

Heresy, heretics and wise choices in beliefs



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

It seems a good time to revisit the concept of heresy and the often accusatory word, "heretic."

("Heretic!" is often used like a weapon). I raise the subject because I was called a heretic twice this week, in response to my writings.

In reply to one apparently upset reader, I wrote: "I have always considered it a compliment to be called a heretic. Jesus himself was a heretic. The word comes from a Greek word meaning "able to choose." One definition of heretic is: "a person holding an opinion at odds with what is generally accepted." I'll proudly stand with those who make rational choices about what to believe or

not believe, and with those who hold unpopular opinions."

In the exchange with another agitated reader, I replied: "Technically, I'm not a "heretic," since I am no longer a Christian. It would be more accurate to say I am an "infidel" or "apostate." This person had written to accuse me of "doing the devil's work." With a touch of humor, I replied: "I'm not sure the devil would like the fact that I write so much about religion, faith and God. For what it's worth, I have many friends and family who are very good Christians."

Then the same reader "invited" me to "repent." Repentance is another of those ancient terms that should be reconsidered. In the Bible, to repent literally means to "change one's mind," to turn from a life of sin (separation from God) to a faithful life united with God. As the dictionary definition states, to repent means to: "feel or express sincere regret or remorse about one's wrongdoing or

sin." There are many assumptions here. What if you don't believe in "sin"? What if you don't believe in God, or at least the God of the Bible? What if you don't think you've done anything so bad to separate you from God, or set yourself up for divine punishment?

There are many assumptions behind these judgments and finger-pointing. One assumption is that a person who chooses to express an unusual viewpoint is somehow a lost sinner who needs to "turn back" to ... the "correct faith." As I see it, Jesus was indeed a heretic in the Jewish tradition. He pushed, and perhaps broke, the boundaries of orthodox faith. Muhammad was a heretic in his tribal tradition. Buddha was a heretic in his Hindu tradition. Martin Luther was a heretic in his Catholic tradition. Baruch Spinoza was a heretic in his Jewish faith. Thomas Paine was a heretic in his Quaker tradition. And on and on. Therefore, we

might consider being called a heretic—accused of heresy—a badge of honor, to stand beside all these innovative thinkers who broke with tradition in various ways. They challenged "correct" ways of believing and practicing faith.

Throughout Christian history, too many have suffered and died for expressing views judged heretical by the standards as interpreted by religious authorities.

We might bear in mind that Jesus spent a great deal of time and energy exposing the hypocrisy of respected religious teachers. So why is it people become so agitated by those of us who question or critique "the faith"? I suppose the answer is in the question. What is "the faith"? Not surprisingly: Faith is faith as they define it. And, of course, God is the God they believe in. The Bible is the book as they interpret it.

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And so forth.

Those of us who are rather comfortable with the “heretic” label, are not afraid of engaging “true believers” since we seek to unpack the claims they make: “The Bible says...” “Jesus said...”

“God wants you to...” All of these statements leave wide open the opportunity to question why people believe one view and judge all the rest heretical. One major problem that arises through history is what happens to heretics? How do the powerful “defenders of the faith” respond to anyone challenging their authority or questioning their traditions? We have seen threats or actual violence in the effort to silence perceived heresy.

Again and again, many resist learning the lesson: you cannot shut down another person’s rational ability to make wise choices, or silence them from speaking with a free conscience.

Heretics and their heresies have the infuriating habit of resurrecting, embodied in new people, new minds. It’s almost humorous to watch the extent the powerful will go to in their feeble attempts to damn those who are “able to

choose” liberating ways of thinking and believing. One generation’s heresies can generate the next generation’s fresh heresy. I don’t think it’s an exaggeration to say the history of religion can be understood as a struggle between heresies.

Though heretics can be disruptive, and some see them as dangerous, we need heretics.