Conscience in the Age of Hyperpluralism

Marcela K. Perett

American capitalism venerates choice as the sacred vessel of consumerism. The message is that endless acquisition is the path to happiness and, implicitly, that if we could only choose the right object, experience, or partner, we would (at last) be perfectly happy and fulfilled. This reasoning, is seems to me, now extends to what I would call Life Questions, serious questions about our most important concerns, the answers to which have implications for our lives. "What should I live for and why?" "What should I believe and why should I believe it?" "What is morality and where does it come from?"[1] Many answers, both secular and religious, have been given to these questions over the centuries. Here I will sidestep the fact that many of the answers given to Life Questions, even Christian answers, involve contradictory doctrinal claims that simply cannot all be true at the same time. What I am concerned about in this brief essay is not which choice might or might not be the right one, but with the act of choosing itself, with the historical process that got us to where we are now, and with the effect that this endless choosing has on our conscience.

The psychology of consumer choice has been much studied. According to the best that consumer research has to offer, having too many choices actually proves to be paralyzing. In one experiment, shoppers choosing a jam for their morning toast chose more easily and were more satisfied with their choice when presented with five alternatives. When presented with fifteen different jams, many had a difficult time choosing and some were unable to choose at all. Those who managed to make a selection reported being less satisfied with their choice than those choosing from among fewer jams. The implication for our lives seems profound. We can handle choosing from among a handful of options, but overabundance sours our view of *all* the available options. I am not aware of any experiments in which participants would be invited to choose from among different answers to Life Questions, but it is reasonable to assume that the same dynamic would apply.

We are used to this abundance of choice, and the historical trajectory that has led us to this place may even seem inevitable. But there is nothing inevitable about the developments that have led us here: it is a result of individual decisions and preferences that have accumulated over the last five hundred or so years and have led to the predicament of the present day.

The hyperpluralism of our age can be traced back to the Reformation. Here I follow the argument put forth by a prominent historian, Brad Gregory, in *The Unintended Reformation*, which is really a sustained meditation on

[1] Brad Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2015), 74.

the Reformation's continued impact on the intellectual, religious, and political trajectories of our age. In this view, the moment in the sixteenth century at which Martin Luther (soon followed by others) asserted that the Roman Catholic church represented a perverted form of the Christian religion and that its answers to Life Questions must, therefore, be seen as suspect or flat-out wrong was the origin of the pluralism of our age. No matter that we are separated from the events by some five hundred years. Sixteenth-century reformers alleged that the church had corrupted the message of Jesus and introduced human-made traditions and rituals in place of true doctrine. It was not this criticism in itself that launched the West on its path toward religious pluralism, but rather the solution that was proposed in order to remedy the corruption of the medieval Church. The reformers sought to redress the Roman corruption by turning to the healing voice of the Bible, and only of the Bible, following a principle of *sola scriptura* (the Bible alone).

At first, this reliance on the Bible alone offered hope of disentangling the gospel from anything that was not absolutely necessary for salvation, which was, according to the reformers, almost everything that the medieval Church had to offer. They especially abhorred the numerous accretions that had grown in the Church over the centuries. By then, the Church was more than a millennium and a half old and dominated the religious, cultural, and political life of the entire continent of Europe; it was the earthly expression of an institutionalized worldview, and it was wealthy, omnipresent, and intrusive. The Church owned about one third of all land on the European continent, which made it the largest single landowner and the most powerful political player. Its rituals, doctrines, and institutions ballooned. In this earthly incarnation, Christianity was a dominant (and dominating) societal force, no longer the religion of a small, persecuted band of Jesus's followers, and as such proved an easy target for the biblically-minded reformers. Rejection of the medieval Church was the only issue that they were ever able to agree upon.

Therein lay the difficulty. The reformers agreed that the medieval Church was intolerable and also that the Bible alone was to serve as their moral compass, not the popes or the Church's traditions. For that reason, any practice, belief, or institution that the reformers did not find in the Bible was decreed to be corrupt and expunged from the practice of the new, reformed Christianity. However, what the Bible actually taught immediately became a matter of harsh contention. The reformers disagreed about what the Bible said, not only with Catholic interpreters but also amongst themselves. And although there were numerous discussions and negotiations, the reformers were never able to agree on fundamental issues, such as the sacraments or even which books should be included in the biblical canon.

The infamous Marburg Colloquy is one such example of the reformers' failing to arrive at an agreement. In October 1529, some twelve years into the Reformation, all the fathers of the Reformation came together at Marburg castle in Germany. They journeyed far to get there. Luther, Philip Melanchthon, and a few others came from Wittenberg, Johannes Oecolampadius from Basel, Martin Bucer from Strasbourg, and Huldrych Zwingli from Zurich. The founders of what would become Lutheranism as well as the Reformed Tradition (future Calvinist,

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The Marburg Colloquy, 1529. Woodcut from Ludwig Rabus, *Historien der Heyligen Außerwölten Gottes Zeügen* (Strasbourg, 1557).

Congregational, Presbyterian, Baptist and other denominations) were all in attendance. They met to discuss their interpretations of a number of points, including the Trinity, original sin, baptism, and justification by faith. The question of Communion, Christianity's central sacrament, proved intractable. The attendees spent two days arguing about Matthew 26 and other key biblical passages in order to decide whether the bread and wine offered in Communion changed and, if so, how. The dispute revolved around the so-called real presence of Christ in the sacrament. Luther found evidence that Christ was present in the bread and wine whereas Zwingli did not. Even after an extensive study, in which all participants agreed that the Bible was the key to what was correct, their positions proved fundamentally incompatible, and their parting was infused with bitterness. Zwingli asked that they all take Holy Communion together, but Luther refused, unwilling even to acknowledge those who disagreed as brothers in Christ.[2] This was the last time the reformers met in person in order to settle their divergent views. There was simply no agreement to be had about what the Bible said about the nature of Communion. Other core issues of doctrine and practice soon came to be disputed as well.

And because, at least initially, all reformers—or Protestants, as they would come to be known—rejected all extra-biblical authority, they had only the Bible from which to wrest meaning and life directives. The Anglicans (and later the Methodists, who split off from them) defined their position as *prima scriptura*—that is to say, they regarded the Scriptures as the primary source of divine revelation but were willing, at times, to supplement this revelation with other sources of truth, such as common sense, the created order, or older traditions. However, unity on any single question proved hard, often impossible. The reformers' firm commitment to *sola scriptura* as the exclusive source of authority in answering Life Questions gave rise to a whole range of completely in-

[2] Michael Massing, *Fatal Discord: Erasmus, Luther and the Fight for the Western Mind* (New York: HarperCollins, 2018), 724–5.

compatible truth claims all based on different interpretations of the Bible. Because no interpretation could exist independently of the person doing the interpreting, every interpretation was shaped by underlying assumptions, existing opinions, values, and preferences. Aware that endless interpretations were being generated by different readers of the Bible, the reformers tried to invoke other criteria in order to be able to sort out valid readings from the invalid ones.

For example, they insisted that the interpreters be "enlightened by the Holy Spirit," but deciding which interpreter met these criteria and which did not proved to be subjective (and therefore divisive) as well. Much turned on a couple of verses from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians: "The unspiritual person does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one." (1 Cor 2:14–15). These verses seemed to provide an explanation for why other reformers were mistaken in their biblical readings, but because they did not give any kind of guidance on how to discern those genuinely "spiritual" from those "unspiritual," they did not alleviate the discord.

This level of disagreement marked a departure from the state of affairs in medieval Christendom. There was doctrinal disagreement, to be sure, even about something as central as the nature of Holy Communion. For example, in the mid-eleventh century, Berengar of Tours rejected the doctrine of real presence in the Communion bread and wine. After publicizing his views in letters to famous church leaders of his day, Berengar was summoned before a church council in Vercelli, his views were condemned as heretical, and he was excommunicated. In this way, the authority vested in the papacy and in church councils served as arbiters of acceptable interpretation. Even if not always popular (many a medieval heretic did complain of injustice and many a modern scholar condemns a perceived lack of freedom among the medievals), these institutions did chart a unified course for the Church as a community of believers.

But the Reformation rejected the authority of Christendom's traditional arbiters. The resulting disagreement proved exceedingly troubling to many reformers, because at heart what was at stake was not a squabble over biblical phrasing but salvation of their souls. The stakes were high, which explains why not an insignificant number of sixteenth-century Christians died a martyr's death rather than recant their views. The violence between Catholics and Protestants is perhaps not surprising, but it is difficult to comprehend that Protestant groups (especially the so-called magisterial reformers, who had made an alliance with ruling secular powers) deliberately hunted down and put to death members of other Protestant groups (often the so-called radical reformers, who rejected any association with secular powers). In Switzerland, Anabaptists died at the hands of their fellow Protestants, with whom they shared many fundamental convictions about the meaning of life, but who found their particular readings of the Bible so dangerously erroneous as to be worthy of death. In England, Catholics killed Protestants, and after Henry VIII led his church away from its union with Rome, Protestants killed Catholics. And there were other groups and other places.

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What has long troubled me is that these heretics, who followed their conscience unto death, died for contradictory things. Some died defending the pope and his authority, others because they thought the pope a heretic. Some died defending Christ's real presence in the sacrament of Eucharist, others because to them it was merely a symbol. Some died because they insisted on baptizing adults, others because they refused to baptize them. The list goes on.

This matters even now, because it is precisely this unwillingness to tolerate alternative answers to Life Questions that led to several extremely violent wars of religion and that brought us—several centuries later—the principle of religious toleration. All manner of religious disagreement is allowed and protected by laws and authorities of the state. What unites our vastly diverse, postmodern societies is the consumerist cycle of acquisition and disposal. What divides us is everything else: what we believe, how we live, what we consider important. The principle of toleration allows us to coexist in peace in exchange for, essentially, agreeing to disagree about what matters and why.

There is a cost, though: skepticism. This skepticism seems to negate all truth claims and causes unbelief to be mistaken for neutrality.[3] Too many choices lead to paralysis; too much choosing leads to relativism. With respect to Life Questions, the defining spirit of our era is the conviction that no definite answers can be found. Indifference is prized. Anyone with strong views, especially religious ones, is forced into relativizing them, downgrading them to the level of subjective beliefs. Cultural osmosis usually does the job; if not, peer and other pressures are brought to bear. As a result, a significant portion of religious believers "in effect relativize and subjectivize their own truth claims, making clear that they speak only for themselves."[4] The state does not need to demote our truth claims; we do it ourselves. We live and let live, and what is right for you is not necessarily right for me.

Of what use can conscience be in this situation? How can our internal choosing mechanism help us in this context of hyper-choice? The Reformation martyrs whom I mentioned above rejected pluralism; each wrestled with his or her conscience to choose the right course of action and, ultimately, arrived at a course of action, even if it led to ignominious death. What I fear is that our endless choosing has given us choice paralysis, or that we even forget to choose. Unexercised, our conscience may atrophy so that we not only cease to be able to empathize with the Reformation martyrs, but also forget why one would die for one's truth at all. ❃

[3] Brad Gregory, *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 352.

[4] Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation*, 111.

Marcela Perett is an assistant professor of European history at North Dakota State University, where she teaches courses on the Middle Ages and the Reformation. Her research interests revolve around heretics, their beliefs, and their recruitment strategies on the eve of the Reformation. She worships at Holy Resurrection Orthodox Church in Fargo.