



The Idea of Heresy, A Note

The History Module (TM1) along with the Module on Normative Conflicts and Transformation (TM4) of ICAS:MP propose a Conference on the Idea of Heresy. We seek to examine the idea of heresy at the conceptual level as also the manifestation of the phenomenon in history as it exemplifies the Metamorphoses of the Political in the long twentieth century.

Heresy refers to views that are contrary to or deviate from mainstream doctrines, particularly, from the most accepted doctrines of a religion. It has largely originated with but is not restricted to the Abrahamic traditions. Since non-conformity is often penalized, heresy has also been associated with substantial violence against individuals and communities involving persecution, beheadings, burnings at the stake and genocides such as the Inquisition by the Church, the expulsion of entire communities such as the Jews and Moors by the Reconquista in Spain and the decimation of the Amerindians.

Yet deviation can also be theologically creative and therefore be a major source of difference and diversity within faiths. Christianity, it has been argued, originated from a Jewish heresy - that of the Essenes, which was grounded in the idea of a caring godhead; in Islam the idea of continuous prophecy has been invoked several times over by the Shi'i, Ismaili and Ahmadi heresies so-called.

In some cases protest movements that were deemed heresies have become dominant religions. Martin Luther's 95 theses that began the Protestant Reformation were, to begin with, regarded by the Catholic Church as heresy. Conceptually, we are interested not only in the idea of heresy but its variants such as blasphemy and apostasy.

Although our starting point is the contemporary we feel it is important to examine heresies in history and seek to invite analyses of the Zoroastrian, Bahai, Shi'i, Ismaili, Parnami, Prannathi and the Ahmadi experience.

Pagan worlds, arguably, did not initially have an idea of heresy. In the Indic context, for instance, normally, if one disagreed one denied existing gods, promoted another god, another agama (set of sacred texts) or formed another sampradaya. Analytically one might contrast societies imbued with heresy to those characterised by pluralism defined as the capacity to live with difference. The other is not viewed as an existential threat, even when disagreement becomes sharp and is accompanied by violence. People often live with each other with existential ease and security. Ashis Nandy has argued that the cosmopolitanism of epic cultures involved prejudice, discrimination, stereotypes - and violence was surely pervasive in these societies - but the imperfection of both gods and demons did not generate a politics of annihilation.

Yet, such societies that acknowledge the other's right to exist, may inferiorize the other in terms of their belief/practice system and also inferiorise certain sections of people. Such societies may therefore develop orthopraxis, the deviation from which invites strong penalties. They devise strong legal and moral codes and evolve practices governed by these.

Analytically, it may be useful to distinguish heresy from deviation from orthopraxy and both from pluralist perspectives that tolerate, even encourage a plurality of beliefs and practices very different from one another.

It is interesting to note that the idea of heresy has become global. In contexts of modernity it has come to move worlds that are Hindu, Buddhist, Jain and Sikh and that arguably did not have earlier have this idea. The question is whether there were prior versions of the concept. Indeed, an argument is now made for the Protestantization of the World Religions.

The Abrahamic traditions, it has been argued, introduced a distinct kind of violence not known before, one that might be called religious violence. Modernity has intensified this - the Muslims are viewed as the New Zealots as the Christians had once been. There is also a secularisation of heresy as it is used by Statism and ultra-nationalism. The heresies of Stalinist politics created the Gulag and Pol Pot decimated his population. In this case the Party became a secular Church with purges and excommunications.

The new culture of heresy in regimes of ultra-nationalism involves suspicion, mistrust, spying and reporting against strangers, but also friends and neighbours. In India the new vocabulary of anti-national, traitor and urban naxal or terrorist establishes the ground for exclusion and even disenfranchisement.

In terms of ideal types we can identify then three forms of orientation to heresy in each of which the following aspects predominate:

- 1 Truth, Revelation and Dogma
- 2 Orthopraxy as distinct from orthodoxy
- 3 Pagan worlds, with neither orthopraxy nor orthodoxy

The first refers to exclusive monotheisms. The second to instances such as Vedic Brahmanism that made certain communities ineligible to perform the fire-sacrifice. One could be thrown out of the jati or sub-caste, or made subject to punishment for violating injunctions with respect to marriage. The Graeco-Roman and certain Asian religions would fall into the third category.

This Conference will dedicate one day each to three distinct responses to established beliefs and practices. Heresy being one of them. As part of the Conference we will have a public event, possibly a Symposium on the Idea of Heresy or on Fluid identities, past and future.