

**Heterodoxy**  
**Reflections on the Recent Heterodox Academy Conference**  
By  
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Several years ago, not long after my arrival in Spokane in 2011, I began sensing something had gone awry in our religion. It was subtle at first and mostly manifested as the willingness of some Unitarian Universalists in leadership positions to publicly shame other UUs for saying things they disagree with. Later it became apparent that white males, particularly white straight males, were being systemically removed from the UUA's platforms—including its podiums, pulpits, and publications. During collegial gatherings, which I eventually stopped attending, white males, especially older white males, increasingly felt fearful of openly expressing ourselves as the result of negative reinforcements and other group dynamics.

These dynamics were at first as subtle as they were troubling, but by 2017, after a person who wasn't hired for a job by the Unitarian Universalist Association blamed her rejection on white supremacy, all pretense ended and the new illiberal, irrational, and intolerant ideology that has overtaken the UUA and many of its members and congregations, became obvious. In an effort to understand what was happening and to make others in aware of it, I began researching the same phenomenon in our wider culture, which eventually resulted in my 2019 book, *The Gadfly Papers*, that led to my immediate, public, and painful cancellation by hundreds of my colleagues and the UUA leadership, all of which proved the point of my book.

I bring this up now only to say that what I experienced, and what our congregation has endured in the aftermath of *The Gadfly Papers*, and the disruption and division that is similarly occurring in many of our congregations, both in the US and Canada, is not exclusive to Unitarian Universalism. It's happened or is happening in much of the world, especially to progressive institutions. This is no truer anywhere than in academia, where it began, starting around 1990, although its roots go even deeper into the past, certainly into the 1970's, and arguably back to the 1950's when American colleges first became enamored with postmodern philosophy.

So, it seems reasonable to believe this is where the problem must be dealt with in order to stop the hemorrhaging that is bleeding into the whole of society as graduates continue to enter the workforce and society to influence and even oversee many of our most liberal institutions and organizations. As William Galston, a Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institute, said in a 2022 *New York Times* article, this has led to “the presence in every progressive organization of a small but very vocal fringe that views every problem as a sin.”<sup>1</sup> The word “sin” is appropriate to describe the dynamics of what many consider a new secular religion that is authoritarian, punitive, intolerant, and extremely dogmatic.

And this is where the Heterodox Academy and heterodoxy come in. Because this widespread phenomenon began in academia decades ago, academia also has the oldest and most advanced responses, including organizations like the Heterodox Academy, also known as HxA. *Heterodoxy* translates as “different opinions,” in contrast to *orthodoxy*, which refers

to one right, or literally one “straight” opinion. “You better get your head on straight,” as the saying goes. As its website explains, “Heterodox Academy was founded in 2015 by social psychologist and bestselling author, Jonathan Haidt, sociologist Chris Martin, and Georgetown law professor Nicholas Rosenkranz, in response to the lack of ideological diversity on colleges campuses and how it’s negatively impacting the quality of research within their disciplines.

“Our commitment to heterodoxy within the academy is a response to the rise of orthodoxy within scholarly culture that leads people to fear shame, ostracism, or any other form of social or professional retaliation for questioning or challenging a commonly held idea,” HxA says. It further envisions “an academy eager to welcome professors, students, and speakers who approach problems and questions from different points of view, explicitly valuing the role such diversity plays in advancing the pursuit of knowledge, discovery, growth, innovation, and the exposure of falsehoods.”

During the past three days I attended the Heterodox Academy’s conference in Chicago, along with over 400 other attendees. I can’t say a negative word about any of the workshops or plenaries I took advantage of, although some of the content regarding the suffering that college professors, other faculty, and many students are enduring these days was sometimes overwhelming.

The very first workshop I attended, for example, was about the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, known to most as F.I.R.E., founded by attorney Greg Lukianoff, coauthor of *The Coddling of the American Mind* with Jonathan Haidt. The presentation was entitled, “Understanding Faculty Rights and How F.I.R.E.’s Legal Defense Fund Can Help.” The possibility of a professor getting into trouble simply for saying something somebody finds disagreeable has become so pervasive that such a fund has come into existence, along with a 24-hour hotline for those who find themselves in potential trouble. The fund doesn’t pay for professors to sue a university, but to pay for lawyers to help them prevent a situation from ever going to court by reminding school administrators of their rights, particularly regarding freedom of speech.

The reality, I learned, is that the law is on the side of professors even though administrators often have to be reminded of this fact. As far back as 1957, for example, in *Sweezy v. New Hampshire*, the Supreme Court ruled that jailing an academic because he refused to answer questions about some of his lectures was a violation of due process, thus establishing the notion of academic freedom. Chief Justice Earl Warren stated, “The essentiality of freedom in the community of American universities is almost self-evident. No one should underestimate the vital role in a democracy that is played by those who guide and train our youth. To impose any strait jacket upon the intellectual leaders in our colleges and universities would imperil the future of our Nation.”

In 1967, New York State had a law prohibiting state employees from being part of any organization seeking to overthrow the government, which was interpreted to include anyone belonging to the Communist Party. This led to *Keyishian v. Board of Regents*, a suit against the State University of New York which required employees to sign an oath stating they were not communists, once again firmly guaranteeing the principle of academic freedom.

Again, in 1972, in *Healy v. James*, the Supreme Court ruled against Central Connecticut State College for refusing to recognize an on-campus chapter of the Students for a Democratic Society as unconstitutional, determining that the First Amendment applies to all public institutions.

How is it, after all these rulings by the highest court in the U.S., that it has become so common for freedom of speech rights to be violated on college campuses that it's necessary to establish a legal defense fund for professors and others who are simply speaking their minds? At HxA, whether during workshops or informal conversations, I heard several painful stories of college professors and others whose freedom of speech rights have been violated, or who have been publicly "canceled" by online mob-justice, or are under tremendous pressure to keep their mouths shut, and to even publicly profess ideas they disagree with, like DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) statements they have to endorse just to get hired. You may have heard that in recent weeks MIT, followed by Harvard, eliminated these requirements. Let's hope this is a sign the tide is turning.

In one workshop entitled, "Encroachment on Open Inquiry," experts from three different fields—social work, psychiatry, and anthropology—talked about ways college professors are forced to ascribe to theories and ideologies that are unproven, unsound, and contrary to what the facts and research actually indicate is true. For instance, until 2022, the Council of Social Work Education's (CSWE) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) didn't include the terms equity, inclusion, anti-racism, anti-racist, or white supremacy at all. Since 2022 they have been dispersed dominantly throughout document 26, 22, 20, 13, and 2 times, respectively. In many cases, the directives surrounding these words are extremely burdensome, if not impossible to adhere to.

The psychiatrist who presented this information was similarly frustrated regarding bold efforts to distort and suppress the truth and uncertainties about treating young people diagnosed or misdiagnosed with gender dysphoria. He spoke of distinguished professor Allan Josephson, for example, who was demoted to in 2017 to junior faculty member (essentially fired) after serving 15 years as Chief of the Division of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Psychology at the University of Louisville. During a 2017 panel discussion, in which he was invited because of his expertise, he said, "the notion that gender identity should trump ... reproductive organs, external genitalia ... is counter to medical science," and that "Transgender ideology neglects the child's need for developing coping and problem-solving skills necessary to meet developmental challenges."<sup>2</sup> Whether or not these comments were in alignment with what others are saying about this serious issue, a person with Josephson's expertise should be allowed to express his opinions about it without repercussions.

More recently, biologist Carol Hooven left Harvard after publicly talking about the reality of gender. She was immediately attacked on social media by a representative of Harvard's DEI office, who called her transphobic even though Hooven had stated, "understanding the facts about biology doesn't prevent us from treating people with respect. We can respect their gender identities and use their preferred pronouns." Eventually Hooven felt it necessary to resign, stating:

While the stated aims of DEI may have been laudable, in practice, DEI culture allows the recasting of certain ideas as “dangerous” or “harmful,” which squashes viewpoint diversity and the open, vigorous debate that should be at the heart of a thriving institution of higher education. So while I was not “forced” to resign, Harvard’s culture of intolerance—particularly toward my scientific views on the nature of sex—led me to feel that my only choice was to leave.<sup>3</sup>

I also heard about another distinguished endocrinologist at the McGill University School of Medicine who was removed from teaching on the topic of disorders of sexual development due to the complaints of two students (students!) who declared he used “outdated and stereotyped conceptions.” The presenter told similar stories, one after another, about experts in their fields being punished, vilified, and drowned out by campus protestors for not adhering to the party line, even when supplying ample scientific evidence and research for their opinions.

I also heard former San Jose State anthropology Professor Elizabeth Weiss, who was forced into early retirement after posting a magazine style picture of herself posing with a skull in her hands. After the post stirred outrage from some in the Native American community, she was locked out of the school’s collection of skeletal remains, upon which she filed a lawsuit, claiming the University retaliated against her. She lost her fight to regain access to the collection. Instead, she and the University reached a settlement to have her voluntarily submit her resignation. Weiss has a new book out about the ordeal, entitled, “On the Warpath.”

In addition to many other examples, I routinely ran into other HxA attendees who told me about their own such tales, like another anthropologist in Canada who feared for her job after being called to the administrative office for mentioning the reality of male and female gender. We even heard from keynote speaker Hakeem Oluseyi who was publicly crucified after refuting online claims about James Webb, saying the former NASA administrator was homophobic and part of a plot to root gays out of government positions. There was an effort to prevent NASA’s latest telescope from being named after him on these grounds, which prompted Oluseyi to research the matter, only to discover the claims were completely false. This is why NASA never addressed the matter and kept Webb’s name as planned. Regardless of the truth, Oluseyi was canceled because he refuted what others insisted is still true, even though it isn’t.

I could go on, but I think I’ve said enough to make the point that life on our colleges campuses these days is oppressive for professors, faculty, and students who are afraid to do the one thing they are all supposed to do, be able to think and speak and argue aloud.

Fortunately, there was also lots of good news about a shift that’s taking place. I particularly enjoyed a session entitled, “What Universities Owe the Liberal Project.” It included three presenters, all of whom agreed Universities must return to and make liberalism’s commitment to free inquiry and debate the core ideal of their mission. I was particularly inspired by Emily Chamlee-Wright, President of the Institute for Humane Studies, an organization “rooted in classical liberal tradition and promotes a freer, more humane, and open society by connecting and supporting talented graduate students, scholars, and other intellectuals who are driving progress in the critical conversations shaping the 21st century.”<sup>4</sup>

I was extremely interested in attending this workshop because I'm a liberal, a liberal minister, and one who also believes the solution to the extreme divisions, intolerance, and lack of progress going on in the world today requires a recommitment to the liberal project. We need another Renaissance to rediscover its ideals. Professor Chamlee-Wright, who was kind enough to share her manuscript with me, did not let me down. I wish I had time to read it to you in its entirety, but a few excerpts will have to do.

With the understanding that these are big problems, I want to suggest that an even bigger problem looms. The fate of our (generally) free, constitutionally constrained, liberal democratic order is hanging in the balance ...

Enlightenment-era liberalism advanced, imperfectly and inconsistently, a radical idea: that individuals, by default, deserve respect. This default respect translated-again, haltingly and inconsistently-into liberal democratic freedom ... As it evolved, liberalism also became a mindset, a cultural ethos that privileged openness, curiosity, ingenuity, and intellectual humility.

This metaphor—the university as the frontline in a war—has become so commonplace that we don't even think to scrutinize it ... My concern, however, is not merely that warfare is a particularly bad metaphor. It's that the metaphor does real damage. The campus-culture-war framing turns the peaceful exchange of ideas into combat. Intellectual rivals are no longer colleagues we seek to understand or persuade; they are enemies we seek to crush. Friends who issue challenge in our direction are not thought partners: they're traitors we must expel them from the ranks of learned society. Worse still, the culture-war framing has led to both sides arming up, willing to use illiberal means to seize power and exercise control.

Instead of an ideological war, we ought to be finding fellow liberals, whatever their political stripe, who still believe in those core principles, and working with them to identify solutions to hard challenges facing the liberal order, both on campus and in the broader world.

We're facing a lot of complex challenges. Backsliding of democratic norms. Rising polarization and declining social trust. Climate change. Healthcare. Housing. Design and governance issues in tech and innovation. The list is long. And ideally, solutions to these challenges will be liberal solutions that preserve liberty and foster human flourishing.

But that can't happen if liberal ideas and concerns are not at the table. Reigniting scholarly interest in the liberal project is not about insisting upon a list of preordained conclusions. It's about reminding ourselves and our fellow liberals that basic liberal principles—the inherent dignity of every person, individual liberty, equality before the law, intellectual openness, limits to government authority require continued exploration and fresh application if we are to sustain and fortify a robust, inclusive, liberal democratic society.<sup>5</sup>

This was the last lecture I heard, and it was, for me, the most important message of the week. The good news is that many presenters expressed their belief that the tide is finally turning, thanks, in part, to brave souls who are willing to speak up and take a beating if necessary. I already mentioned MIT and Harvard's recent elimination of their DEI policies in hiring. Also, during the past two years, HxA's membership has grown nearly fifty percent, and now has 50 HxA communities on campuses across the U.S. and Canada, suggesting an increasing number of people are ready to work for change. This change will reflect HxA's commitment to open inquiry, viewpoint diversity, and constructive disagreement. As its

slogan says, “Great minds don’t always think alike.” And I also now have hope that liberal values, those I have been preaching about for years, those that are supposed to be central to our Unitarian religion, have a real chance of becoming Humanity’s core values again so that we might live peacefully together and advance together as one human family across the globe.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/29/opinion/progressive-nonprofits-philanthropy.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.wlky.com/article/insider-louisville-federal-lawsuit-says-uofl-professor-was-fired-over-transphobic-remarks/26995314>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.thefp.com/p/carole-hooven-why-i-left-harvard>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.theihs.org/>

<sup>5</sup> Chamblee-Wright, Emily, “What Universities Owe the Liberal Project,” Heterodox Academy Conference, Chicago, IL, June 8, 2024.