

# The Way of Heterodoxy

By

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We are living at a time when, in the name of achieving greater diversity, equity, and inclusion, freethinking and free speech have been thrown under the bus. Our ideas and voices cannot be diverse, allowed equitable expression, nor all be included at our podiums, pulpits, and platforms. This doesn't mean there aren't still many different ideas out there, only that too many of us now divide and isolate ourselves into ideological tribes that are rigidly defined by their beliefs and by their extreme intolerance and hatred of outsiders.

Human history and societies are replete with examples of ideological suppression and division, but the extent at which it prevails today is exacerbated by the advent of social media. Built on algorithms designed to keep our attention, social media directs us toward information based on our previous browsing habits, so that the information we consume isn't very diverse. Even worse, these algorithms, which aren't programmed to fact check, drive us toward increasingly extreme versions of such information. In short, they lead us toward extremism. As Roger McNamee, an early investor in Facebook now says, "In their relentless pursuit of engagement and profits, these platforms created algorithms that amplify hate speech, disinformation, and conspiracy theories."<sup>1</sup>

So, the stage is set for the perfect storm and today we are in it. American society, in particular, is so politically divided it's as if we have become two opposing countries occupying the same space. But our divisions are not that clean. We are not merely divided, but divisive, meaning we increasingly respond to each other with hostility over the slightest differences, which leads to lots of internal strife within groups that are on the same page about most things.

Conservatives, including the Republican party, have largely handled such strife by favoring their most extreme members, which helps them maintain their political strength by sticking together no matter how crazy they become in the process. Outliers like Liz Cheney, Adam Kinzinger, Mitt Romney, and only a handful of others, tend to be repudiated, censured, and condemned as traitors. As far as a political strategy, steering the herd to move with the most extreme thinkers has worked well, but it has also made the Republican party unstable, unrecognizable, and often unethical.

The impacts upon progressive organizations, including the Democratic party, have been much different. Rather than moving as a herd toward our most extreme thinkers, we continue to infight and splinter, which keeps us politically impotent. Even when our party of choice is in power, it makes few major moves so as not to offend anyone, not even its political opponents, and is, thus, unable to achieve its goals or prevent its worst fears from coming true. The overturning of *Roe v. Wade* by a politically weighted and extremely conservative Supreme Court was a decision that could be seen coming miles away, and yet the Democratic leadership did nothing to prevent it.

In a recent article entitled, "The Elephant in the Zoom" by *The Intercept's* D.C. Bureau Chief, Ryan Grim, we are told the Guttmacher Institute, "the abortion rights movement's premier research organization,"<sup>2</sup> has been locked into such internal strife that it has been unable to concentrate its energies and resources on the organization's work. When, following the

killing of George Floyd, its vice president of public policy, Heather Boonstra, spoke to employees “about the role systemic racism plays in society and the ways that Guttmacher’s work could counter it,”<sup>3</sup> many of them turned their sights on what they considered the systemic racism within Guttmacher itself. According to Grim’s article, they wanted the institute to loosen deadline restrictions and allow employees to take leave without any penalties, since deadlines and being at work are part of white supremacy culture. The difference, the article says, is that “For Boonstra and others of her generation, the focus should have been on the work of the nonprofit: What could Guttmacher, with an annual budget of nearly \$30 million, do now to make the world a better place? For her staff, that question had to be answered at home first: What could they do to make Guttmacher a better place?”<sup>4</sup>

But, according to Grim, the leaders of such groups think at least some employees are “using a moment of public awakening to smuggle through standard grievances cloaked in the language of social justice.”<sup>5</sup> In the case of Guttmacher, employees filed formal complaints against Boonstra, which were investigated and found to be baseless, but it took a lot of energy away from the Institution’s mission and twitter groups continued beating the organization up with accusations of racism and white supremacy anyway. This continued even after last May when we all learned of the Supreme Court’s plan to overturn *Roe v. Wade*. As Grim says:

That the institute has spent the course of the Biden administration paralyzed makes it typical of not just the abortion rights community—Planned Parenthood, NARAL Pro-Choice America, and other reproductive health organizations had similarly been locked in knock-down, drag-out fights between competing factions of their organizations, most often breaking down along staff-versus-management lines.<sup>6</sup>

I bring up this example to show how destructive this mindset can be just when we need our social justice and political action organizations the most. In our community, you may recall, the Spokane County Democrats became entirely dysfunctional in the runup to Donald Trump’s election after its chairman was accused by some of his own staff of racism and criticized for “refusing” to use the right pronouns. He denied these allegations, resigned his position, and threatened to sue if the very people he once worked with didn’t stop making defamatory remarks.

This is the point made in a recent *New York Times* piece by columnist Thomas Edsall entitled, “Democrats are Having a Purity-test Problem at Exactly the Wrong Time.” Edsall not only discusses how progressive organizations are being paralyzed from within when we need them most, but how they are inadvertently pushing more Americans toward the political right. He cites Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker who “contends that internecine conflict on the left has become ‘a profound issue, particularly for those of us who are terrified that the hard woke left will enable the resurgence of authoritarian populism by inflicting damage on the moderate left and center and by driving voters to the right.’”<sup>7</sup>

Those of us with liberal values and progressive aims should, thus, be especially troubled by the illiberalism, intolerance, and destruction caused by extremism within our own ranks. While extremism on the far Right has resulted in more political power for them, it is destroying the chances for those of us on the Left to ever have any kind of meaningful political power again. As Edsall says, “The reality is that the left and the Democratic Party have suffered bouts of internecine conflict repeatedly over the past 100 years.

Unfortunately, the most powerful corrective has proved to be defeat, even repeated defeat, on Election Day.”<sup>8</sup>

Sadly, our own Unitarian Universalist Association is also a casualty of the illiberalism crippling and destroying liberal organizations by making them inconsequential to anything meaningful. William Galston, a Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institute, says the fundamental problem, is “the presence in every progressive organization of a small but very vocal fringe that views every problem as a sin.”<sup>9</sup> In many of them, such sin is conferred by conflating minor work grievances with oppression and mere differences of opinion with hate speech and harm.

The problem with the Unitarian Universalist Association is the small but very vocal fringe group has maneuvered its way into its leadership positions and has instituted undemocratic changes in governance that will make them impenetrable for years to come. Because of this, and during the past couple of weeks, I have come to see the UUA as a lost cause in the current culture wars, as they are sometimes called. I hope I am wrong, and I also hope things will eventually turn around, although I don’t expect them to do so any sooner than the next decade.

This is so because the UUA is a rather isolated, insignificant, and mostly unknown organization, which means it can cling to its failed ideology for a lot longer than the many more prominent liberal organizations that are already recognizing the detrimental impacts resulting from the failed ideology infecting them. And this is the good news, there are now enough liberal organizations on life support that they are looking for a cure for this madness.

When I was at the Heterodox Academy’s 2022 annual conference in Denver last month, I bumped into one of my heroes on the elevator, Kmele Foster. Foster is a cohost of the popular 5<sup>th</sup> Column podcast and is a lead producer for *Freethink* media company, among other impressive accomplishments. I introduced myself and was surprised that he remembered hearing about my own difficulties going up against the cancel culture. After asking me how things turned out and how I’m doing, I was relieved to hear him say he believes this troubling mindset has already reached its peak and is beginning to wane. I agreed with him and hope that we are both correct.

The good news is that progressive organizations already have the fix for this disaster. We don’t have to figure out how to counter it, we simply need to reinstitute and recommit to the values that make liberal organizations liberal—freedom, reason, and tolerance. This is at the heart of what we mean by heterodoxy. Also referred to as the HxA Way, I’m going to share its five characteristics with you as stated by the Heterodox Academy itself, which, I’m confident, you will agree could be your own principles, as well as the principles upheld by our liberal religion until only recently:

- 1. Make your case with evidence.**

Link to that evidence whenever possible (for online publications, on social media), or describe it when you can’t (such as in talks or conversations). Any specific statistics, quotes, or novel facts should have ready citations from credible sources.

- 2. Be intellectually charitable.**

Viewpoint diversity is not incompatible with moral or intellectual rigor — in fact it actually enhances moral and intellectual agility. However, one should always try to engage with the strongest form of a position one disagrees with (that is, “steel-man” opponents rather than “straw-manning” them). One should be able to describe their interlocutor’s position in a manner they would, themselves, agree with (see: “Ideological Turing Test”). Try to acknowledge, when possible, the ways in which the actor or idea you are criticizing may be right — be it in part or in full. Look for reasons why the beliefs others hold may be compelling, under the assumption that others are roughly as reasonable, informed, and intelligent as oneself.

### **3. Be intellectually humble.**

Take seriously the prospect that you may be wrong. Be genuinely open to changing your mind about an issue if this is what is expected of interlocutors (although the purpose of exchanges across difference need not always be to “convert” someone, as explained here). Acknowledge the limitations to one’s own arguments and data as relevant.

### **4. Be constructive.**

The objective of most intellectual exchanges should not be to “win,” but rather to have all parties come away from an encounter with a deeper understanding of our social, aesthetic, and natural worlds. Try to imagine ways of integrating strong parts of an interlocutor’s positions into one’s own. Don’t just criticize, consider viable positive alternatives. Try to work out new possibilities, or practical steps that could be taken to address the problems under consideration. The corollary to this guidance is to avoid sarcasm, contempt, hostility, and snark. Generally target ideas rather than people. Do not attribute negative motives to people you disagree with as an attempt at dismissing or discrediting their views. Avoid hyperbole when describing perceived problems or (especially) one’s adversaries — for instance, do not analogize people to Stalin, Hitler/ the Nazis, Mao, the antagonists of 1984, etc.

### **5. Be yourself.**

At Heterodox Academy, we believe that successfully changing unfortunate dynamics in any complex system or institution will require people to stand up — to leverage, and indeed stake, their social capital on holding the line, pushing back against adverse trends and leading by example. This not only has an immediate and local impact, it also helps spread awareness, provides models for others to follow and creates permission for others to stand up as well. This is why Heterodox Academy does not allow for anonymous membership; membership is a meaningful commitment precisely because it is public.

Make your case with evidence. Be intellectually charitable. Be intellectually humble. Be constructive. Be yourself. These are the principles that enable us to put heterodoxy into practice. Heterodoxy is the opposite of orthodoxy. The suffix, *dox*, come from the Greek

word meaning idea, belief, or opinion. *Orthodox* refers to the right belief, the correct belief, the one belief, which is why orthodontists correct crooked teeth, teeth that aren't right, aren't straight, or are out of place. *Hetero*, on the other hand, means "different," or, "other." Heterodox refers to having other ideas, ideas that are different than the one orthodox belief. So, you can understand why the Heterodox Way is the solution to the ideological tribalism and intolerance of our day; Exposing ourselves to different ideas and other beliefs and becoming more tolerant of those who hold them.

In liberalism today, the orthodox idea, the one idea, the right idea regards an approach to greater diversity, equity, and inclusion that is based on Critical Race Theory, which I won't go into, only to say that many people think there are other, better approaches. But the conflict that arises from this isn't over ideological differences, but over the utter unwillingness of those who think they have the right idea to tolerate those who speak of other ways. Those who dare are immediately condemned as modern-day heretics under the guise of racist, homophobe, transphobe, and so on. Conservatives, on the other hand, who don't seem to care as much about racial issues, are quick to label, dismiss, and denigrate everyone they disagree as "liberal," which they use as a slur. There are also many of us who not only care about racial justice but are also concerned about other significant issues. We are heterothematic, if you will. We think global warming, reproductive freedom, homelessness, immigrant rights, criminal justice, income equality, academic freedom and other societal matters are also important issues that must be addressed.

The Heterodox Academy focuses mostly on how such intolerance is impacting academia and its members are academics who support open inquiry, viewpoint diversity, and constructive disagreement in research and education. It currently has over 5,000 members, 14% percent of whom identify as conservatives, 17% as progressives, 30% as moderate, and 26% as libertarian or classic liberal, all of whom, as I witnessed at the HxA conference, not only tolerate each other, but get along with great enthusiasm and joy. Despite their differences, they engage as friends.

While there, I attended a fascinating lecture by a professor of Medieval history. It was entitled, "Cancel Canceling," and was a comparative analysis of the Medieval Inquisition with today's cancel culture. The parallels between these past and present mindsets are disturbing. I was so impressed with the professor's polished, enthusiastic, and scholarly presentation that I presumed she must have given it many times. After she was through, I asked if this was something she teaches to her classes, hoping to hear how her students have responded to it. To my surprise, and sadness, she and many others in the room laughed at the suggestion. It was clear to me, in that moment, that it would be foolhardy in today's climate for a history professor, an expert in her field, to risk offending what has become the status quo. That moment helped me better understand and sympathize with what college professors and others in academia are now going through. To be afraid to say what you want and to teach what you should because you might be condemned on social media and out of work the next day, must feel terribly oppressive. It also makes me sad knowing that so many college students aren't able to have their minds truly opened by professors who have far more to offer than what they are allowed to give. This is much different than my life-changing, mind-opening, and mind-bending college experience no so long ago.

Fortunately, I left the HxA Conference with lots of hope because it has become clear to me that a shift has occurred in our larger society, the beginnings of a swing back in a saner direction that's based on the values many of us hold dear, and that some of us have even made a religion out of; reason, freedom, and tolerance. As difficult as it is for me to admit, I don't have as much hope that the Unitarian Universalist Association will come to its senses anytime soon, but I have much hope our society has reached a turning point and that our perennial values will again become our prevailing values as more of us come to realize, as the Heterodox Academy puts it, "Great minds don't always think alike," or, as our liberal religion has been saying all along, "We need not think alike, to love alike."

<sup>1</sup> McNamee, Roger, "Platforms Must Pay for Their Role in the Insurrection," *Wired*, Ideas, January 7, 2021, 5:16 PM.

<sup>2</sup> <https://theintercept.com/2022/06/13/progressive-organizing-infighting-callout-culture/>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/29/opinion/progressive-nonprofits-philanthropy.html>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.