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What is Heresy?, 1923.



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LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER.

SUBJECT: WHAT IS HERESY?

AT THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING.

MARCH 11, 1923, CLEVELAND, O.

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JOSEPH T. KRAUS  
Shorthand  
Reporter  
CLEVELAND



There was a considerable theologic flare-up recently in one of the more fashionable of Christian demominations. A minister had provoked the apostolic wrath of his superior by the expression of certain unorthodox views, and there were charges of heresy and a great commotion ensued. To one who is not a member of that particular faith the particular matter at issue is of little concern. What does interest one is the popular reaction to that incident--the side-lights which that incident throws upon contemporaneous thought.

This thing stands out rather clearly: that theologic disputations are not yet a thing of the past; that people have not yet lost their interest in them. If the newspapers are true barometers of popular taste, then theology is still potent enough to intrigue the tastes of the masses; for very few things have claimed and commanded so much front page publicity and so many columns of copy as this heresy charge.

Of course theology is not yet religion, and yet if people were not religiously minded they would not be interested in theologic discussions. I think one may safely conclude from this particular incident, as well as from others, that the American people are very religiously minded. Such a thing could not occur, for example, in France, because the masses are not at all attracted by theology or theologic conflicts. That is one interesting commentary.



And there is another: popular sentiment was decidedly with the man accused of heresy. And that is significant, because it was not always so. We are sometimes tempted to believe that heresy-hunting is the prerogative of ecclesiastics, that only priests, the clergy, are interested; and yet it is a rather saddening and disillusioning fact, which one gleans from reading the history of the past, that the masses, the so-called common people, make more zealous and more insistent and more relentless persecutors of heretics and heresy than even priests; and very often we find the masses goading on the more tolerant and more reluctant priests. In its career of heresy-hunting the church could always count on the masses. Orthodoxy could always lean upon popular support.

But in 1923 things are quite different. Orthodoxy seems to have fallen upon very evil times indeed. It can no longer command popular enthusiasm, and that is a sign of bankruptcy. The heretic is surrounded in the popular mind with a halo of courage and daring, with the magnificent abandon of the radical and revolutionary. He is decidedly a popular hero today, and he speaks in terms which appeal to the popular mind; he speaks of progress and freedom.

The orthodox, on the other hand, is by necessity compelled to speak in terms old and in phrases rather tired and hackneyed; the orthodox is compelled to speak in terms of the past; his inspiration is the past, his authority is the past; and so the masses are no longer interested.



That, I say, is significant. For two reasons--the one I have just mentioned; the other is this: that the popular acclaim which heresy receives today may be just as dangerous from the point of view of human progress and civilization as the popular assent which orthodoxy received in the past. The minute people are ready to make a hero of a saint, that saint is likely to become a demagogue. There are all too many people ready to pose as heroes and ready to embrace martyrdom if they are assured beforehand of the acclaim, of the rewards of heroism, and of the fact that their martyrdom will not be too unpleasant.

Such people will not be the real heretics who make for human progress, and they will phrase their heresy in such vague and ambiguous terms as to win them the plaudits of the masses without winning for them the thorns of the classes; they will couch their heretical opinion in such ambiguous phraseology as to save them from the rigors and the exactitudes of their own church discipline and their own church organization. They will, in other words, be posing.

The particular heresy of which this eminent clergyman in New York was accused of was in reality no heresy at all. His superior--and I dwell upon this fact not because I am particularly interested in it but because it illustrates the difference between heresy and publicity--suspected that he denied the divinity of Jesus, which, of course, is one of the fundamental articles of that church; and the superior called upon this minister, clearly and unequivocally, to



define his position on this basic dogma of the church. Does he or does he not believe in the divinity of Jesus? He asked for a clear statement, but no clear statement was forthcoming. There was much smoke but little fire; there was much heat but little light. The answer to the question was, I believe, that Jesus was the portrait of the invincible God; the perfect revelation of the Heavenly Father; I believe that there was in Him a certain incarnation of Deity, but I do not know how.

Now that phrase may mean everything or it may mean nothing, and a generous interpretation put upon these words may make them appear strictly orthodox, and the superior understood this very clearly. He was not dealing with a heretic at all; there was no heresy here. This minister accepts the creed of the church, and the creed of the church is stated in very concise and definite language; and yet he would so construe the meaning of this creed and so reinterpret it through symbolism, apologetics and rationalism as to make that creed mean the very opposite of what it actually does mean. He would pour new wine into old bottles.

But why? Is this the technique of the heretic? Why this theologic legerdemain? Why this intellectual juggling? If this minister is a heretic and feels that he can no longer conscientiously subscribe to the dogmas and the doctrines of his church, why does he not leave his church and join another denomination whose doctrines and teachings are more akin to his own? Surely there are other denominations



in Christendom that have preached the humanity of Jesus, that have preached a very rationalistic and acceptable theology for a hundred years. Why will he insist upon remaining within the narrow confines of a strictly divine orthodoxy and make prison bars appear windows, when he can gain all the freedom, and all the scope, and all the religious emancipation which he seeks in another denomination, where he can serve even more effectively than he can in his own particular denomination? That is not heresy.

In one of these addresses, shortly following the rebuke of his superior, he said, "When your boy comes home from college and you say to him, 'Come, let's go to church,' do you want him to say unto you, 'What! do you want me to go and hear that old bunk again?' (I am quoting the preacher <sup>really</sup> verbatim). Does he feel that with this mental juggling, with this effort to make words mean their very opposite, that he will convince the young student, intellectually keen and alert? Why, what he is getting is not bunk."

That is not heresy. It may be publicity.

Shortly thereafter another minister, one of our own fold, jumped in the mock arena, and he said, "Hold on, I also am a heretic; I also want to be martyred. I deny that the ten commandments were written by the finger of God upon tablets of stone; and here I am; expel me from the synagogue. I am a heretic." Well, the only martyrdom he would receive would be the welcome martyrdom in newspaper columns. He knows, as we all know, that there is no central authority in



the synagogue to expel him; he knows as well as we all know that the orthodox synagogue has long ago ceased to recognize him as an orthodox rabbi; he knows as well as we all do that this startling heresy, namely, that the ten commandments were actually not written by the finger of God upon tablets of stone is today the common possession of every boy and girl in the Sunday school. That is not heresy, either. It may be publicity.

What is heresy? Heresy was originally a name of contempt and condemnation in every way applied to those opinions and doctrines which were a departure from the authoritatively accepted and enjoined; a heretic was one who challenged ecclesiastic authority and ecclesiastical interpretation of law and dogma; a heretic is one who relied more upon his own light and his own vision and his own leading and the promptings of his own heart and the guidance of his own mind than upon dogma, creed or authority; a heretic is one who placed above authority external--that of church or state or book or tradition or guild or corporation or whatever human organization--the authority of the human soul, the authority of the individual, the authority of the God resident within the soul of every human being. His law was the law of the spirit and not the law of a group or an organization or a church or a state; subjective, revelational, prophetic, rather than objective, external, dogmatic.

And these heretics were at all times the leaven of civilization; these heretics were the revolutionary leaders of



mankind. Heresy is a marvelous leaven. Every great religion began as a heresy. It was a breaking with authority; it was a departure, a setting out upon a new road and upon a new adventure; every great religion began as a revolutionary movement; it was apostolic, prophetic, revolutionary; it challenged, it denounced, it destroyed, it reached out after something new, a new revelation, a new authority--that of the soul. And that is why the founders of all great religions were stoned and burnt and crucified--because they were heretics.

But after a while the momentum of that new impulse begins to slacken; people cannot live on a high pitch of enthusiasm all the time, and they begin to settle down; the pull of spiritual gravity, emotional deflation, begins to operate, and instead of this holy fervor which takes hold of the followers and disciples of a new religion, there begins to come about routine and creed and dogma and institution; things begin to harden and to congeal; the dead weight of inertia sets in, and then that religion becomes orthodox, and then that religion comes to look upon everyone who wants an innovation, a change, anyone who wants a move forward,--that religion comes to look upon him as a heretic, and begins to hate him and to persecute him and to exorcise him; and every old established religion has its own prayers and its own anathema against the heretic.

That particular church of which I spoke a moment ago has in its prayer, "Lord, God, deliver us from false doctrines and heresys and schisms"; and in our own synagogue



we have such expressions as these: "He who interprets the law against the Hallakah, and tradition against the traditions of the rabbis, will have no portion in the world to come." And the great Akiba goes into it farther and says, "He who dares to read new books, books of heretics, books of Gnostics, will have no portion in the world to come."

Old age sets in and with old age comes weariness of spirit, lassitude, the desire to rest, to stay put, not to move, because movement means effort and exertion.

What makes heresy possible, then? First, this desire on the part of long established faiths to remain just where they are, and, secondly, and even more fundamentally, the earlier conception of religion was this: religion is a completely revealed truth; revealed in perfection for all time; there can nothing be added unto it and nothing be detracted from it; it is final, it is absolute, it is perfect; and it is entrusted in the keeping of a certain group, or a certain body of men, who alone have the authority, who alone have the wisdom, the ineffable wisdom to interpret that law and that truth. Religion already has a complete program of living in this world and in the next; there nothing can be added thereto.

And so when a man dares to depart from that final and absolute truth he errs, and if he is persuaded not to do it and still persists, he is wicked, he is obscene, he is proud, and therefore he is an abomination in the sight of God. That is the philosophy underlying heresy. And so this earlier



conception of religion clearly makes for uniformity, makes for sameness, makes for autocracy, makes for centralization of authority, and stifles and deadens individual initiative and individual enterprise; it is stagnation; it is the grave of human progress because it makes progress impossible by making it meaningless; there can be no progress because the thing is already perfect.

And so the heretic who comes on the scene and says, "No, what you have may be truth but it is not absolute truth and it is not final truth; there is yet much truth to be found if we would but dare to go on that pilgrimage; there are yet many new revelations which may be vouchsafed unto us if we but dare to set out courageously and bravely seeking the God who dwells in the burning bush of human experience."

That heretic becomes an ally of civilization; that heretic appeals from the authority of a historical event to the authority of the human soul in which God progressively reveals himself; that heretic demands decentralization in life; every department is an authority unto itself; art and science and literature have their own law and they cannot be subserved and controlled by one law, the absolute law of a church; and so the heretic works for a full development of every department of human life and for their ultimate harmonization. That heretic who speaks in the name of a progressive truth revealing itself right down the ages to all men, who dares to seek it,--that man is a heretic.



I read to you this morning from the Bible a supreme heresy--the heresy of Jeremiah, who was stoned to death. There was a heretic who did not speak for plaudits but who spoke for a crown of thorns; there was a heretic who spoke in no ambiguous, vague, mystic terms, so that you could make them appear to mean anything you chose. Jeremiah rises in the temple of the Lord; he stands at the gate as the people flock in bringing their sacrifices unto the Lord, they who believed that as long as the temple endured Israel was safe, that as long as they brought their sacrifices they could sin and be forgiven.

Jeremiah the heretic, Jeremiah the prophet, rises and says unto them: "Would you put your trust in these buildings of stone? The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord are these! I will destroy this temple, saith the Lord, even as I destroyed the temple at Shiloh, because of your sins. You bring me sacrifices. I did not command your forefathers to bring me sacrifices. What I ask of you is to do justice, to cease the oppression of the stranger, the widow and the orphans, to cease following strange gods and strange idols; I ask of you the worship of the soul."

And they threw him into the pit, and they pulled him out of the pit and had him lashed through the streets of the city; and then when Jerusalem fell, as he prophesied it would, and he was an exile, they stoned him to death. That is the heretic speaking--the clear trumpet calls of a new



revelation. And these heretics are always brave souls. One cannot, one need not, go through the whole tragic story of those dark ages when men refused to permit their fellowmen to follow their own gods; those heretics, whether they be individual men like Bruno, or whether they be groups like those in southern France, who at the close of the twelfth century were almost completely exterminated by a holy war against heresy,--these men that faced the rack and the stake and the Inquisition, these were the priests, the priests of advancing mankind.

But in reality they were not heretics, they were the real orthodox. They did not depart from truth; they sought truth; they were faithful unto the light which was within. The others who persecuted them, the others who called themselves followers of the truth path, were the real heretics.

Who is the heretic? Who is the man who deserves contempt and the epithet of condemnation which once went with the term heretic? I will tell you who the heretic is today. It is not the man that has a truth and follows it; it is the man who, knowing the truth in his own heart, chooses falsehood. A heretic, a damnable heretic, is he who, seeing the light, will yet pursue the darkness; a heretic is he who lies unto himself, who sins against the Holy Ghost that is within him; a heretic is he who, having received a revelation, who, having become persuaded of the abiding value of a certain ideal, will yet, because of a fear or censure or cowardice,



refuse to follow the beckoning of that vision; the man who makes the great abdication, as Dante says, who refuses to follow the promptings of his soul and sins against the God that is within him,--that man is a damnable heretic.

A heretic is he who would compromise with truth; a heretic is he who would try to keep rigidly apart faith on the one hand, knowledge on the other; dogma on the one hand, philosophy on the other; who would try to departmentalize his mind; who, when he opens his oratory, shuts down his laboratory; a heretic is one who recites a creed and a formula and a dogma which his mind refuses to sanction. That man is a heretic! A heretic is one who practices otherwise than what he professes; a heretic is one who on a Sabbath prostrates himself before a God of Love and on workdays prostrates himself before the God of Mammon.

A heretical church is one which, preaching love of one's enemies, preaching the doctrine of turning the other cheek when one smites you on the one, preaching forgiveness, sanctions war; a heretical church is one which, preaching universal peace, will yet bless the banners and the standards of war and imperialism. A heretical synagogue is one in which the men and the women who, presuming to preach justice unto mankind, the ideals of the prophets, who, presuming to be missionaries and servants of the great God of hosts, will yet devote their lives and their concerns and the energies of their days to mere money-grubbing and exploitation; who will wallow in self-pampering and luxury and starve their



souls. That is heresy.

We Reform Jews look upon ourselves as being theologically emancipated; we are very free in our dogmas, in our creeds. We have none. And we think ourselves very liberal. Well, I sometimes fear that this liberality is a result of indifference. We are liberal because we do not care. But if we are liberal in matters of theology, we are not so liberal in other things. We, too, have our dogmas and our creeds, and we, too, are as zealous in the persecution of those who challenge our economic dogmas, and our political dogmas, and our social dogmas, even as these who persecute the religious heretics.

We have dogmas which we refuse to question; dogmas concerning competitive enterprise, and dogmas concerning the sanctity of private property, and the rewards of capital; dogmas which we refuse even to be analyzed and criticized and questioned, and we crucify him who dares to be a heretic in these matters. Heresy is an attitude of mind, a point of view, which must pervade every department of human thought, and not one of these. Those who follow no claim, who are the bounden servants of no moral imperative, who are untrue to themselves, who violate the sancturies within themselves,--these are the factitious, contentious, despicable, hurtful heretics of mankind.

But all others--dreamers, thinkers, friends and lovers of mankind, who, while departing from standard opinion, are yet seeking the truth which is within them,--all these



are not heretics but the priests ministering, but the leaders  
of the Lord God of truth.

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