“Following the Way Which Is Called Heresy”: Milton and the Heretical Imperative

Benjamin Myers

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John Milton is widely regarded as a forerunner of Lockean liberalism, and so of the political thought of the English Enlightenment.1 Indeed, already in 1698, Milton’s biographer John Toland had constructed a unified tradition of English liberalism running from Milton through Locke, and had exclaimed that “nothing can be imagin’d more reasonable, honest, or pious” than Milton’s advocacy of religious toleration.2

This picture of Milton as an “apostle of toleration”3 has continued to shape interpretations of his place in intellectual history. Milton is viewed alternatively as an advocate of human rights,4 as a proto-Habermasian thinker who conceptualizes the private sphere in distinction from a secular public sphere,5 and as a writer who “anticipates with a resounding magniloquence the principles of western liberalism articulated by John Locke and

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inscribed in the American constitution.”" At the same time, however, scholars continue to note the tensions and paradoxes in Milton’s writing on liberty and toleration. Thomas Corns, for instance, observes that Milton presents “soaring generalizations” coupled with “significant exceptions” regarding individuals’ right to toleration,7 while Nigel Smith notes that intolerance seems to be built into the very structure of Milton’s theory of toleration, so that the whole theory is threatened by “inconsistency.”8

But such inconsistencies cannot be ironed out, since, as I hope to show, they are fundamental to Milton’s whole conception of toleration. Far from offering a secular, rationalist theory of toleration, Milton develops a radical theological account of the relation between heresy, faith and toleration. Throughout his prose works, and culminating in the De Doctrina Christiana, he moves toward a redefinition of heresy as the underlying “grammar” of authentic faith, and as the social glue which holds together a truly free (because radically Protestant) English society. Here, the right to toleration is grounded not in human nature as such, nor in adherence to any specific confessional dogma or institution, but in the subjective practice of radical religious individualism. In Milton’s account, the universalization of “heresy” (defined as individual choice) as the basis of the right to toleration thus has as its necessary corollary the exclusion of those who refuse to participate in this social order of autonomous religious choice.

My analysis in this paper of three of Milton’s major prose works, Civil Power, Areopagitica, and De Doctrina Christiana,9 will seek to clarify both the apparently secularizing direction in which Milton takes the concept of heresy, and the radical theological basis of this secularizing move. Milton’s account, I will argue, is one in which not only the right to toleration, but also the exception which ultimately defines that right, remains grounded in a specifically Protestant-theological understanding of the nature of faith.

I. CIVIL POWER: HERESY AND TOLERATION

In February 1659, Milton published a tract against state interference with religion, entitled A Treatise of Civil Power in Ecclesiastical Causes: Shewing

7 Corns, 73.
8 Nigel Smith, “Milton and the European Contexts of Toleration,” in Milton and Toleration, 43.
That It Is Not Lawful for Any Power on Earth to Compell in Matters of Religion. This work includes Milton’s best known account of the nature of heresy—an account that is, in many respects, remarkably close to that of Locke.

Milton begins Civil Power by defining religion as whatever pertains “chiefly to the knowledge and service of God.” If that is the definition of religion, then it follows already that religion will always involve differences of opinion. The ways of God transcend natural knowledge, and so are “liable to be variously understood by humane reason.”10 From the outset, then, Milton imports the notion of diversity into the very definition of religion. His point here is not (as it is for Hobbes) that the divine transcendence relativizes all religious opinions; rather, the fact that transcendent realities are grasped by human reason means simply that God will be understood in different ways by different individuals. Thus God’s transcendent inaccessibility to “the light of nature”11 constitutes the ground of religious differences.

Still, it would be a mistake to imagine that Milton is defending religious diversity in general: his concern in this tract is solely with “our protestant religion.”12 Arguing that the authoritative function of scripture is mediated by individual conscience, he remarks that Protestant Christians “hav[e] no other divine rule or autoritie from without us . . . but the holy scripture, and no other within us but the illumination of the Holy Spirit so interpreting that scripture as warrantable only to our selves.”13 The external authority of scripture is thus accessible only to the internal illumination of the Spirit, so that no religious authority can transcend the subjectivity of the believing conscience. Indeed, Milton presses home the subjectivity of religious commitment, observing that “no man can know at all times” that he truly possesses the divine illumination and so interprets scripture correctly.14 As a result, “no man or body of men in these times can be the infallible judges or determiners in matters of religion to any other mens consciences but thir own.”15

What, then, should the state do about heresy? The word “heresy,” Milton insists, is merely a “Greek apparition.” People should not be frightened

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11 CPW 7: 242.
12 CPW 7: 242.
13 CPW 7: 242.
14 CPW 7: 242.
15 CPW 7: 242–43.
by this foreign word, but should observe “that heresie, by what it signifies in [Greek], is no word of evil note; meaning only the choice or following of any opinion good or bad.” Indeed, even the New Testament writers speak of heresy in a neutral way; for instance, in Acts 26:5, Paul says that he was a Pharisee “after the exactest heresie of our religion.” After citing this verse, Milton observes with more than a little irony: “In which sense Presbyterian or Independent may without reproach be called a heresie.” Although a significant neutralizing of the concept of heresy is implicit in this argument, Milton is not trying here to relativize heresy entirely. At this point, he is still concerned to speak of heresy pejoratively, as deviant choice. If it is true that heresy is simply the “choise . . . of one opinion before another,” it is nevertheless also true that heresy involves a wrong religious choice.

But what does it mean to form a wrong opinion in religion? Milton answers this question with characteristic emphasis on the subjective role of conscience: the wrong or “heretical” opinion is any religious opinion which rests on external authority instead of on individual conscience:

> Seeing therefore that no man, no synod, no session of men . . . can judge definitively the sense of scripture to another mans conscience . . . it follows planely, that he who holds in religion that beleef or those opinions which to his conscience and utmost understanding appeer . . . in the scripture, though to others he seems erroneous, can no more be justly censur’d for a heretic then his censurers; who do but the same thing themselves while they censure him for so doing.

Orthodox opinion, in other words, is any opinion which seems right to the individual (Protestant) conscience, so that no individual believer can be censured by another. The flipside of this, of course, is that heresy exists wherever the individual Protestant fails to follow the light of conscience.

16 CPW 7: 247. This etymological point was commonly recognized, even among conformist authors. For example, in his anonymously published work on the evil of heresy, *The necessity of heresies asserted and explained in a sermon ad clerum* (London, 1688), Samuel Hill acknowledges that the Christian use of the term differs from the word’s original use: “Heresie then, literally and generally importing Division, in Philosophy, among the Greeks, signifies the separation of Men into different Schools and Parties, upon the account of different Doctrines and Opinions, without any form of Excommunication, Exe- cration, or Extermination from common and friendly Society” (3).

17 CPW 7: 247.

18 CPW 7: 247.

“He then who to his best apprehension follows the scripture, though against any point of doctrine by the whole church receive, is not the heretic”; rather, the heretic is the one “who follows the church against his conscience and persuasian grounded on the scripture.”

In this way, Milton inverts the traditional heresy/orthodoxy nexus: those who seem to be orthodox may be the most heretical of all, while those who appear to be heretics may be the most orthodox.

In this account, what matters is not the content of religious belief so much as the concrete practice of believing. Orthodoxy and heresy are identifiable not by their doctrinal or confessional content but by their underlying epistemologies. Orthodoxy is belief that has been formed in the right way; it is a religious practice in which belief is generated from the individual Protestant conscience in response to scripture. Another person’s belief, on the other hand, may be materially identical with its orthodox counterpart, but it is nevertheless heretical if it has been formed in the wrong way, through reliance on external authority. Heresy, one might say, lies not in the what of faith, but in the how.

The immediate implication of this inversion of heresy should be plain enough: it is not Protestant sectarianism but Catholicism that constitutes the archetypal heresy. Schismatics with eccentric religious opinions may in fact be “the best protestants”; there is no limit to the range of possible opinions, since among Protestants there can be only “a free and lawful debate at all times . . . of what opinion soever.” But Catholics, in contrast, ground their belief on the testimony of the church, thus relinquishing the rule of conscience and so yielding to the practice of heresy. For this reason, Milton singles out Catholics as the only true heretics—indeed, the Catholic Church itself is precisely “a catholic heresie against scripture”:

no man in religion is properly a heretic at this day, but he who maintains traditions or opinions not probable by scripture; who, for aught I know, is the papist only; he the only heretic, who counts all heretics but himself.

Nevertheless, Milton insists that the management of heresy is a function of the church rather than the state. Heretics should be punished not by state
coercion, but by ecclesial excommunication. While still assuming that heretics should be punished, then, Milton’s proposal effectively reduces the management of heresy to zero: the only heretics are Catholics, and the only punishment due them is excommunication from the (Protestant) church. Thus in a single argument, Milton attempts both to invert the traditional understanding of heresy, and to remove heresy entirely from the jurisdiction of the state.

Notoriously, though, Milton goes on to suggest that the state should not tolerate Catholic believers. Like Locke, he offers a non-religious justification for this policy of persecution. Catholics should be persecuted not because they are heretics, but because they are “supported mainly by a civil, and, except in Rome, by a foreign power: justly therefore to be suspected, not tolerated by the magistrate of another country.” Their persecution is, in other words, “for just reason of state more than of religion.” In short, having granted civil liberty to Catholics with the right hand, Milton withdraws it again with the left. His argument here is structurally very close to Locke’s judgment that Turks “have no right to be tolerated” since they “deliver themselves up to the protection and service of another prince.” And while both Milton and Locke justify the possibility of persecution on ostensibly non-religious grounds, their respective arguments are clearly driven by specific theological commitments about the nature of faith and the relation between subjective piety and external authority—a crucial problem to which I will return later.

While Civil Power offers a subjectivized and distinctly Protestant account of heresy, Milton is still moving here within the general discourse of heresy as religious error, or (in the definition of John Owen) as “the choice or embracement of any new destructive Opinion.” As well as remaining close to this understanding of heresy as error, Milton’s position in Civil Power is strikingly close to the later Lockean theory: the sphere of religious belief is sharply differentiated from the sphere of civil power, and individual liberty gives rise to the subjective right to toleration, irrespective of whether the individual’s religious opinions are right or wrong.

Although this account of heresy is very familiar—and may justly be described as proto-Lockean—I now want to argue that, elsewhere in Mil-

24 CPW 7: 249–50.
25 CPW 7: 254.
27 John Owen, A vindication of the animadversions on fiat lux (London, 1664), 63.
ton’s corpus, there is a move toward a quite different conception of heresy. To explore this alternative version of heresy, I will turn to two of Milton’s other prose writings, one earlier than Civil Power, and the other later.

II. AREOPAGITICA: THE VIRTUE OF SCHISM

In November 1644, Milton published his famous defense of unlicensed printing, the Areopagitica. Against those who were anxious to prevent the publication of heterodox theological books, Milton offers a vigorous apologia for the value of public debate and theological diversity. Just as the human body needs exercise for health, so too, he insists, “our faith and knowledge thrives by exercise.”28 Truth can be attained only by hard struggle, and the publication of diverse and even heterodox books plays a crucial role in energizing this struggle. Thus Milton offers the judgment: “I cannot praise a fugitive and cloister’d vertue, unexercis’d & unbreath’d, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race.”29 Against such a “cloister’d vertue,” Milton himself believes that the temptation of heresy will ultimately fortify and refine Christian faith.

Further, Milton sounds a distinctive Protestant note against the mere conservation of tradition: “Truth is compar’d in Scripture to a streaming fountain; if her waters flow not in a perpetuall progression, they sick’n into a muddy pool of conformity and tradition.”30 Authentic Protestant faith thus entails constant movement which is the exact opposite of unthinking conformity. Indeed, Milton appeals to his readers’ Protestant sensibilities by observing that a Protestant who receives his beliefs from the authority of any religious institution will simply “live and dye in as arrant an implicit faith, as any lay Papist.”31 To adopt such an attitude of implicit faith—that is, to accept beliefs without having won them personally through hard struggle—is nothing less than a betrayal of the reformation. Indeed, the only way to be true heirs of the reformation is to continue the process of religious and social reform right here and now in England; otherwise, we prove that “we have lookt so long upon the blaze that Zuinglius and Calvin hath beacon’d up to us, that we are stark blind.”32 As in Civil Power, Milton thus argues here that truth is far too important to be left to the judg-

28 CPW 2: 543.
29 CPW 2: 515.
30 CPW 2: 543.
31 CPW 2: 543.
32 CPW 2: 550.
ment of any religious authority. To believe something just because “[the] Pastor says so, or the Assembly so determines,” is to be “a heretick in the truth”—in such a case, “though [a person’s] belief be true, yet the very truth he holds, becomes his heresie.”

Although the *Areopagitica* offers this provocative comment on heresy, it has much more to say about the closely related theme of schism. With the bewildering proliferation of Protestant sects in the 1640s, one of the principal arguments for the licensing of the press was the threat of schism. Milton thus trains his sights on this argument, and he seeks to undermine as sharply as possible “these fantastic terrors of sect and schism.” Scoffing at the anxiety of the bishops, he says:

There be who perpetually complain of schisms and sects, and make it such a calamity that any man dissents from their maxims. . . . They are the troublers, they are the dividers of unity, who neglect and permit not others to unite those dissever’d pieces which are yet wanting to the body of Truth. To be still searching what we know not, by what we know, still closing up truth to truth as we find it . . . this is the golden rule in *Theology* as well as in *Arithmetick*, and makes up the best harmony in a Church; not the forc’t and outward union of cold, and neutrall, and inwardly divided minds.

The logic of this argument is similar to the logic of Milton’s characterization of heresy in the same work: just as the religious conformists are the real heretics, so too the bishops who insist on institutional unity are the real “dividers of unity.” They are promoting an outward and coerced unity to conceal the reality of “cold, and neutrall, and inwardly divided minds.” The problem, then, is that the progressive advance toward truth is halted by such “forc’t and outward union.” In contrast, Milton believes that free and energetic debate will produce an authentic, inward unity, even though, externally, “there of necessity will be much arguing, much writing, many opinions.”

Milton takes his argument a step further when he claims that Christian unity subsists precisely *in* this clamour of diverse opinions. Earlier the same year, Thomas Hill had preached a sermon on religious conformity, and had

33 *CPW* 2: 543.
34 *CPW* 2: 554.
35 *CPW* 2: 550–51.
36 *CPW* 2: 554.
used the building of Solomon’s Temple as a symbolic example of the evil of schism. Citing the early Protestant theologian Peter Martyr Vermigli, Hill writes:

It is an observation of a Learned Divine, from that passage [1 Kings 6:7] while the Temple was in building, there was neither hammer, nor axe, nor any toole of iron heard in the house; that thence wee should learn, in Church affaires, in matters of Religion, to manage all with sweet peace and unanimity; That no noise of contentions and schisms (saith hee) might be heard, O that God would grant this mercy, that in his house wee might all thinke and speake the same thing.37

As Ernest Sirluck has noted,38 Milton subverts this argument by attending to the larger context of the Old Testament narrative of the Temple’s construction:

as if, while the Temple of the Lord was building, some cutting, some squaring the marble, others hewing the cedars, there should be a sort of irrationall men who could not consider there must be many schisms and many dissections made in the quarry and the timber, ere the house of God can be built.39

Further, Milton argues, even the finished building remains an artefact of irreducible difference and diversity: “when every stone is laid artfully together, it cannot be united into a continuity, it can but be contiguous in this world; neither can every peice of the building be of one form.”40 Indeed, while Thomas Hill had insisted that unity means “think[ing] and speak[ing] the same thing,” Milton declaims: “nay rather the perfection [of the building] consists in this, that out of many moderat varieties and brotherly dissimilitudes . . . arises the goodly and the gracefull symmetry that commends the whole pile and structure.”41 And changing the metaphor, he remarks that, in spite of all the differences within English Protestantism, there is a “firm root, out of which we all grow, though into branches.”42

38 CPW 2: 555 n. 244.
39 CPW 2: 555.
40 CPW 2: 555.
41 CPW 2: 555.
42 CPW 2: 556.
According to this argument, then, unity is not to be achieved in spite of differences and schisms, but precisely through the richly differentiated life of a free-thinking religious society. England’s “perfection” consists not in blandly “think[ing] and speak[ing] the same thing,” but in the “goodly and gracefull symmetry” that emerges from the co-existence of diverse sects and schisms. Such differing parties are not “continuous,” but “contiguous”: they are irreducibly different, existing side by side as the multiple components of a coherent social order. Milton’s defence of schism is thus aimed at nothing less than a reinvention of the nature of the church itself—and, subsequently, at a theological reinvention of the nature of English society. The progressive movement toward truth is not a movement toward ever-increasing sameness, but toward sharply accentuated differences of religious choice and opinion. Divergences and schisms should not be expected finally to converge into a smooth unity, but instead to come together precisely in their differences, like the complex parts of a single building.

The argument here—published fifteen years before the tract on Civil Power—moves within a framework very different from that of the later work. While in Civil Power Milton takes it for granted that schism should be tolerated as a necessary evil, here in the Areopagitica he advances an argument not merely for the toleration of schism, but for the virtue of schism. In this work, the church is envisaged as a community of schism—a community structured and defined by religious differences. The noise of religious argument and debate is thus portrayed as the sound of harmony rather than of discord; the unity of the church subsists in difference.

In the Areopagitica, Milton does not yet seek to defend heresy as such. He thinks of it here, as in Civil Power, as religious deviance (albeit one that should be tolerated). But in his depiction of the church as a community defined by schism, he anticipates a later argument, in which the concept of heresy would itself be reinvented. In one of his late prose works, Milton would come to define the Christian community as a community of heresy, just as he has here defined it as a community of schism.

III. DE DOCTRINA CHRISTIANA: THE BELIEVER AS HERETIC

Milton’s radical system of theology, the De Doctrina Christiana, was discovered in 1823 as a “complicated mess of manuscript” among Milton’s

state papers. The exact date of composition is impossible to determine, and the manuscript itself evinces an ongoing process of correction and revision, so that it is best regarded as an unfinished work.\textsuperscript{44} In any case, it is likely that Milton’s work on the theological system had largely ceased by 1665, around the same time that he finished work on \textit{Paradise Lost}.\textsuperscript{45} So the treatise’s opening epistle, which concerns us here, must have been written no more than five or six years after the tract on \textit{Civil Power}.

While parts of this Latin systematic theology are rough and fragmented, the opening epistle is a highly polished work. Characteristically, Milton takes the opportunity to present a carefully constructed authorial persona: he assures the reader that in this treatise, as in all his earlier prose, he is writing as an uncompromising champion of individual \textit{libertas}. The epistle begins with the individualistic assertion that “God has revealed the way of eternal salvation only to the individual faith of each person,” so that “anyone who wants to be saved should work out his beliefs for himself.” For this reason, Milton says, “I made up my mind to puzzle out a religious creed for myself by my own exertions,” based solely on the authority of scripture. This personal theological exercise was necessary, since Milton found himself dissatisfied with all existing systems of theology; in his opinion, “all previous writers have failed in this attempt.”\textsuperscript{46} By his own exertion and by “long hours of study” over several years, he has thus developed his own system of theology.\textsuperscript{47} Indeed, he has worked so hard and so long on this system that it has become his “dearest and best possession”—a possession that he now wants to share with the public out of sheer good-will.\textsuperscript{48}

Immediately, however, Milton anticipates the reaction against some of his unorthodox ideas. After all, the ensuing chapters of the treatise defend such opinions as Arianism, antinomianism, anti-sabbatarianism, thnetop-

\textsuperscript{47} \textit{CPW} 6: 120.
\textsuperscript{48} \textit{CPW} 6: 121.
sychism (or “soul sleep”), creation ex materia (as opposed to ex nihilo), polygamy, divorce, and the synergy of grace and works in salvation. In view of all this, Milton asks his readers to “avoid prejudice and malice,” even though “many of the views I have published are at odds with certain conventional opinions.” Just as in the Areopagitica he had argued that open public debate leads toward truth, so he insists here that his unconventional opinions cannot “throw the church into confusion”; on the contrary, open and critical discussion will lead only to ever-increasing clarity. Moreover, he appeals to the Protestant conviction that ordinary believers as well as specialists should have access to the truth: “free discussion and inquiry . . . are allowed in the academic schools, and should certainly be denied to no believer.” As usual, then, Milton is confident in the self-attesting power of the truth: “For we are ordered to find out the truth about all things, and the daily increase of the light of truth fills the church much rather with brightness and strength than with confusion.” Echoing the Areopagitica, Milton thus affirms the liberty of individual believers to assert and to discuss their own opinions. And as in Civil Power, he protests against the use of coercion in religion:

Without this freedom, there is no religion and no gospel; violence alone prevails [sine qua libertate, religio nulla, Evangelium nullum est; sola vis viget]; and it is disgraceful and disgusting that the Christian religion should be supported by violence. Without this freedom, we are still enslaved: not, as once, by the law of God but, what is vilest of all, by human law, or rather, to be more exact, by an inhuman tyranny.

While such arguments repeat themes that are familiar from Milton’s earlier prose, when he comes to the question of heresy, Milton sets off in a surprising new direction. To start with, his etymological comment on the term “heresy” is familiar enough: as in earlier works, he observes that the “invidious title” and “hateful name” of “heretic” is discontinuous with the way the term hairesis functions in the New Testament. It is therefore

49 CPW 6: 121.
50 CPW 6: 121. In contrast, many Protestant writers specifically attributed the rise of heresy to the theological ignorance of the uneducated classes. For instance, in The necessity of heresies, Samuel Hill condemns the “common People” who are led into heresy when “their ears itch after strange and empty Novelties” (26).
51 CPW 6: 121.
52 CPW 6: 123.
a “perversion of justice” when self-styled orthodox believers condemn as heretical “anything they consider inconsistent with conventional beliefs.”

In passing, Milton still concedes a pejorative sense of the term “heresy”: “nothing can correctly be called heresy unless it contradicts [the New Testament].” But then, immediately, he presses the term “heresy” in a very different direction:

> For my own part, I follow Holy Scripture alone. I follow no other heresy or sect. . . . If this is heresy, I confess with Paul in Acts 24:14: ‘following the way which is called heresy, I worship the God of my fathers, believing all things that are written in the law and the prophets’; and, I add, whatever is written in the New Testament as well. Any other arbiters or supreme interpreters of Christian faith, together with all so-called implicit faith, I, in common with the whole Protestant church, refuse to acknowledge.

In this remarkable passage, Milton offers a construction of heresy that differs fundamentally from all his earlier discussions of this theme. Here, as an introduction to his own heterodox system of theology, he seeks to reframe the discourse of heresy in a way that evacuates the term “heresy” entirely of its pejorative sense. In Civil Power, he had accepted that heresy was religious error; but here, in the De Doctrina, he takes the term “heresy” and deploys it to describe the very essence of Protestant piety itself. The pejorative connotations recede from view as the word is restored to its primitive etymology. The heretic is simply the one who chooses; and since the essence of Protestantism is individual choice, the true Protestant is the quintessential heretic.

At a single stroke, then, Milton attempts to shift the discourse of heresy in a wholly new direction, by identifying heresy with the act of individual faith. As Janel Mueller observes, Milton’s earlier depiction of “a heretick in the truth”—someone who believes the right things in the wrong way—is “paradoxically transformed from negative to positive by now overtly stressing the pre-Christian personal sense of ‘heresy’ as an individual’s free, reasoned choice.” The epistle to the De Doctrina thus presents “a resonantly paradoxical self-portrait of the true Christian as heretic.”

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53 *CPW* 6: 123.
54 *CPW* 6: 123.
therefore, it is precisely the character of the authentic Protestant to be “a heretick in the truth”—to generate all religious belief from the autonomous deliberations of illuminated reason, under the guidance of the scriptures alone. Milton is thus a heretic just as the apostle Paul was: his heresy is the choice to worship God on the basis of God’s self-revelation in scripture. Indeed, scripture is Milton’s heresy, since his choice is determined solely by this authority; thus he insists, “I follow Holy Scripture alone; I follow no other heresy or sect [haeresin aliam, sectam aliam sequor nullam].” Here, where obedience to scripture is characterized simply as one possible heresy among others, all the weight is placed on the etymology of hairesis as “choice,” so that the usual religious sense of heresy as deviant choice simply falls away.

Moreover, this transformation of the concept of heresy takes a further step when Milton invokes the “whole Protestant church” (universa Protestantium ecclesia) as the proper site of heretical belief. It is a commonplace of sociological studies of heresy that “pressures from outside and inside a group produce anxiety about criteria of belonging,” so that heresy serves the social function of marking the group’s boundary: the heretic, by definition, is the one who falls outside the negotiated boundary, and the resulting exclusion or persecution of the heretic “springs from the instinct for the necessity of group unity.” This sociological commonplace is, however, inverted in Milton’s construal of Protestantism. Milton is a “heretic” precisely because he is a member of the “whole Protestant church.” It is his inclusion in this particular social group that eliminates the possibility of religious conformity and establishes the imperative of personal “heresy.” Precisely because he is a Protestant, Milton cannot acknowledge the legitimacy of any faith except that which is arrived at independently, nor can he accept any external arbiters or interpreters of faith. To do so would necessarily exclude him from the company of authentic Protestants (and of the apostle Paul, whom he portrays here as the archetypal Protestant, and so too as the archetypal heretic).

Heresy is, one might say, the underlying grammar of Protestant discourse; it is the unifying ethos of the Protestant community. Just as Milton depicts Catholic faith as “implicit” faith—as belief divorced from choice

59 CPW 6: 124.
so he depicts Protestant faith as the unceasing movement of individual choice, and thus (in the proper sense) as heresy. In this construal, the concept of heresy is still being used to define the boundaries of Christian community. But here, the heretic is not the one outside the community, but the one inside. Simply put, the heretic is the true believer; heresy is nothing more or less than faith itself.

IV. THE HERETICAL IMPERATIVE

Whereas in Civil Power Milton presupposes an understanding of heresy as religious error, in Areopagitica and De Doctrina he begins to move language of “schism” and “heresy” in quite a different direction. First, in the Areopagitica, the concept of schism is imported into the definition of the church, so that both schism itself and the need for any state management of schism are sharply relativized. The logic of this reinvention of schism is later deployed in the De Doctrina, where the term “heresy” is pressed back to its classical, pre-pejorative sense of “choice.” The results of this move are striking. Thinkers like Locke (in England) and Christian Thomasius (in Germany) would later relativize heresy by observing that there is no objective standpoint from which one group can determine the orthodoxy or heterodoxy of another: as Thomasius writes, “each religion will be orthodox to itself, but heretical to . . . the others”60; and in Locke’s words, “every church is orthodox to itself; to others, erroneous or heretical.”61 Milton’s argument in the De Doctrina, however, is not aimed at this kind of relativization. Instead, Milton relativizes heresy precisely by universalizing it. Since the essential characteristic of religious belief is choice, it follows that all religion is heretical.

What I think Milton is aiming at here is a thoroughgoing reinvention of heresy: a construction of “heresy” as a wholly positive concept, and indeed as a moral imperative. Faith is heresy; heresy (understood as choice) constitutes one’s inclusion in the Christian community, and so also one’s right to toleration by the state. In part, Milton achieves this reinvention of heresy by appealing to a highly formalized conception of religious faith. The specific content of faith is less important than the act itself of deliberat-

61 Locke, 24.
ing and choosing between alternative religious possibilities. In this view, therefore, one belongs to the Christian community not by virtue of any specific doctrinal or confessional commitments, but through a set of practices, through an epistemology of religious self-determination in which all external authorities are rigorously questioned and critiqued.

Once this vision of the church as a community of heresy has been glimpsed, Milton expects that the need for any specific policy of toleration will simply dissolve. There is a somewhat utopian coloring to all this, in as much as Milton is untroubled by the possibility that rival Protestant communities might simply erupt into violence and chaos. But this utopian coloring is precisely the point: Milton is not trying here to recommend a policy for the prevention of violence and conflict; he is trying to reconstruct the language and self-understanding of Protestantism itself in such a way that religious violence and state persecution alike will simply be ruled out in advance. The Protestant society which Milton envisions is a society whose underlying grammar—its social glue, so to speak—is heresy. In such a society, the universalization of heresy should constitute a de facto relativization of any single group’s claim to orthodoxy vis-à-vis competing theories.

I say that Milton’s account should relativize heresy—but it is important to ask whether Milton in fact achieves the degree of religious relativization that he is pursuing. If the underlying basis of a free society is the practice of individual religious choice, what then becomes of those who refuse to engage in this practice? What becomes of Roman Catholics, who simply refuse to become heretics in Milton’s (positive) sense—that is, they refuse to make the individual conscience the locus of religious authority? In Milton’s conception of English society, such persons are clearly excluded: their refusal of individualistic choice is tantamount to a repudiation of the entire social order, so that the possibility of their toleration by the state cannot even be entertained. In other words, Milton’s relativization of heresy, if carried out as a social program, would lead to precisely the same impasse as Locke’s theory of toleration: the practice of subjective Protestant piety gives rise to the right to toleration, but the resulting construction necessarily excludes those who do not practice such piety, or who practice the wrong kind.62 For all its uniqueness, then, Milton’s reinvention of heresy finally leads to the same place as the Lockean theory. Although Milton’s concep-

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tion of society is much more radical and fissiparous than Locke’s, Milton still supplies the political architecture for his own radicalized ideal of a Protestant confessional state.

And although Roman Catholics constitute the exemplary case of a group excluded from the right to toleration, one cannot help wondering also about the place of ordinary Protestants within Milton’s schema. A prescription of faith’s radical individualism in distinction from authorities and institutions is all very well for an intellectual like Milton himself, but it is unlikely that the ordinary English Protestant would be able to measure up to these rigorous standards of individualism. One wonders whether it would have been possible for most seventeenth-century believers to engage in the kind of carefully measured deliberations and institutional critique that Milton prescribes—and, therefore, whether such persons would also fall outside the boundaries of the benevolent system of liberty and toleration. In short, Milton’s vision of the Protestant church as a community of choice begins to look suspiciously like the vision of a Protestant intellectual elite, comprising those who—“elect above the rest”—have the necessary training and leisure to construct their own individual systems of belief, and who subsequently possess the subjective right to be tolerated.

In raising these questions, I am not suggesting that Milton’s conception of toleration is merely “inconsistent,” or that his otherwise rational theory of toleration is hampered by an unfortunate remainder of religious prejudice. On the contrary, Milton’s theory of toleration is theological through and through. The right to toleration is grounded on a specific Protestant understanding of the nature of faith; and the exception to this right is inextricably connected to the whole logic of toleration. Indeed, the normative “centre” of Milton’s theory is constituted precisely by its exception, by its exclusion of certain groups who are declared incapable of moral participation in the sphere of politics, and who thus forfeit the right to toleration.

But leaving aside such critical considerations, a final question presents itself: is there not something strangely prescient—something strikingly modern—in Milton’s conception of heresy? In the De Doctrina, Milton envisages a society in which all persons ground their own beliefs on individual choice alone; a society in which choice is severed from the authoritative function of religious institutions; a society whose fundamental organizing grammar, therefore, is “heresy.” Might it be possible that this idealized

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63 See the acute analysis in Stephen M. Fallon, “‘Elect above the rest’: Theology as Self-Representation in Milton,” in Milton and Heresy, 93–116.
heretical society is in fact a distinctive Protestant anticipation of later social realities?

In his famous 1979 work on *The Heretical Imperative*, the sociologist of religion Peter Berger characterized modernity as the social universalization of heresy. Admittedly Berger’s schematic depiction of a transition from “premodernity” to a unified epoch of “modernity” cannot be taken too seriously; but his argument nevertheless casts a suggestive light on the reinvention of heresy that we have been considering here. Berger argues that the proliferation of choice and the inescapable necessity of choosing form the very “fabric” of modernity.64 Whereas in premodern societies, heresy was a deviation from more general situations of religious certainty, in modernity, heresy has become an “imperative”: it is no longer merely a possibility, but a social necessity.65 According to Berger, the “heretical imperative” is therefore “a root phenomenon of modernity.” While heresy had once been “the occupation of marginal and eccentric types,” it has now become one of the basic conditions of life: “heresy has become universalized.”66 Summarizing Berger’s interpretation, Jacques Berlinerblau thus observes that “modernity itself is predicated on the heretical ethos,” since “modernity makes choice the currency of all social existence.”67

Is this not precisely the kind of situation that Milton envisages when he universalizes heresy and makes it constitutive of all religious belief? If so, one could conclude that Milton’s conception of heresy in fact points toward modern social realities in a way that is even more striking and more remarkable than the influential Lockean theory of toleration. If Milton wanted England to become a society whose currency was individual choice, then we might say he got what he wanted. Indeed, we might conclude that the emergence of a certain kind of “modernity” is precisely the social implementation of this theological drive toward choice (*hairesis*). It is the elimination of the possibility of heresy (*qua error*) through the universalization of heresy (*qua choice*). It is, therefore, the overcoming of heresy by the “heretical imperative.”

The strikingly “modern” dimension of Milton’s thought, then, is not any movement toward a non-religious secularization of politics. It is rather a profound *theologizing* impulse—the impulse to re-imagine and reinvent

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65 Berger, 28.

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entire social orders theologically. And so, while many historical narratives portray the Enlightenment as a fundamental break with religion, in Milton’s work the turn toward modernity appears not as a turn from religion to the secular, but precisely as the radical (and radically Protestant) reinvention of religion itself.

The University of Queensland.