



Heretics: The Creation of Christianity from the Gnostics to the Modern Church

By Jonathan Wright

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In *Heretics* Jonathan Wright charts the history of dissent in the Christian Church through the stories of some of its most emblematic heretics—from Arius, a fourth-century Libyan cleric who doubted the very divinity of Christ, to more successful heretics like Martin Luther and John Calvin. As he traces the Church's attempts at enforcing orthodoxy, from the days of Constantine to the modern Catholic Church's lingering conflicts, Wright argues that heresy, by forcing the Church to continually refine and impose its beliefs, actually helped Christianity to blossom into one of the world's most formidable and successful religions.

Today, all believers owe it to themselves to grapple with the questions raised by heresy. Can you be a Christian without denouncing heretics? Is it possible that new ideas challenging Church doctrine are destined to become as popular as have Luther's once outrageous suggestions of clerical marriage and a priesthood of all believers? A delightfully readable and deeply learned new history, *Heretics* overturns our assumptions about the role of heresy in a faith that still shapes the world.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Amazon Exclusive: A Q&A with Author Jonathan Wright



Q: What were your reasons for writing *Heretics*?

A: Two reasons spring to mind. The first is very straightforward. I simply wanted to provide the general reader with a pithy, evenhanded introduction to the story of Christian heresy. I wanted him or her to learn a little more about some fascinating people and events. The second reason is more selfish. I've always been a little puzzled by the persistence and multifaceted nature of Christian heresy. Other faiths have had their heretics, of course, but there seems to be something unique, or at least exaggerated, about the Christian experience. Heresy never went away, and it has done as much as any other factor to mold and define Christianity. Why is this? Is there something inherent in Christianity that breeds so much dissent and diversity? Such questions have been nagging at me for a very long time.

Q: Only very speculative ones, and I'd always argue that reaching overarching conclusions about an entire religious tradition is a rather silly pursuit (though I realize that it is all the rage). I do think, however, that debates are always likely to permeate Christianity. Who exactly was Christ? How is the Christian supposed to worship? Who should be in charge? What should the Church's structures be? Christians have been arguing about these and countless other issues for two millennia, and the battle between the so-called heretics and the so-called orthodox is the very best place to observe these conflicts.

Q: You say "so-called" heretics and orthodox. Why?

A: I must stress that I am not being judgemental. I happen to think that the Christian muddle is a rather wonderful muddle. "Muddle" isn't intended as a pejorative word, but I think we have to admit that decisions about what turned out to be orthodox and what ended up being denounced as heretical could sometimes be arbitrary. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the early Church. In those confused centuries very little was

settled. What texts should Christians hold sacred? Where were the fonts of doctrinal authority? Even something as fundamental as the nature of Christ was up for extended and ferocious debate. Some stressed his divinity, others stressed his humanity, others tried to combine the two. The Church, courtesy of its councils, reached firm, long-lasting, and perfectly reasonable decisions, but this shouldn't disguise the fact that alternatives were available, and they were held by very savvy, very devout Christians.

Q: So things might have turned out differently?

A: Up to a point, yes, absolutely! Look, it is fair to say that various Christian notions are basic. Monotheism, say, or a belief that Christ is crucial. But so many of the details were endlessly debatable. I'm not usually a fan of "what-if" or counterfactual history, but the story of heresy does invite such speculations. At the Council of Nicaea in 325, the ideas of Arius were denounced. He argued, as best we can tell, that Christ should be seen as an infinitely important figure but as someone not quite coequal with God the father. He was created and, as the famous catchphrase put it, there was a time when he was not. Those who held to such an agenda, one of those heresies that overstated Christ's humanity at the expense of his divinity, were certainly in the minority, but they were not lunatics. As we all know, such ideas were denounced, and we got the decisions of Nicaea and, subsequently, the councils of Constantinople and Chalcedon. It is important to remember, though, that Arian ideas (and other unorthodox Christological ideas) continued to win support among both the empire's ruling elite and the invading tribes that were causing mayhem during the fourth and fifth centuries. If there had been a run of emperors sympathetic to Arianism (not nearly as outrageous a notion as one might think), then Arius the arch-heretic might now be remembered as Arius the champion of orthodoxy.

Q: So differentiating between heresy and orthodoxy is a coin flip?

A: Sometimes, yes. I wouldn't want to overstate this argument. There were lots of excellent reasons why certain Christian ideas triumphed: they were more coherent, more popular, and so forth. On occasion, however, it came down to who won the argument or who secured political support or who managed to seduce the crowd. This isn't to deny that some ideas are simply mad. And it is crucial to stress that I don't have any fundamental objections to the notion of orthodoxy. It is sometimes a crapshoot, but perhaps a necessary one. What else was the fledgling Church to do, especially during the difficult early centuries? My only point is that we should see many of the decisions reached about Christian doctrine as an accident of historical circumstances. This doesn't invalidate them, and there is nothing uniquely Christian about drawing lines in the sand, but it does give pause for thought.

Q: Or perhaps we can be a little bolder and suggest that the process of enforcing orthodoxy was ill judged? Why was it necessary to stamp out alternatives? Couldn't the different parties simply learn to get along?

A: I'm delighted you asked this question, because it leads me to one of the other lodestones of my book. I agree that it is very hard for us citizens of the twenty-first century to swallow the history of heresy. It can be a bitter pill, and we tend to grow annoyed at the persecution of all those people whose only crime was to think differently. The trouble is, this is a modern perspective. Today we have a firm commitment to notions like pluralism, human rights, and free enquiry. I can't tell you how much I cherish such ideals, but I also realize that I'm a creature of my time. The stark fact is that such notions (at least as currently articulated) are inventions of the modern age. They did not exist in the fourth or the eleventh or the fifteenth century. Back then, the idea of an intellectual or religious free-for-all would have seemed absurd. We might not like this but we have to accept it, and ultimately, who are we to sit in judgement? To do so would involve an awful lot of arrogance: evolved us versus silly old them. As a historian whose job it is to treat the past on its own terms, this really won't do. The other reason behind writing *Heretics* was a sense of frustration. The history of heresy is often thought of as a battle between heroes and villains: the plucky, freethinking heretics versus

the nasty old Church. Heretics are recruited as forerunners of modern ethical and philosophical assumptions. This drives me mad. If you'd asked Arius, or a Cathar, or Martin Luther to support your modern beliefs in pluralism and cozy ecumenism, he would have looked at you as if you were insane.

Q: But surely this robs us of the opportunity to judge the past.

A: Absolutely! And long may such a disability reign supreme. Don't get me wrong—if someone tried to jail a person for his beliefs today, I'd lead the charge to denounce such antics. I'm quite a fan of rights and liberties, but when it comes to being a historian, I simply have to bite my tongue. That's one of the undercurrents of this book. I cheer neither for heresy nor for orthodoxy. I simply tell the stories and accept that the past was different. It is far more rewarding to explain that difference than to sit in Olympian judgment. Some might consider this as craven or wishy-washy. I prefer to think of it as striving, however feebly, for objectivity. That's an impossible goal, of course, but it remains something for which we should strive. That's the funny thing about the story of heresy: it raises incredibly important questions about how we write history. I've tried not to hammer the reader over the head (the book is intended as an instructive entertainment), but I hope I've done enough to provoke some musing.

Q: Moving on, you mentioned the fact that you saw the Christian muddle as wonderful. Is this a reflection of your own beliefs?

A: I want to make it clear that I hope the reader is unable to discern my affiliations or lack thereof from these pages. That would be a triumph. I know it's fashionable to nail one's colors to the mast when writing trade books about Christianity. For me, this is a lamentable trend—something of a pollutant, in fact. It really shouldn't matter. Since you've asked, however, I would probably define myself as an agnostic who respects sensible theists and atheists. More than that, I cherish them and would love to possess their certainty. I was not granted this gift, however, which makes my chosen profession (writing, reading, and reviewing books about Christian history) rather curious. Though no one ever complains that the historian of the medieval fabric trade does not own a loom! I realize, of course, that my book does not exist in a vacuum. I'm all too aware of the absurd God Debate that gobbles up so many column inches these days. It drives me to distraction. First because it is usually more of a cultural cat fight than a serious debate, and second because the antagonists (on both sides of the aisle) seem to think they are saying something new. I'll admit that I had a gentle polemical purpose in writing this book. Instead of making glib, crowd-pleasing statements about a two-thousand-year-old tradition (either pro or con), it might be better to admit to the complexity and step down from the pulpit. Dawkins, Hitchens, and their more bullish theistic rivals are addicted to simplification, historical and theological illiteracy, and drum-banging. I don't suppose for a moment that a modest history book will calm the hysteria, but it might be a good place to start.

Q: And finally, can you tell us a little more about yourself?

A: I'm a historian who spends most of his time in his hometown of Hartlepool, a soothingly ordinary place in the northeast of England. I did my undergraduate degree at St. Andrews University, then went on to complete my doctorate at Oxford in 1999. I spent several years in academia but then decided to opt for life as what they call an independent scholar: less security but also fewer essays to mark, fewer colleagues to make small talk with at receptions, and most of my time is my own. These days, I divide my time between scholarly and popular history writing. With my earnest scholarly hat on, I'm currently working on an edited volume on the eighteenth-century Jesuit suppression and a series on the great religious cities of the world, and I serve as a book review editor for the *Religious Studies Review*. With my populist hat on, I do lots of reviewing for the British press. I suppose the best thing about writing *Heretics* is that it has allowed me to straddle this divide. It is intended as a serious but entertaining book. Aside from all that, I like to think I'm an excellent amateur gardener. Just the other week I took some very promising cuttings from my ancient

lupines, which had decided to burst into life ahead of schedule. They do this every year. What can I say? I have heretical lupines.

Review

Heretics, by Jonathan Wright (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt; \$28). In this chatty primer, Wright emphasizes the "extraordinarily creative role" that heresy has played in the evolution of Christianity by helping to "define, enliven, and complicate" it in dialectical fashion. Among the world's great religions, Christianity has been uniquely rich in dissent, Wright argues—especially in its early days, when there was so little agreement among its adherents that one critic compared them to a marsh full of frogs croaking in discord. The fractiousness, he suggests, springs both from the worldly power that Christians achieved, which insured that the line between orthodoxy and heresy was sharply policed, and from enduringly confusing elements of Christian doctrine, such as the issue of Jesus' dual nature as god and man. Wright, though his prose is sometimes marred by creaky Oxbridge wit, navigates all the theological complications deftly.—The New Yorker

From the Inside Flap

A lively new examination of the heretics who helped Christianity become the world's most powerful religion.

In this delightfully readable and deeply learned new history, Jonathan Wright charts the history of dissent in the Christian Church through the stories of some of its most emblematic heretics—from Arius, a fourth-century cleric who questioned the very nature of Christ, to firebrands like Martin Luther and John Calvin, whose protests created new branches of the faith. As he traces the Church's attempts to enforce orthodoxy from the days of Constantine to modern times, Wright argues that heresy, by compelling the Church to continually refine and impose its beliefs, helped Christianity to blossom into one of the world's most formidable and successful religions. He also reminds us that there was nothing inevitable about how this faith developed.

The history of these heretics continues to raise crucial questions. What is the future of heresy? Is the current mood of tolerance a fleeting historical accident? *Heretics* is a book that challenges our assumptions about the role of heresy in a faith that still shapes the world.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Kenny Crowther:

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They can be reading whatever they get because their hobby is definitely reading a book. Think about the person who don't like looking at a book? Sometime, person feel need book once they found difficult problem as well as exercise. Well, probably you will want this Heretics: The Creation of Christianity from the Gnostics to the Modern Church.

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