

excommunicated

The newsletter of The International Society for Heresy Studies

A biannual newsletter

heresystudies.org

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INAUGURAL ISHS CONFERENCE: PRESIDENT'S OPENING REMARKS

GREGORY ERICKSON

New York University

I am very excited to welcome everyone to the first conference of the International Society of Heresy studies. It is great to see all of you and to begin to put faces to the names that I have come to know through your emails and abstracts. Early this morning I had what I call my "Mrs. Dalloway moment," as I had this fear that I had put together a party that no one was going to come to, so I am thrilled and relieved to see you all here.

Before anything else, there are some very important people that I would like to thank. I would like to thank the Gallatin School of NYU and Dean Susanne Wofford for letting us use this terrific space and for giving us an incredible amount of support in hosting this conference. It would literally have been impossible without them. I also want to thank Theresa Anderson, who has been the main person in planning everything that will happen here today and tomorrow—every room reservation, every nametag, and every cup of coffee or glass of wine is due to her. I especially want to thank Bernard Schweizer, who is the primary force behind this whole society and who helped me plan every aspect of this conference.



Gregory Erickson, President of the ISHS

I want to say a little bit about how this society and conference came to be. A little over a year ago, a mutual friend introduced me to Bernard since she knew we were both writing and teaching about heresy. Shortly thereafter there was a long lunch at the Torch Club down the street, with Bernard, James Morrow, James Wood, and Rebecca Goldstein (who are all here today).

Each of us was working with the concept of heresy in different ways. We agreed on wanting to form some sort of organization. Much of our discussion focused on why we each felt this sort of group was needed and what we meant by the word heresy. In naming the group we considered including words such as blasphemy, unbelief, heterodoxy, orthodoxy, but decided to err toward simplicity and to leave it with just heresy even though it was pretty clear—I think—that we all meant something different by that word.

I think it is this diversity of concepts and definitions that is perhaps the most important jumping off point for this conference. The various posts on the website—on the need for a society of heresy studies—reflect much of our diversity of opinions. I thought I would just read a few excerpts from these to you.

For James Wood, "where we can do interesting work is at the place where belief and unbelief truly meet and grind together — that is to say, in the house of heresy, or the bunker of blasphemy." He suggests that we "will probably want to expand that sense of heresy so as to include the blasphemer or atheist . . . who truly does not believe, but who is very close to belief."



The first membership meeting of the International Society for Heresy Studies, held in advance of the conference at NYU's Gallatin School of Individualized Study. May 30, 2014.

Rebecca Goldstein expresses a “longing to be able to approach these questions of belief and unbelief with others who think that literature is also interesting and can be—to say the least—every bit as subversive of received opinion and orthodoxy as science can be.” For her, “there’s a wildness in the literary imagination that absolutes can’t tame. Given the intrinsically heretical tendencies of literature, I’m surprised that no society such as ours yet exists.”

Finally, David Dickinson, a Methodist Minister, writes that “those with religious belief, those without belief, those who are heretical, those who are blasphemous and those, like many of us, who simply don’t know – assist the theological quest, which some prefer to call an atheological quest. The (a)theological and literary quests go on hand in hand. This collaborative search, where nothing is sacred but all is respected, is what I hope this Society will reverently assist.”

Now a little over one year, after that first lunch meeting, we have a society, a conference, a website, a journal, and plans for a book of conference proceedings. Yet, it seems to me that we are no closer to answering those questions that occupied us at our first meeting: Why do we feel the need for

this society? What do we mean by the word/ concept of heresy? And why is it important for the modern world? Of course—as I am pretty sure this conference will demonstrate—these are not new questions or issues.

I looked at my office bookshelves this morning and counted 15 books with heresy in the title written by authors from Athanasius to Bob Royalty; almost every author opens by expressing the multiple and broad meanings of the word heresy and then takes a shot at creating their own meaning. One thing that I hope this conference will demonstrate is that these questions cannot be satisfactorily addressed within any one discipline.

Looking around this room I see theologians, historians, literary critics, novelists, modernists, classicists, theorists, musicians, musicologists, and philosophers. It is appropriate that our first meeting takes place in a school of individualized study, a school without departments, disciplines, or majors. These spaces of interdisciplinary exchange are rare and this conference should be a rich opportunity for creative dialogue.

To conclude, and since we are holding this conference in New York City, I will finish with a

little wisdom of the subway. A year or two ago, I was riding the F train home to Brooklyn and was reading Eric Reitan’s book *Is God a Delusion?* which is, of course, his response to Richard Dawkin’s *The God Delusion*. A woman next to me said, “the answer is yes.” “What?,” I said. “The answer to the question, is God a delusion, is yes,” she said. The man on the other side of me, an orthodox Jew, said, “Ah, perhaps, but it is the most complicated Yes in human history.” As a scholar of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, a novel that ends on another very complicated “yes,” I can’t really do any better than that impromptu subway exchange as a way of opening this conference.

So I would hope that this conference is not about trying to find any one answer to these questions. In a conference on heresy that would seem . . . well, heretical. But it seems to me, in a time where both the academy and popular press have declared a sort of “return of religion” and where atheism is now advertised on subways and the sides of buses, that these questions and conversation are both old and new and are certainly worth having. I hope this conference can be the beginning of new conversation, new avenues of study and creation, and some new friendships. Welcome everyone!

VICE - PRESIDENT'S CONFERENCE RETROSPECTIVE

BERNARD SCHWEIZER

Long Island University, Brooklyn

A General Membership meeting with standing-room only is surely the dream of every initiator of a new Society. At that moment, on May 30, 2014, as I looked around the crowded seminar room on the 8th floor of the Gallatin School, the ISHS became a reality for me. Shortly after the start of proceedings, I realized that this was no rubber-stamping, yes-nodding assembly, but an inquisitive (though not inquisitorial!), lively, smartly disputatious gathering, and I thoroughly enjoyed discussing the bylaws and probing the key terms and principles that inform our Society’s mission.

It is a rarity nowadays to have a group of people who deliberately eschew both the culture of reflexive affirmation (the “positive thinking” school of corporate America where critical deviation is

considered “bad” for company morale) and the knee-jerk partisan bickering that characterizes our political discourse.

Here is a group, I thought, composed of people from different viewpoints—especially differing religious and non-religious viewpoints—who nevertheless manage to have a civilized, informed, constructive dialogue about controversial matters such as whether blasphemy is a “victimless crime.”

The most important moment in the discussion of our bylaws came for me when the question was raised whether we, as the Society for Heresy Studies, should even insist on prescribing a normative definition of key terms like “heresy.” Wouldn’t that constitute an orthodoxy in its own right? Still, without a general shared understanding of what basic concepts mean, how can we have a

meaningful conversation about controversial topics involving heterodoxy?

The point is this: while we should build a consensus on the guiding principles and foundational concepts that animate our thinking about heresy and non-conformism, we should also keep a space for disruption and disagreement even within our foundational terminology. Hence, we decided to work toward a consensus while keeping the option of updating and revising the key conceptual definitions on an ongoing basis. In other words, the task of building a consensus about key terms should be a process in which all members of the ISHS are welcome to participate. And even when we have reached a certain (provisional) consensus, we could still leave room for dissenting voices, notably, by providing a discursive space on the website for the expression of alternative views.

This proceeding is experimental, for sure, and it remains to be seen how practical and productive this approach turns out to be in the long run. I, for one, believe that such a flexible, responsive, and nuanced approach showcases exactly the kind of inclusive, open-minded, and yet principled values that inform our society. At the end of this lively first membership meeting, the entire slate of nominated officers was elected. Congratulations to our first president, Gregory Erickson and to all the other officers and board members! I look forward to a fruitful and engaging collaboration.

I am bringing away many fine memories and a basket full of learning from this conference. The panels I attended were throughout of high quality, startling in their revelations, and engaging in the discussions that usually went on past the allotted time, with clusters of discussants continuing the conversation in the hallway and during coffee breaks. The Roundtable on Friday evening sparked with intellectual brio and wit, as James Morrow, Rebecca Goldstein, Gregory Erickson, Ed Simon, and Robert Royalty considered the question “why heresy now?”

All three keynote addresses approached the topic from radically different perspectives: James Wood on the novel as a privileged vehicle for conveying religious doubt, apostasy, and misotheism; Rebecca Goldstein expanding on Spinoza’s pivotal role in forging a modern world view based on heresy and apostasy; and Thomas Altizer tracing the roots of the death-of-God theology to Hegel, Blake, and Milton. The conference was concluded in a festive spirit, with a beautiful concert by our own Society member Tasha Golden, performing with her husband Justin as “Ellery.” Tasha’s songs were in turn edgy, comforting, sad, and rebellious, with the artist providing great narrative bridges between individual songs. The remaining conference attendees who still had some time to spare went to a fusion restaurant in the vicinity of the Gallatin School to continue animated debates, and to toast to the success of the first conference of the ISHS.

Heresy Studies in Perspective

One of the most positive outcomes of the conference for me was the realization that we are not falling into the trap set up by Alister McGrath.

Let me explain: McGrath, a prominent theologian at Oxford University, has taken heterodoxy to task in his book *Heresy: A History of Defending the Truth*. He claims that responses to the existence of heresy fall into two categories: on the one hand there are the cheer-leaders for heresy, whom he identifies as proponents of the “postmodern template of heresy”; these people are given to rather mindless celebrations of all things heretical, just for the sake of being provocative and “relativist.” On the other hand, there are the “defenders of truth” like McGrath himself, holding on to the traditional meaning of heresy as “bad choice,” as deliberate corruption of the truth, and as error. I reject this framework as too narrow and ultimately unhelpful. Indeed, most, if not all talks at this conference cannot be classified as falling into either side of McGrath’s dichotomy. And certainly, our Society’s definition of heresy in the bylaws explicitly sidesteps that scheme: “We use the term ‘heresy’ in a value-neutral way, neither celebrating nor condemning it, but simply making it a central object of critical inquiry.”

There is another thinker at Oxford, who offers a more useful paradigm, certainly one more in tune with the aims and objectives of the Society for Heresy Studies. I am referring to Valentine Cunningham (an Advisory Board member of the ISHS). In his brilliant introduction to the volume *Figures of Heresy* (2006), Cunningham writes that “heresy and orthodoxy exist... as doubles of each other. Heresies and orthodoxies are often utterly parasitical the one upon the other” (7). How true. Further, addressing the role of literature, Cunningham insists that literary “authors are in great numbers Christians who are unorthodox in their Christianity, who are actual religious heretics. Our writers illustrate heresy in their texts, propagandize for it in their fictions” (13). Finally, concerning the act of reading, Cunningham makes the hermeneutic argument that “our reading is manifestly a case of heresy. . . . The texts in



“On the Borders of Heresy: Theory, Laughter, and Science”

A panel with presentations by A.Q.M.A. Rahman Bhuiyan, Bernard Schweizer, and Richard Santana.

contention are not just continuously reread, but read perpetually against the grain of previous readings” (15).

The reason why Cunningham’s approach is more productive for our endeavors lies in his hermeneutic emphasis and dialectical rationale. This leaves room for approaches to heresy from within and without a faith context, and it also specifically accommodates the literary and artistic manifestations of heresy and orthodoxy. By contrast, McGrath’s approach to heresy is strictly faith-based and theologically apologetic. But apologetics can get him only so far. Indeed, what happens when one steps out of the faith context and considers heresy from a secular perspective? The whole category of heresy-as-error, as false choice, crumbles to the ground. It certainly cannot be the case that only believers can adjudicate heresy and that only they are legitimate students of heresy. Our conference has formulated a resounding rejection of that exclusionary, binary position. At the same time, our organization does not exclude the faith perspective either, just as it does not disqualify the secular approach, both being considered valid bases from which to start meaningful inquiries into heresy, blasphemy, and unbelief.

Our Society is not only well positioned to start a lively dialogue regarding heresy across the faith gap, but it also encourages stimulating new perspectives by emphasizing the vital nexus between literature and religion. Let me quote another Founding Member of the Society, David Dickinson, to illustrate this point:

“Unlike confessional theology which tends towards rationalisation and systematisation, literature (including the Christian Bible!) is much more hospitable to alternative concepts held in paradox, flux and tension. Literature has, therefore, often informed creative and innovative theology forged on the anvil of experience. Whether intentionally or not, writers—those with religious belief, those without belief, those who are heretical, those who are blasphemous and those, like many of us, who simply don’t know—assist the theological quest, which some prefer to call an atheological quest. The (a)theological and literary quests go on hand in hand. This collaborative search, where nothing is sacred but all is respected, is what I hope this Society will reverently assist.”

It is this quality of inclusiveness and dialogue, welcoming to both believers and non-believers, as well as the focus on literature that make our Society unique, and uniquely positioned to become a major player in the endeavor to shed light on the endlessly fascinating interplay between orthodoxy and heterodoxy.



James Wood, Thomas J. J. Altizer, and Rebecca Newberger Goldstein (left to right) deliver their plenary talks at the International Society for Heresy Studies conference on May 30 and 31, 2014 at NYU's Gallatin School of Individualized Study.

Scattered Notes

JORDAN E. MILLER

Salve Regina University

Thoughts on the discussion of key terms at the membership meeting:

Definitions of "religion" are notoriously problematic, in turn, varieties of religious expression or reactions against particular religious expressions are also impossible to define comprehensively. As a result, each term — "heresy," "blasphemy," and "unbelief" — is dynamic and the Society's understanding of these definitions leaves them each, by both necessity and design, open-ended and slippery. They mutually constitute each other and are context-dependent.

As a society for heresy studies, it is fitting that we disagree with each other -- even over such fundamental terms as those contained in the name of our organization. We encourage our own internal dissent.

Note from panel 2:

"Heresy is a polemical term for doctrinal difference."

Notes from the roundtable:

Royalty — Heresy, as a technical term, historically has meant 'demonic difference.' Orthodoxy creates itself by creating heresies.

Goldstein — Heresy is meaningful in that it has the potential to connect small numbers of people through adversity. Orthodox categories tend to stifle creativity; heresy is a creative rebellion against those categories.

Simon — Heresy is a mark of vibrancy and fertility of ideas, beliefs, etc. It's academic orthodoxy to reduce all things religious to codes for other things (economics, politics, material conditions, race/gender/sexuality, etc). To study religion is, in a sense, heretical. It follows that heresy itself should be given its due.

Goldstein's plenary:

There's little more exciting than when someone says, "you can't do that!" Heresy is a useful term in that it preserves the sense of antagonism — that things matter — that things are at stake for certain communities.

ISHS as the "Third Way"

ROBERT ROYALTY

Wabash College

At the risk of sounding irreverent (or a bit heretical?), I was struck by how much the ISHS can sound like the "International Society Haunted by Spirituality." This was most evident in James Wood's wonderfully allusive plenary, but there were undercurrents in other discussions and papers. As a religion scholar, it's very interesting to watch people tiptoeing into the shallow end—or diving into the deep end—of the topic which I have made my professional focus. My sense is the Society can be a new "middle space" between the American Academy of Religion and the Modern Languages Association. The breadth of interdisciplinarity was exciting and refreshing. It was probably the most diverse meeting I've attended.

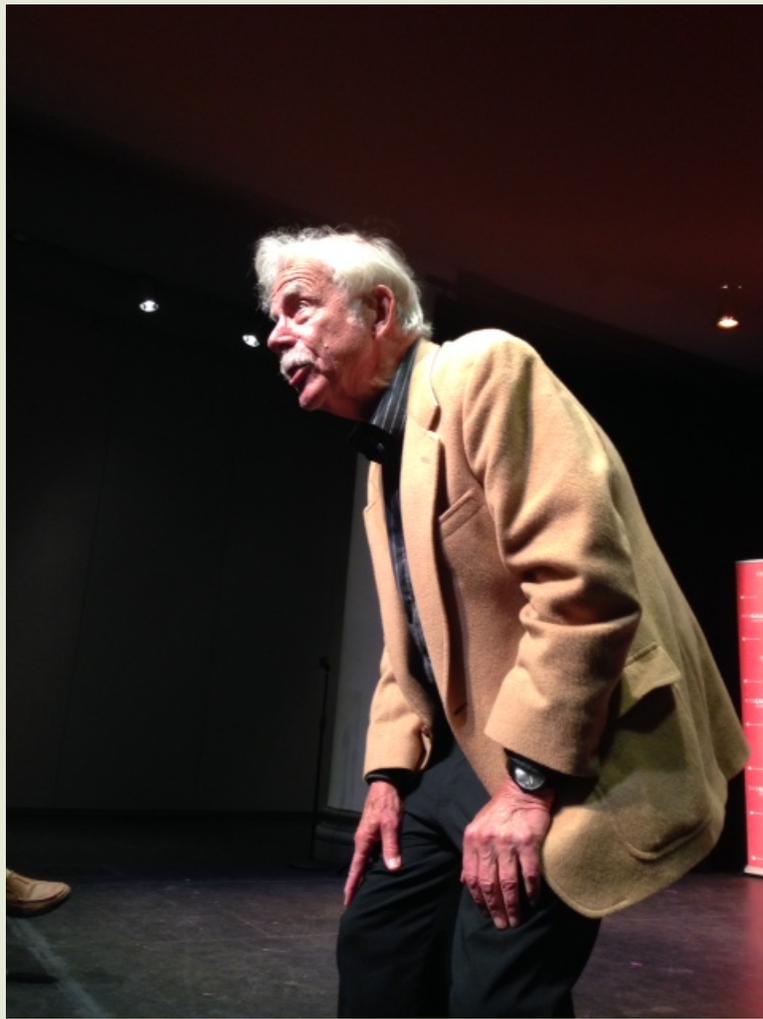
This will be a fun, stimulating group to hang out with!

Three Cheers for Studying Heretical Literature

JAMES MORROW

Novelist

I think our premiere convention proved a ringing affirmation of heretical literature in all its glorious paradoxicality. Valuable poems, plays, stories, and novels embrace simultaneously the discursive and the dramatic; they cannot be domesticated. During the Friday afternoon roundtable I introduced the image of Ivan Karamazov "returning his ticket"—his unwillingness to accept the tortured child as the price of a harmonious universe—and I was pleased when James Wood, in his keynote address that evening, reminded us of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's anxiety that the vivid character of Ivan might eclipse Father Zosima in the reader's mind. Dostoyevsky's fear was not unfounded. His novel revels in ambiguity. And so the conversation continues...



Thomas J. J. Altizer during his plenary talk Q&A.

Hobby Lobby and “Doctrinal Principles”

GEREMY CARNES

Lindenwood University

If you somehow missed (or chose to flee from) the multitude of editorials, blog posts, legal dissections, Facebook posts, and late night talk show jokes addressing *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby* in the weeks before and after the United States Supreme Court decision this summer, or simply want a concise but insightful discussion of the contexts of the case and of the majority and dissenting opinions, I recommend [an article in *The New England Journal of Medicine*](#), co-authored by three scholars holding a combined five degrees in law and medicine.

Most of the discussion about the decision has rightly focused on its implications for women’s reproductive health and workplace access, and for the extension of religious rights to corporations, both of which are addressed in the article from *NEJM*. Here, I would like to draw attention to another aspect of the decision that has received far less comment. The *NEJM* article observes that the decision could affect many more medical issues than just birth control:

“[The majority opinion’s] logic could apply, Justice Ginsburg suggested, to employers with religious objections “to blood transfusions (Jehovah’s Witnesses); antidepressants (Scientologists); medications derived from pigs . . . (certain Muslims, Jews, and Hindus); and vaccinations (Christian Scientists, among others).”

However, Ginsburg’s concern occurred to the majority as well. The article explains how they dealt with it:

“The majority added that not all religious objections to specific mandates, such as immunizations, would necessarily succeed but did not explain why not or provide doctrinal principles that would ensure that immunizations remain mandatory.

The authors of the article lament the court’s lack of *legal* “doctrinal principles” to guide lower courts in determining what mandates are constitutional and what mandates are not, but doctrinal principles of a rather different sort were almost certainly at work in determining that the birth control mandate was not constitutional. Thus, Ginsburg is likely wrong to fear that the floodgates have been opened to objections from religions outside the U.S. mainstream, such as Scientologists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Muslims, etc. The vagueness of the majority about how it will come to future decisions about such objections leaves them free to find reasons to refuse them. Hiding behind this vague decision is an implicit orthodoxy of religious beliefs that trump federal health care laws, an orthodoxy that just so happens to align with the doctrines of the United States’ most mainstream religions.

This is far from the only federal court case in recent memory in which we have seen favoritism of certain religions, or favoritism of the religious over the non-religious. Such decisions threaten to establish a tacit religious orthodoxy in the United States, creating obstacles for the participation of the heterodox in public life and for control over their private lives. The setback that *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby* represents for women’s access to birth control and the strange new rights and powers it finds in corporate personhood deserve the public’s attention, but so too does the damage that this decision does to a religiously pluralistic society.”

However, not all the news from the federal courts lately has been bad for religious freedom in the United States. One bright spot is the recent case of *Center for Inquiry, Inc. v. Marion Circuit Court Clerk*. The Center for Inquiry sued over an Indiana law that allowed members of religious groups to be certified to solemnize marriages, while atheists only had the option of being married by certain government officials. Furthermore, not all religious groups were treated equally. Due to their lack of clergy, Buddhists were also unable to obtain certification to officiate at weddings. In 2012, a federal court [found in favor of the defendant](#), dismissing atheists’ inability to celebrate marriages in a way they find meaningful as a mere “inconvenience,” while defending the state’s accommodations for religious groups. However, on July 14 of this year, [the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals overturned the decision](#). Indiana atheists, Buddhists, and other people whose religious beliefs fall outside those of organized churches will now have the chance to be married by people of their choice. Coming only a few weeks after the Hobby Lobby decision, it was a refreshing victory for heterodoxy.



Ellery (Tasha and Justin Golden) performs in the Jerry H. Labowitz Theater For the Performing Arts to celebrate the close of a successful first conference.

Kate Kelly and the Mormon Moment

GREGORY ERICKSON

New York University

On June 23rd, Kate Kelly, lawyer, feminist, member of the Church of Latter Day Saints, and a founder of an organization called Ordain Women, was excommunicated by the Church for “apostasy.” This harshest of Church punishments, excommunication strips a person of their baptism (although they can be “rebaptized”) for “living in opposition to the church.” Kelly is not the only case of Mormons recently disciplined by the church. Mormon blogger John P. Dehlin was threatened with expulsion for urging the church to accept gay men and lesbians. At least a dozen other Mormons in the United States have recently or are currently facing disciplinary action for similar activities. “It feels like the church is wanting to clamp down,” Dehlin told NBC News. The move echoes the last famous Mormon “purge,” when in 1993 it excommunicated six scholars who had been critical of different aspects of the church or its teachings. These disciplinary actions—or threats of disciplinary action—represent to some an apparent change of course for the church, which has been conducting a high-profile advertising campaign in recent years to portray an image of greater openness and diversity (For example, the ubiquitous “I’m a Mormon” campaign).

Kelly is now appealing the decision and writes that “Just as the church teaches individual church members to correct past mistakes, the institution can also rectify old wrongs and heal old wounds” (OrdainWomen.com, July 8). Kelly is right to emphasize the “old” and historical nature of the debate. Although discussions of a recent “Mormon Moment” have been primarily concerned with issues of contemporary politics and popular culture (gay and women’s rights,

Mitt Romney, South Park, and the Broadway musical), what has been less discussed are the ways in which Mormonism continues to restage debates that have marked the history of Christian thought and debates over orthodoxy. Jon Butler, an important historian of early American Christianity, has written that Mormonism is “an almost perfect replication of the history of Christianity, it almost perfectly aligns itself with the early history of Christianity if you accept the early history of Christianity as complicated, difficult and in some places unknown.” Like early Christians, the first generations of US citizens lived in the shadow of Christ’s second coming. Often labeled the Second Great Awakening, early nineteenth century American religion featured an evangelical Protestant revival movement (Millerites, Shakers, Baptists, Methodists) that emphasized the immanence of the Second Coming. Mormon history (they are the *Latter Day Saints*, after all) reflects this culture.

Recent discussions at Mormon panels at religious studies conferences have addressed issues of a different kind of “Mormon Moment,” one that in fascinating ways, echoes debates with Christianity following the higher criticism coming out of Germany in the 18th and 19th century. Scholars are asking if it is possible to continue to be “religious” and “orthodox” Mormons as new less rigid and fundamentalist modes of interpreting scripture and history are introduced into their religious scholarship. In the same ways that 19th century Christian theologians had to accept that Moses did not write the opening books of the Hebrew Bible or that there was a very human and political history behind the selection of the gospels, some Mormon scholars are asking what happens, for example, if we see the *Book of Mormon* as a text that is rooted in 19th century America history and ideology instead of the more literal interpretation that has been accepted as orthodox and that is still celebrated every year at the Hill of Cumorah pageant in upstate New York.

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Or contact Dr. Bernard Schweizer, English Department, Long Island University, 1 University Plaza, Brooklyn NY, 11201.

In a *New York Times* editorial that claimed the end of the “Mormon Moment” (7/14), Cadence Woodland points to “Troubling historical facts and inconsistencies in policy and even doctrine” as if this were unusual in any faith tradition. But the history of heresy teaches us that our churches, our theologies, and our understanding of the divine come out of these kinds of “troubling facts” and “inconsistencies.” From the earliest centuries Christians have debated issues of who gets to assume authority, who decides the chain of command, who gets to interpret history and scripture and with what kind of language. These kinds of issues have determined and continue to determine how we define orthodoxy, heterodoxy, apostasy, and heresy. From the perspective of heresy studies, Mormonism is interesting as both an example of heresy and as one of the few religious organizations with a strong enough central organization to officially act upon the ideas of heresy, apostasy, and excommunication. The recent events in the LDS Church and the resulting media and blogosphere response demonstrate both sides of this tension; they have created a discursive space between politics, public opinion, theology, written language, and church power that is both profoundly modern and also has deep echoes of the past.

Three Recent Cases

JOHN D. HOLLOWAY

Regent University

The Case of Open Theism:

In 1994, five theologians published a book entitled *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*. The book was bound to be monumental and controversial for the suggestion posed in its pages was that God does not possess exhaustive foreknowledge of coming events—God does not know the future. The theologians were Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger.

Today, each author has his own book advocating Open Theism and others have joined them as well, including Greg Boyd, who is perhaps the most well-known open theist. Pinnock, Sanders and Boyd have all faced heresy charges in different settings, and Sanders even lost his tenure and was booted out of Huntington College. On top of such occurrences, open theists have faced the hostility of their opponents. Sanders even records in his book that an author prayed that God would not only put an end to open theism, but that he would kill Sanders as well! Currently, open theist Thomas Jay Oord is being threatened with heresy charges.

These are just a few figures. Throughout the history of this theology (which actually goes back several

centuries), its proponents have been deemed heretics and have faced unfortunate consequences for espousing their views. However, the tide seems to be turning. Open Theism has been brought to more and more sympathetic ears and has been adopted by an astounding number of people. There was even a conference recently on Open Theology and the Church. It seems this is a heresy that may actually overcome the label.

The Case of a Southern Baptist Minister Changing His View on Homosexuality:

[This YouTube video](#) includes an hour-long sermon from Pastor Danny Cortez of New Heart Community Church in La Mirada, CA. In it, he describes the long journey he went through in changing his view on the morality of homosexuality, from being certain of its sinfulness to denying it altogether. The Pastor was not terminated from the church like he thought he might be, and the church has decided to become a “third way church” where homosexuals are welcome, as are varying views on the issue. After the video went viral, Albert Mohler, president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, condemned Pastor Cortez as a heretic, and the church has been dissociated with the Southern Baptist denomination, as it prohibits any of their churches from affirming the morality of homosexual behavior.

The case of Rob Bell:

In 2011, Rob Bell—who was Pastor of Mars Hill Bible Church in Grandville, MI at the time—published *Love Wins: A Book about Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person who Ever Lived*. It was advertised as a book about the afterlife that challenges the traditional understanding of Hell and the notion that God would sentence people to damnation forever and ever. To a certain extent, it is that, but not like it was made out to be. It makes sense that a publisher would advertise the book the way it did because as such it would promise to sell more copies. However, when you give something so ambiguous to the mainstream evangelical public, it becomes, “Rob Bell denies the existence of hell and advocates universalism in his new book!” Senior Vice President at Crossway publishing Justin Taylor blew this whistle. The only problem was that it’s not actually true, but that didn’t stop a multitude of Christians from calling Bell a heretic. John Piper, for example, infamously tweeted, “Farewell, Rob Bell.” When I started going through the book with my Christian small group, one of the members abstained because her pastor told her Bell is a heretic.

Would the response have been different had people read the book first? Maybe not. Many would have still called it heresy, but they would have at least learned what he was actually saying, and they maybe would have been troubled by the fact that several orthodox Christians throughout church history have advocated the same views, such as Gregory of Nyssa (one of the founders of the Nicene Creed), Clement of Alexandria, St. Jerome, and Origen. We are left with the unfortunate fact that evangelical Christians will condemn someone before hearing what they have to say. Jason Upton captured it best when he said, “It’s amazing that a pastor can publish a book called ‘Love Wins’ and *Christians* condemn him as a heretic.”

Retrospective from Another Heresy-Related Conference

KATHLEEN KENNEDY

Penn State-Brandywine

Europe After Wyclif Conference at Fordham University, June 4-6, 2014

Europe After Wyclif resulted from a series of debates within the Lollard Society about how to carry on during an academic moment in which, as Fiona Somerset put it in the afterward of *Wycliffite Controversies*, “all the old stereotypes about lollardy are, finally, worn out” (319). While the group decided to retain the name of the society in honor of the scholars who came before us, we wanted to explore more fully where the field stood at present. Europe After Wyclif made a remarkable effort to outline the immediate state of affairs in our corner of heresy studies, featuring papers by scholars at all stages of their careers from across North America and Europe. Using a wide range of methodologies, from history to literary studies, theology to codicology, papers probed the variety of ways in which scholars are replacing those tired stereotypes. The breadth of medieval vernacular religious practice was emphasized at every turn. A number of Czech scholars in particular offered valuable context for lollardy in setting it next to the constellation of events and practices surrounding Jan Hus and his followers. Conference participants put vernacular religions, whether English or Bohemian, into dialogue with a Roman orthodoxy that they showed to be more frequently fragmented, multiple, contradictory, and debated than figures like Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Arundel or theologian Jean Gerson might have liked to admit. This scholarly concentration on the multiplicity within both orthodoxy and heresy may be the hallmark result of the conference. In the end, then, we were left without one direction for the future of the Lollard Society, but instead with an invigorating variety of directions.

Simoni Deo Sancto**EDWARD SIMON**

Lehigh University

If you take several of the Church Fathers at their word, the original heretic was Simon Magus. A first century Samaritan, Simon permeates the pages of the patristic accounts of the early Church. A sorcerer and a magician, he was the gnostic scourge of Christianity. Simon haunts the subsequent history of the Church, becoming a standard against which authority must define itself. More legend than fact, he becomes a stand-in for all manner of heresies and blasphemies that were to come after him. In the absence of any positive body of teaching we have only the words of his enemies Irenaeus and Justin Martyr. We don't even have a clear understanding of whether he was real or rather a conflation of several figures. Is Simon Magus the Simon of Acts? Is he the same as the mysterious Samaritan Simon in several apocryphal texts? Is he the founder of the gnostic sect the Simonians? The details of his life are unclear, yet his name gave us the term "simony" (the illegal selling of church offices) and his story is arguably the origin of the Faust myth. As heretic, indeed as "first" heretic he is less man than symbol of all that is supposed to be in opposition to proper belief and practice, and as such he is a powerful figure of dissent and subversion.

Simon's existence, even if the order of events or the identity of the particular magus may be in dispute, is still by definition a canonical figure. It's likely that it is he who appears in the biblical book of Acts where we are told that "there was a certain man, called Simon, which beforetime in the same city used sorcery, and bewitched the people of Samaria, giving out that himself was some great one." Like pseudo-messiahs before him and pseudo-messiahs after him Simon claimed to be a "great one." Early Christians may have had some understandable anxiety – for several reasons. We are told that Simon bewitched the people of Samaria with his "sorceries," but the Magus, upon meeting the apostle Philip the Evangelist was converted to Christianity. Eventually the sorcerer is rebuked when he offers money to Peter the Apostle so that he may acquire the ability to impart the Holy Spirit by the laying on of hands. Peter tells him "Thy money perish with thee, because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money," hence the application of Simon's name to the sin which is associated with him.

In other texts Simon Peter and Simon Magus are still associated with one another, intimately connected across apocryphal gospels that were rejected from the New Testament but that elaborate on the relationship first hinted at in Acts. Simon Magus is often seen as a sort of demonic inversion of Peter, his sparring partner and enemy, perhaps even some sort of subliminal and projected part of Peter's own consciousness. That they share a name seems not a coincidence, but whereas Simon Peter becomes the Rock on which Christ builds his Church, Simon Magus becomes the magician who manipulates divinity for his own selfish purposes. In the Acts of Peter, an apocryphal text from the second century, Peter and Simon fight in the city of Rome, in which authentic faith is pitted against cynical magic, piety against sorcery.

And indeed Simon is a powerful magician; the text recounts his ability to resurrect dead animals, to float, to make dogs speak. A persistent anxiety in the text, and indeed in the person of the character of Peter, is that Simon's magic is perhaps God-given, that his baptism has given him dominion and power over nature supplied by God. The Acts of Peter record "And already on the morrow a great multitude assembled at the Sacred Way to see him flying. And Peter came unto the place, having seen a vision, that he might convict him in this also; for when Simon entered Rome, he amazed the multitudes by flying." Peter challenges Simon to prove that his occult skills have their origin in the Christian God, and as Simon levitates above the Roman Forum Peter is effectively able to "pray" his nemesis to the ground. The text recounts "And behold when he was lifted up on high, and all beheld him raised up above all Rome and the temples thereof and the mountains, the faithful looked toward Peter. And Peter seeing the strangeness of the sight cried unto the Lord Jesus Christ: If thou suffer this

man to accomplish that which he hath set about... hasten they grace, O Lord, and let him fall from the height and be disabled... And he fell from the height... Then every man cast stones at him and went away home, and thenceforth believed Peter." Some accounts have it that where Simon crashed would be the future site of Rome's Jewish ghetto, a conflation of the older faith with new heresy.

Simon of course was not Jewish, he was a Samaritan, an ancient religion with a different version of the Torah, and who regard Mt. Gerizim and not the Temple Mount as holy. The ancient Jews would have seen the Samaritans as heretical (incidentally there are still Samaritans, under a thousand spread across the West Bank and into Israel). But this is no matter; this is the difficulty of small differences. And Peter of course was a Jew, but in the casting down of Simon with his Hebrew name and Peter with his new, gentile name we see manifested in narrative forms the very anxieties of influence that Christianity must have faced as it defined itself in those first few centuries.

But Simon wasn't just a symbol for the early Christian church separating itself out from its Jewish origins or from its gnostic competitors. In some writings he could appear as a marker for what grew into normative Christianity, in other words for the Church itself. The Ebionites, a sect of Jewish Christians who regarded Jesus as messianic-prophet but not God and who followed Mosaic law as did orthodox Jews conflated Simon Magus with Paul who was understood as a dangerous antinomian rejecting God's law in favor of a nebulous, almost magical "faith." In the Pseudo-Clementine writings of the Ebionites Peter argues with Simon who is a thinly veiled Paul, asking "And how can we believe you even as to the fact that he appeared to you? And how can he have appeared to you seeing that your sentiments are opposed to his teaching? ... For it is against a solid rock, the foundation-stone of the Church, that you have opposed yourself in opposing me."

Often the Magus is identified with the Gnostics, that mysterious and recently oh-so-sexy sect of alternate Christians from the first few centuries of the Common Era who rightly or wrongly represent to many modern people a contrary and more attractive version of Christianity. For the Gnostics the empirically clear nature of theodicy, the evidence of the cruel, evil, and fallen world we experience and see all around us, can only be explained by recourse to its creation by a malevolent demiurge who is lesser than the true God above it. Never a unified movement, Gnostic religion encompassed groups with such exotic names as the Ophites, the Cainites, the Borborites, and the Carpocratians. One Gnostic group, the Mandeans, who view Jesus as a demonic usurper of the actual messiah who they identify with John the Baptist, still exist in small numbers in Iraq and Iran. The Gnostic group identified with Simon Magus is appropriately enough called "Simonians." In his diatribe against them Hippolytus records what some of the actual teachings of Simon Magus may have been. As with the complex cosmology of all Gnostic groups it is a confusing tangle of emanations, angels, eons, and demiurges. Simon freely mixes Athens and Jerusalem, equally at home with the Hebraism of Moses and the Hellenism of Heraclitus.

The patristic writers Justin Martyr and Irenaeus record that Simon came to Rome with a debased woman named Helen who in the nature of several other sects of Gnostics (like the Montanists, but more on them for a future column...) preached a gospel of sexual libertinism. According to Simon, in the beginning was not the Word per se, but a Thought, and that first emanation of God was female. Known across traditions as Sophia, the presence of sacred wisdom, or in Hebrew as the Shekinah, she represents God's feminine indwelling presence. According to Simon the angels rebelled against this feminine thought, and she was trapped in the female body, reincarnated across generations (including as Helen of Troy) until Sophia was born in the form of Simon's partner, the Phoenician prostitute Helen. It was in Rome that Simon and his consort Helen preached their Gnostic gospel. He was associated by the patrists, like most heretics, with blasphemy, sorcery, magic, perversion and heresy. And he became quite powerful. According to Justin, Simon used his magic to convince the Romans of his divinity to the point where a bridge crossing the Tiber river was

inscribed with the phrase “Simoni Deo Sancto,” (“To Simon the Holy God”).

Whether he was the simonist of Acts, or the wizard who crashed to the ground during his battle with Peter, or the gnostic priest of the patristic fevered imaginations, it seems that by the third century his followers had abandoned the idea of him. Origen writes “Also Simon the Samaritan, a magician, wished to filch away some by his magic. And at the time indeed he succeeded in his deception, but now I suppose it is not possible to find 30 Simonians altogether in the world.” But this isn’t quite right, is it? If heresy is religion’s shadow, that which faith sustains itself by in defining itself against, Simon has never really disappeared. As the ur-heretic, the arch-blasphemer, he haunts Christianity not with his own subversive messages but with the fear that Christianity itself might be a heresy. After all, Simon’s sin wasn’t “false belief” so much as it was a peculiar appropriation of genuine Christianity. Indeed he acquired his magical powers in part through the power of baptism.

So it’s not that he doesn’t believe in Christianity, it’s that he is able to use it as magic. He harkens back to the ancient, totemistic power of language in religion. Remember, we’re not allowed to take the Lord’s name in vain because the ancient Hebrews feared that God’s true name could be utilized in magic. The God who wore an Angel’s mask when he wrestled Jacob didn’t tell Jacob his name for He feared what powers the patriarch could use to control Him. This is not the omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent God of the scholastics; rather this is a spirit of the magicians. Simon harkens back to this old faith. The legendary Simon Magus uses the rituals and language of a Christianity he knows to be true for very un-Christian ends. And the legend implies that this is a possibility, that we may in fact have a dark power over our own gods. It is not an issue of correct versus incorrect belief, but rather he represents a fear of the dark heart of religion and faith itself and what those things could be identified with. He reminds us of the uncomfortable fact that before religion was theology it was magic.

TEACHING CORNER

Teaching Heresy at an Orthodox Institution

BELLA TENDLER

Yeshiva University

When we gathered last May for the inaugural conference of the Society for Heresy Studies, I asked a question: In our post-modern world, where diversity is lauded and personal meaning takes precedence over catechismic doctrine, does heresy actually matter anymore? While the question led to some fruitful conversations about the adoption of orthodoxy and heresy as constructs in fields as diverse as politics, science, and contemporary religion, the question was somewhat disingenuous. We had all obviously gathered at the conference because we care deeply about heresy. Some of us had even dedicated our life’s work to this subject. Moreover, the numerous confessional narratives shared over the course of the weekend made it clear that for many present the intellectual interest in heresy emerged from very personal formative experiences with doubt. In fact, from a certain perspective, one could argue that the entire conference was an endeavor to reclaim the center for the periphery; to create a space where marginalized scholars, writers, and artists of heresy could become the orthodox.

In my own experience, heresy has mattered tremendously. For the past two years I have been teaching a course on the construction of orthodoxy and heresy in early Islam at Yeshiva University, the premier institute of Modern Orthodox Jewry. For purposes of brevity (but not nuance), Modern Orthodoxy is a Jewish philosophy whose proponents try to maintain traditional observance of halakha, Jewish Law, while still participating in modern secular culture. This is often a difficult balance to maintain, particularly at Yeshiva University, where under the auspices of Torah Umadda, Torah and Science, the slogan of the university, students can learn creationism and evolutionary biology, the Sinaitic origins of the Bible and Documentary Hypothesis, halakhically imposed gender inequality and feminist theory, religious Zionism and post-colonial studies.

I am not new to this dichotomy. I attended this university as an undergraduate and my own interests in orthodoxy and heresy were forged in this crucible. But I was not prepared for what was at stake in this class for my students. The course, after all, was about Islam. In fact, after a short theoretical component in which we read, for example, John Henderson’s, *The Construction of Orthodoxy and Heresy*, and Jacques Berlinerblau’s “Towards a Sociology of Heresy,

Orthodoxy, and Doxa,” we spent the entire semester analyzing Islamic heresiographies and studying the specific doctrines and histories of this or that Shiite sect. Nevertheless, the students argued textual interpretations and conflicting versions of sacred history as if it was their own tradition. It became clear to me that at times they were arguing about their own tradition: Orthodox Judaism, with its claims to primacy and authenticity, was always just beneath the surface, and would occasionally erupt and bring on full-blown debates over rabbinic authority, the Oral Law, mysticism, messianism, the State of Israel, and modernity. This, I realized, is what it is like to have a living conversation about orthodoxy and heresy, to discuss theology with students who are deeply invested in truth claims, but have been taught to employ sociological, comparative, and historic paradigms as well.

I should say that the most troubling aspects of this course for my students were not the particular heresies we described – be they divine incarnation in human form, esotericism, antinomianism, or metempsychosis. These were not much more than exoticisms with little power to agitate outside of their particular historical contexts. What troubled my students most were the orthodoxies. Recognizing the ways in which Orthodoxies are constructed over time, how they evolve while still insisting on their immutability, how they are complicit with power, dependant on power, and eventually abandoned as theological oddities when they lose power— these realizations were difficult for students who self-identified as Orthodox.

Teaching this class was simultaneously thrilling and troubling. Watching my students grapple with assumptions they had always held as sacrosanct was so exhilarating that I often left class shaking with adrenaline. On the other hand, I knew where this intellectual journey could lead and I was not prepared to take responsibility for the doubt and uncertainty that may well follow. At least once a semester I had a student ask me how he should live his life now that he has lost the positivism and absolute certainty of his faith. This, I know, was not my doing. It is an inevitable consequence of a Torah Umadda education for a certain type of student. But I also know that my class provided an opportunity and a vocabulary with which to think about these issues.

I am not sure what to say to such a student. No relativizing or humanistic solution can possibly satisfy a mind trained to know the will of God. It does not satisfy me either. Perhaps, as they say, the quest for knowledge will provide meaning; I do not expect it to supply answers.

SOCIETY NEWS

Good News from the IRS

Yes, you read that correctly. The International Society for Heresy Studies received word from the Internal Revenue Service in late August that our application for tax exempt status has been approved. Henceforward, the ISHS will identify as a 501 (c) (3) exempt organization. This means, among other things, that donations to ISHS are tax deductible and that future costs (such as running conferences) may be paid minus sales tax.

But more than any of that, we gained a federal stamp of approval for the work that we do!

The Journal of Heresy Studies

Rationale

The only academic journal dedicated to scholarship on heresy, blasphemy, and unbelief

Current academic discussions of religion often either pass over subjects of heresy, blasphemy, and non-belief in contexts of literature, art, and culture, or they give these subjects a confessional turn. The *Journal of Heresy Studies* aims to correct this critical blind spot by offering an intellectual “home” for scholars and artists who engage critically and openly with matters of heterodoxy, in all forms.

heresyjournal.com

Objective

The Journal of Heresy Studies is an open-access, blind-peer-reviewed interdisciplinary journal published online. We encourage submissions from scholars in a variety of academic fields including but not limited to, literary studies (in any language or genre), art history, religious studies, secular studies, theology, history, philosophy, psychology, sociology, humanism and any other related disciplines. Submissions should demonstrate a relationship to the themes of heresy, blasphemy, unbelief, or religious heterodoxy whether in an organized community or in the wider culture. The journal takes no ideological stance and makes no value judgments as to the concept of heresy in general or towards particular heresies. The only standards that are upheld concern the academic rigor and intellectual originality of the submissions.

Submit:

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Dr. Bernard Schweizer
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