* (1951)) and James Cone (*God of the Oppressed* (1997)), the "ultimate concern" (Tillich 51) and "social a priori" (Cone 40) of an individual also have much to do with the inability to remain neutral in any social or mental scenario. The "ultimate concern" is exactly what it sounds like – it is that which concerns any individual ultimately (51); it is that which is most important to an individual; it could be family, loyalty, work, money, etcetera. Given the ultimacy of the concern, the concern filters down into every aspect, idea and interpretation of an individual's life. It could be said that the Early Church's ultimate concern was to expand and to establish unity and a clearly outlined doctrine. Therefore, every decision it made was centered upon that ultimate concern; its perception of other ideas, theologies, interpretations and *hairesis*, and its judgment of those diverse theological perceptions were arguably measured against, and eventually disregarded because they did not fit with the Church's ultimate concern for unity.

Similar to an individual or institution's "ultimate concern," the "social a priori" is the life lens through which that individual or institution views the world. The social a priori is created by a mixture of ultimate concern, life experiences, and identity. Through the a priori, an interpretation is made particular and unique. Because the ultimate concern and the social a prior shape the outlook, the life perspective and "the box" from which an individual and/or institution think and understands, these two elements dictate what is accepted and what is denied by controlling the biases and particularized interpretations of that individual or institution. When such a theory is used to describe the way in which the Early Church constructed and organized the Bible and the communities it created, a ray of hope is revealed as a renewed understanding for the Early Church's categorization of *orthodoxia* and *hairesis* is realized. Heresy, particularly within Christianity, might not be as "bad" as it has been contemporarily interpreted to be; the negativity that is associated with it might rather be the result of the normalization of the biases held by the Early Church, which found heresy's diversity to be problematic and contrary to its agenda of established unity.

Considering that within every interpretation and world understanding there lives a biased, particularized belief, if such a belief is forced upon others or used to judge the alternative or "heretical," exclusion is born. In *Exclusion and Embrace* (1996), biblical scholar, Miroslav Volf, provides a tip for "enriching" one's particularized way of thinking as well as "correcting" one's perhaps exclusive view of diverse interpretations: "Enlarging one's thinking" allows one to achieve "double vision" (213). Enlarging one's thinking occurs by "letting the voices and perspectives of others especially those with who we may be in conflict, resonate within ourselves, by allowing them to help us see them, as well as ourselves, from *their* perspective, and if needed, readjust our perspectives as we take into account their perspectives" (Volf 213). In addition, double vision implies "reversing perspectives [which] may lead us not only to learn something from the other, but also to look afresh at our own traditions and rediscover their neglected or even forgotten resources" (Volf 213). By enlarging one's thinking and allowing the self to look at and consider the views, opinions and beliefs of others, rather than creating an exclusive barrier between those of different thinking, a door to diversity is opened, creating a channel through which dialogue, interaction and reasonable discourse can occur between the "orthodoxy" and those whose beliefs were previously *hairesis*.

This investigation does not wish to criticize maintain Christianity, but rather it attempts to *remind* the mainstream of the important role heresy has played in the biblical past and then, by extension, to imply that heresy might also be quite important to the present. The desired consequence of such a reminder is the following: that the religious mainstream, including but not limited to Christianity, will *consider* and *dialogue* with those who hold oppositional, "heretical" views as it remains *humble* of its own interpretative understanding and as it attempts always to adapt in way that allows it to sustain and to better understand and exemplify the Judeo-Christian core principles of *love*, *compassion* and *righteousness*.

By extension and through implication, the ultimate questions that this investigation hopes to surface in the mind of the reader are these: 1) Does the blind and dogmatic following of the orthodox, mainstream Christian belief exemplified by John 14:6 - *"Jesus answered, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'"* – lead to the automatic disregard, condemnation and/or self-righteous pity of all those who value alternative ideologies and/or heresies? And 2) Does such a disregard for those beliefs considered "heresy" juxtapose the core Judeo-Christian principles of *love*, *compassion* and *righteousness*?

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