

**Happy Among the Heretics**

**by Donne Hayden**

Are you now, or have you ever been, a heretic?

Many Quakers are; at one point in our history, I would have said “most Quakers,” but given the substantial number of Orthodox Friends, that would no longer be true. At the beginning, however, Friends were often accused of heresy. For example, in 17<sup>th</sup> century Puritan Massachusetts (settled, as we know, out of a desire for religious freedom), Quakers were unwelcome and persecuted everywhere. Friends were stripped to the waist, men and women alike, and “lashed behind carts and whipped from town to town. They were branded with an ‘H’ for heretic; they had their tongues bored through with a hot iron; their ears were cut off; they were banished,” and the Massachusetts governor “succeeded in having the death penalty invoked for any Friends who returned to the colony after being banished beyond its borders.”<sup>1</sup> Four banished Quakers who nonetheless returned were hanged on Boston Common, among them Mary Dyer, a well-known Quaker martyr.

Another example comes from a “Declaration of a Day of Prayer” issued in 1658 by Peter Stuyvesant, leader of the Dutch colony in New York (then called “New Amsterdam”), to counter the influence of what he called the “abominable and heretical sect of Quakers”:

*Notwithstanding the good an all-merciful God has favoured and blessed this newly rising Province in general and its inhabitants in particular with many and innumerable mercies and benefits; amongst others with health, peace and prosperity,*

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<sup>1</sup> “Early Quakers,” <http://thorn.pair.com/earlyq.htm>

*abundance, and remarkable increase of population and trade, and what is to be valued above all, with the free and public exercise of the pure worship of God; Yet, we, either enjoying the same thanklessly, or abusing them unworthily, have by the ungrateful use, or the unworthy abuse of spiritual benefits, provoked God's rigorous justice, exciting his Divine Majesty—never sufficiently honored—to righteous anger, of which he hath shewn us not only palpable signs, but has caused us also to witness evident proofs; He hath visited near and remote places, towns and hamlets with hot fevers and dangerous diseases, as a chastisement if not punishment of the thankless use of temporal blessings; permitting and allowing the Spirit of Error to scatter its injurious passion amongst us, in spiritual matters here and there, rising up and propagating a new unheard of, abominable Heresy, called Quakers; seeking to seduce many, yea, were it possible, even the true believers—all signs of God's just judgment and certain forerunners of severe punishment.<sup>2</sup>*

So what terrible things had those Quaker missionaries been saying that brought down the wrath of God on the colony where they spoke? Perhaps, as William Penn asserts in one of his defenses of Friends against the charges of heresy, they were “conscientiously cautious in expressing the manner of the resurrection intended, because it is left a secret by the Holy Ghost in the Scripture.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, they left it up to God whether or not they would be raised from the dead in their *physical* bodies,

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<sup>2</sup>“Proclamation of a Day of Prayer for March 13” (1658, in response to “The Remonstrance of the Inhabitants of Flushing, Long Island, Against the Law Against Quakers and Subsequent Proceedings,” John C. Thorn Genealogy website, Descendents of William Thorne, <http://thorn.pair.com/thorn/thornlineage/FlushingRemonstranceResults.htm#Day%20of%20Prayer>>, accessed 10/17/09.

<sup>3</sup>William Penn, “A Key: Opening the Way to Every Capacity; How to Distinguish the Religion Professed by the People Called Quakers, from the Perversions and Misrepresentations of their Adversaries; With a Brief Exhortation to All Sorts of People to Examine Their Ways, and Their Hearts, and Turn Speedily to the Lord.” <http://www.tractassociation.org/Key.html#SEC5>

for certainly, that was one charge of heresy against the Quakers.<sup>4</sup> Or perhaps they, as Penn says, “assert the Light of Christ to be sufficient to save, that is, to convince of sin, lead out of it, and quicken the soul in the ways of holiness . . . .”<sup>5</sup> Maybe they said we don’t have to do all the other things the Church required, such as water baptism and other “outward sacraments.”

To us, these things sound fairly mild, maybe even simply correct, being of an “heretical bent” ourselves. That may be because today, even the Orthodox, I believe, are not free from some of the so-called heretical ideas held by early Friends. In spite of two thousand years of suppression, many ideas that were considered heretical through the centuries are now sort of widely accepted. It is like humanity “grew into” understandings more open and tolerant than the traditional church teachings.

Until I went to seminary, I muddled heretics with atheists or pagans; my vague understanding was that heretics somehow didn’t believe in God or Jesus. In studying the history of Christianity, however, I discovered that heretics were indeed believers, though non-conformist believers, and that my own beliefs often coincided with those labeled heretical by the established church. Over and over again through history, I would have been among those burned at the stake, or branded with an “H.”

The word “heresy” comes from a Greek word related to *choosing a belief*, rather than simply accepting all parts of an established and “authoritative system of dogma designated as orthodox.” Heretics don’t consider themselves heretical, of course—but they are perceived as heretical by others convinced that their own beliefs are the only right beliefs.<sup>6</sup> The word “orthodox” means “straight thinking,” or “right thinking,” while

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> “Heresy,” Wikipedia.

“heterodoxy” (another word for “heresy”) means literally, “*other* thinking.” Heresy turns out to be *other thinking about Christian teachings*. So you can be a *Christian* and a *heretic* at the same time!

One of the surest ways to know if someone is a heretic (or if you yourself have heretical tendencies) is to consider the possibility of hell and punishment. Here is the correct response for the straight-thinking orthodox among us. This comes from Martin Downes, minister at Christ Church Deeside in North Wales:

*Is God present in Hell? We have to say that he is. Firstly, because Scripture affirms that he is. In Hell there is torment day and night in the presence of the holy angels and the in the presence of the Lamb (Rev. 14:9-11). Secondly, to deny that he is present in all of his creation is to deny that God is infinite and immense. Was God present at the cross when Christ was forsaken? He was spatially as present in Jerusalem then as he is today. Nevertheless in a way that we cannot comprehend but which is the cause of all our hope in time and eternity, we believe that the Son of God knew all the torments of a condemned sinner, and all the relational distance that guilty sinners will receive. His experience of being forsaken was not imagined (Mark 15:33-34). In that cry of dereliction he knew abandonment, as Christ the only true and perfect covenant keeper, bore the full weight of the covenant curses in the place of his people (Gal. 3:10-14).*

Downes then refers us to the Westminster Larger Catechism, which is more specific in answering the question:

***What are the punishments of sin in the world to come?***

***A. The punishments of sin in the world to come, are everlasting separation from the comfortable presence of God, and most grievous torments in soul and body, without intermission, in hell-fire forever.***

*Hell is not spatial separation from God, it cannot be because God is omnipresent. No, Hell is separation from the comfortable presence of God. It is the unshielded experience of the presence of God in his holiness and just wrath, and the absence of his mercy and grace.<sup>7</sup>*

If you are an orthodox Christian, all this will ring true for you. If it doesn't, you may very well be—I must inform you—a heretic. Technically, anyway.

Before Christianity, in fact, no such place as Hell existed. The ancient Jews had the concept of *Sheol*, which was not a place of punishment, but simply a grave or burial pit, or the place where the dead went, and this included all the dead—good and bad, rich and poor. According to Paul Laughlin in *Remedial Christianity*, in the New Testament when Jesus refers to “hell,” the word translated as “hell” is the Greek word, *Gehenna*, “which was the site of the smoldering garbage dump near Jerusalem, a place where the abominable practice of child sacrifice had often been carried out.”<sup>8</sup> (Now I can see *that* as hellish.)

Through two millennia, Christianity maintained this view of human beings as born sinners, all destined to go to hell, saved only by acknowledging that God required the death of his Son, Jesus Christ, and accepted it in lieu of punishing them for their

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<sup>7</sup>Martin Downes, “Is Hell Separation from God’s Presence?” published in *Evangelical Magazine* and *Against Heresies* blog, <http://against-heresies.blogspot.com/2009/04/is-hell-separation-from-gods-presence.html>

<sup>8</sup> Paul Laughlin, *Remedial Christianity: What Every Believer Should Know About the Faith but Probably Doesn't*, (Santa Rosa, California: Polebridge Press, 2000) p. 166.

sins. For centuries, those who disagreed with this view were likely to suffer greatly for doing so.

This idea that humanity fell into sin through one man—Adam—and then was saved by one man—Christ—has been foundational for Christian thought. Augustine got the idea from Paul’s letters, and from it he developed the notion of “Original Sin” passed along from generation to generation via the soul, and which a child “somehow acquired” from his or her parents. Once acquired, Original Sin prevailed—human beings could do nothing but sin. Augustine allowed some freedom of will, but only in the degree of sin a human chose to commit.

Naturally, punishment was required for such relentless sinners, and thus Christian thought developed its unique vision of Hell based on descriptions in letters ascribed to Paul, such as these verses in 2 Thessalonians (7-9):

*And to you who are troubled rest with us, when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels,*

*In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ:*

*Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power. . .*

Long before Augustine, Paul’s teaching was already part of Christian thought, but earlier Christian writers largely ignored it and focused on more positive views of humanity. Clement and Origen, for instance, “believed their own spiritual essence to be the inner presence of God,” which sounds familiar to us Quakers. They also “taught that humanity was meant for perfection, which could be achieved through the exercise of free

will because of the *deification of humanity* effected by the incarnation of Jesus” (Laughlin, 162). In other words, people could improve, could achieve salvation through good works and their own actions—another thing the early Quakers taught<sup>9</sup>—but this was considered heresy.

Augustine’s view was debated during his lifetime by other thinkers with less pessimistic views of humanity. For instance, a British monk named Pelagius argued that Augustine’s “limited free will made God an ogre” (Laughlin 160). What kind of God would require obedience to laws by creatures congenitally incapable of obeying? Instead, Pelagius argued, if God expected humans to be good, it must be because it was possible for them to be so. In seminary, when I read Augustine’s writings against Pelagius, I was convinced that Pelagius made more sense than Augustine. Pelagius insisted that human beings could, through an effort of will, be good or “righteous.” He lost the argument, however; he was, and still is, labeled a heretic by the Christian church.

Laughlin suggests that the Augustinian view prevailed in Christianity “largely for political reasons: it made the rites and rituals of the Church seem indispensable and those who administered them powerful. To put it bluntly: it kept the clergy employed” (163). The threat of hell and eternal damnation gave the Church a good deal of power,

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<sup>9</sup> John Passmore, *The Perfectibility of Man*, Chapter 7, “PERFECTIBILITY WITHIN CHRISTIANITY: PROTESTANT AND HERETICAL,” Online Library of Liberty <[http://oll.libertyfund.org/?option=com\\_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=670&chapter=136017&layout=html&Itemid=27](http://oll.libertyfund.org/?option=com_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=670&chapter=136017&layout=html&Itemid=27)>

*The theologian of the movement, Robert Barclay, is obdurate on that point in his Apology for the True Christian Divinity. If men experience the “new birth,” he says, “the body of death in sin comes to be crucified and removed, and their hearts united and subjected to the truth; so as not to obey any suggestions or temptations of the Evil One, but to be free from actual sinning and transgressing of the law of God, and in that respect perfect.” He grants, no doubt, that “this perfection still admit[s] of a growth” and that the possibility of sinning remains. But this last admission can scarcely be reconciled with what he also says, namely, that the grace of Christ is able “to counterbalance, overcome and root out the evil seed, wherewith we are naturally, as in the Fall, leavened.”*

one of the main things that Quakers spoke out against; they recognized that such power is not true Power from God, but corruptible human power.

Many liberal Protestants today have trouble accepting the orthodox Christian idea of a seething hell existing under the ground, which as Laughlin points out, “is incompatible with our modern scientific worldview.” For 21<sup>st</sup>-century liberal Protestants the belief “that an infinitely, or even relatively, merciful and compassionate God would create a realm of cruel, vindictive, tortuous, and . . . eternal punishment seems totally incongruous and incredible.”<sup>10</sup>

Heresy is not dead, thank goodness. Two contemporary Quakers struggling against the tide of Orthodoxy are Phillip Gulley and James Mulholland whose books *If Grace is True* and *If God is Love* have led to criticism and charges of heresy from the Orthodox or “right-thinking” Friends in Indiana Yearly Meeting and Western Yearly Meeting.<sup>11</sup> Gulley and Mulholland are Orthodox Quaker ministers who each came to realize he did not believe that a loving God would damn people to suffer eternally in hell. Together, the two Friends (who were also friends) wrote these books which I encourage you to read if you have not done so. The books are enlightening in showing how two Orthodox Quakers were led to what—in my opinion—is a truer understanding of original Quaker thought, and thus to rousing heresy.

I will end with an example of the “horrible” heresy, found fresh and alive in Gulley’s & Mulholland’s books. This is from *If Grace Is True*:

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<sup>10</sup> Laughlin, 166.

<sup>11</sup> Full titles including subtitles of the books are: *If Grace is True: Why God Will Save Every Person* and *If God is Love: Rediscovering Grace in an Ungracious World*.

*Forgiveness doesn't rely on sacrifice, blood or the payment of debt. Forgiveness has always been the choice of God. God was as gracious prior to the cross as God was after the cross. The death of Jesus didn't enable God to forgive, nor did it change God's mind about us. God has never sought our destruction, but our completion. Jesus wasn't born to die. He came to teach us how to live. Jesus didn't die to appease an angry God. He came to proclaim a God of love.<sup>12</sup>*

If this is heresy, I am happiest among heretics.

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<sup>12</sup> Phil Gulley & James Mulholland, *If Grace is True: Why God Will Save Every Person* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003) pp. 134-135.