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THOMAS SZASZ

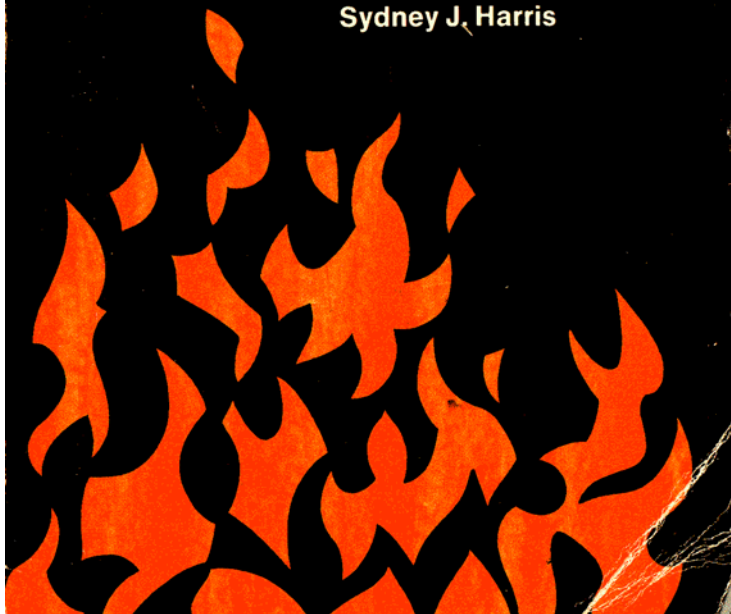
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# Heresies

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psychology

## HERESIES

Thomas Szasz

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"One knows that he is a heretic when his friends and colleagues confront him with an incredulous and indignant: 'You mean you don't believe that...?' What one does not believe might be that the Jews are the Chosen People; or that Jesus is the Son of God; or that Freud was a scientist."

from the Introduction

Heresy means to choose. The person who chooses "wrongly" is a heretic; yet heretics, since the beginning of time, have existed in all societies. The result has been an endless conflict between the holders of power, whose business it is to rule, and the individual, whose business it is to free himself from arbitrary authority.

It is this perennial human conflict—between power and knowledge, authority and reason, the collective and the individual—which noted psychiatrist Thomas Szasz explores in *Heresies*. In the same biting but often humorous vein as in *The Second Sin*, Dr. Szasz illuminates the contradictions and fallacies that make up our contemporary attitudes toward sex and marriage, freedom and punishment, law and morals, medicine and psychiatry. These aphorisms expose many of our modern beliefs and practices to be as self-serving and inhuman as those of the medieval Christians, who, out of fear of the Devil, burned witches at the stake.

Thomas Szasz is Professor of Psychiatry at the State University of New York Upstate Medical Center in Syracuse, New York. He is the author of *The Age Of Madness*, *Ceremonial Chemistry*, *Ideology And Insanity* and *The Second Sin*, all published by Anchor Press.

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THOMAS SZASZ is Professor of Psychiatry at the State University of New York Upstate Medical Center in Syracuse, New York. He is a member of the editorial board of *The Humanist*, *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, *Journal of Drug Addiction*, and *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, and of the board of consultants of *The Psychoanalytic Review*; a member of the American Psychoanalytic Association; a fellow of American Psychiatric Association; and a co-founder of the American Association for the Abolition of Involuntary Mental Hospitalization. He is the author of more than two hundred articles and book reviews and of numerous books.

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# *Heresies*

THOMAS SZASZ

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“The word heresy is derived from the Greek *hairesis* which originally meant an act of choosing, and so came to signify a set of philosophical opinions or the school professing to them. As so used the term was neutral, but once appropriated by Christianity it began to convey a note of disapproval. This was because the church from the start regarded itself as the custodian of a divinely imparted revelation, which it alone was authorized to expound . . . Thus any interpretation which differed from the official one was necessarily ‘heretical’ in the new, pejorative sense.”

“Heresy,” Encyclopaedia Britannica (1973)



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## *Preface*

This is a collection of observations and reflections on a variety of subjects, but mainly on language and law, and on medicine, morals, and madness. It is thus a continuation and extension of several of my previous books, and especially of *The Second Sin*. While it may be more rewarding for those who are familiar with some of my earlier writings, it may be more refreshing for those who are not. In any event, to understand it, and I hope to enjoy it, requires no special competence or knowledge, but only a willingness to think for oneself.

## *Introduction*

### I

Heresy is being right when the right thing to do is to be wrong. It is insisting that two and two make four when the proper, patriotic, professional thing is to say they make five. It is believing that the earth moves around the sun, when Luther, Calvin, and Cardinal Bellarmine all tell us that the sun moves around the earth.

Of course, it would be a mistake to think that the heretic is always right. No one is. Moreover, often heresy has nothing to do with being right or wrong in the literal—mathematical or scientific—senses of these terms. Instead, it has to do with not believing what everyone else believes or what one ought to believe; with proclaiming disbelief when the right thing to do is to profess belief or at least remain silent.

One thus knows that he is a heretic when his friends and colleagues confront him with an incredulous and indignant: "You mean you don't believe that . . . ?" What one does not believe might be that the Jews are the Chosen People; or that Jesus is the Son of God; or that Freud was a scientist. Each of these disbeliefs is a heresy for those who believe in them, but not for those who do not. When a psychoanalyst friend says to me, earnestly but contemptuously: "You mean you don't believe in the

unconscious?"—as if not believing in the unconscious were like not believing in the liver—it is because my disbelief offends his belief. A hematologist or Hebraist couldn't care less about whether or not I believe in the unconscious, but he might be quite interested in whether or not I believe in the genetic causation of leukemia or the divinity of Jesus. And so it goes. The point is that what is heretical for one person may be heroic for another and irrelevant for a third.

Most of the heresies in this book are of the same type as those mentioned above about religion and psychoanalysis. That is, they pertain to matters where language is used in two ways, literally and metaphorically; where the true believer speaks metaphorically but claims that he asserts literal truths; and where heresy may consist of no more than insisting that a metaphoric truth may be a literal falsehood. One's wife may be a witch; but she cannot be a "real" witch. However, there are people who believe that their wives are witches and act accordingly, murderously, toward them. Psychiatrists say that such a person is psychotic and act toward him as if they believed that he was a "real" patient. So are metaphors created and literalized, confirmed as "real" and unmasked as "myth," new ones formed, literalized, and so forth—in the cycles of what we call individual, organizational, and cultural lives and deaths. This is what poets and politicians, psychotics and psychiatrists, therapists and theologians have in common: they all deal with metaphors that sustain the dignity and lives of some and destroy those of others; and they all deal with metaphors mendaciously, insisting that metaphorical meaning is literal and that literal meaning is metaphorical. The result of all this is the mystification, the nonsense, and the outright prevarication that make up a large part of the semantic air people in all cultures have always exhaled

and then, mistaking it for the pure air of the mountains or oceans, have enthusiastically rebreathed.

Still, just as when the concentration of carbon dioxide in the air exceeds a certain limit and interferes with breathing, so there comes a point when belief in the reality of literalized metaphor exceeds a certain limit and interferes with knowing. When that happens, whole groups and civilizations lose, as it were, their sense of humor: they actually come to believe, for example, that certain moral injunctions were given to their forefathers because they were God's favorite children; that a piece of bread is the body of a god; that pregnancy is a disease which justifies abortion as a treatment and requires that delivery take place in a hospital superintended by doctors; or that the unconscious is a part of a mental apparatus just as real as the liver or kidneys and hence requiring a science of its own. I could go on, but as that is what I do in this book there is no need to do so here. Instead, I shall do something I do not do in the book: namely, show, as a warning about where the literalization of our favorite metaphors may lead us, where the literalization of one of the favorite metaphors of Christianity has led our ancestors.

## II

The literalization of the metaphor of the Last Supper creates the image that Jesus is alive. If so, He can be killed again. Incredible as it may sound to the contemporary reader, this belief was actually held in Europe until relatively recent times. For about three hundred years, from the thirteenth until the sixteenth centuries, there were repeated episodes of Jews being accused of stabbing the sacramental wafer and making it bleed—justifying the killing of thousands of Jews. Moreover, the colloquial characterization of Jews as “Christ-killers,”

even in modern anti-Semitism, also points to the power that literalized metaphors exercise over the human mind: for this epithet must be read as casting blame for the death of Jesus not only on some Jews who lived a long time ago, but also on Jews who are the speaker's contemporaries.

The story of the "bleeding" Eucharist is a fascinating, but astonishingly neglected, chapter of medieval history. The following is, of course, but a bird's eye view of it.

According to Eugene Gaughran,<sup>1</sup> the first authentic reference to mysterious blood appearing on bread is the report of classical historians concerning the siege of Tyre, in what is now Lebanon, in 332 B.C. Diodorus Siculus, the Greek historian, gave this account of the phenomenon: "At the distribution of the rations on the Macedonian side, the broken pieces of bread had a bloody look."<sup>2</sup>

The exact cause of this reddish coloration, which was often mistaken for blood, was not discovered until 1823, when the Italian naturalist Bartolomeo Bizio identified, named, and described the saprophytic bacterium *Serratia marcescens* as its cause. This widely distributed bacterium, which grows readily in starchy foods, produces a blood-red pigment. To those who believed that the Host was the body of Christ and not just a piece of bread, the occurrence of this pigment in the bread thus had momentous significance.

One of the earliest reports of such bacterial discoloration of the sacramental wafer was reported in 1247. In the village of Beelitz, in Germany, "A maid held the Host in her mouth during communion. Later she sold it to Jews who stabbed it, kept the blood which flowed from it, and gave the Host back to her. The Miraculous blood made the Church of Beelitz famous."<sup>3</sup> There is no mention of any harm coming to the Jews in this case.



Soon, however, stories of "bloody" Hosts become the backdrops for their mass murder.

Gaughran reports a typical incident of this sort:

In Paris on Easter [1290] a woman is said to have taken the Host from her mouth after communion and given it to a Jew to redeem a pawned dress. The Jew boiled the Host in water without destroying it. He then stabbed it and the water became complete red. The Host flew by itself onto the table where Christians saw it. The Jew confessed the deed and was burned.<sup>4</sup>

Here are several more such accounts:

1298 A.D., Nuremburg, Germany

The Jews are said to have stolen the Holy Host of the Christians, scorned it, and beat it in a mortar and pestle, and blood came out of it. The Jews in Nuremburg were destroyed by fire and sword, and the persecution extended into eastern France.

\* \* \*

1299 A.D., Röttingen, France

The Jews of Röttingen were reported to have bought Hosts at Easter time in order to draw blood from them. They stabbed them and powdered them in a mortar. Many Jews are said to have been killed by the Christians.

\* \* \*

1399 A.D., Poznan, Poland

A girl sold a Host to the Jews who stabbed it until blood appeared. They threw it into a swamp. A shepherd saw the Host flying about and the oxen knelt in adoration. The girl was burned with the Jews.

\* \* \*

1492 A.D., Sternberg, Germany

In the state of Mecklenburg an unscrupulous priest, Peter Dane, in order to redeem pawned goods, gave two Hosts to

a Jew, Eleazar. He had sanctified them on July 10. On the Friday before the Feast of St. James, July 20, the Jews defiled the Hosts and stabbed them until blood flowed and stained the table through three layers of cloth. The wounded Hosts flew about on the table top. The Jews were frightened and wished to return the Hosts. Eleazar's wife returned to Peter Dane the bloody Hosts concealed in the socket of a candle stick holder, the whole wrapped in a cloth. He denounced them because his conscience bothered him. All the Jews who knew about this were put on trial and more than twenty of them were burned on Simon Judas Day on a hill near Sternberg, which since has been called Judenberg. Judenberg is a place where the legislative assembly of Mecklenburg for many years held its open air sessions.<sup>5</sup>

And so it went. I cite these episodes concerning the stabbing and bleeding of the Host to show where the literalization of the central metaphor of Christianity—of sacramental wafer as the body of the Son of God—could lead. It actually led to the interpretation of a reddish pigment in starchy material as blood, as the blood being the blood of Jesus, and as the cause of the shedding of His blood being the Jews. This line of reasoning—which we now recognize as transparently literalized and strategic—justified the “rightful” killing of Jews as murderers. The same reddish discoloration of starchy foods had, of course, been observed by other people at other times, none of whom gave it this particular interpretation. One is reminded here of sayings such as “One sees what one is prepared to see” and “Opportunity favors the prepared mind.” When men are prepared to see the Jews as Christ-killers, and when they want to kill the Jews for killing the Son of God, they will then perceive the reddish discoloration of the sacramental wafer as blood. And their “religious” interpretation of its red color will not seem inconsistent to them with the fact

that the same discoloration also occurs in bread that has not been consecrated—in other words, in bread (literal bread, for eating), as well as in Bread (metaphorical bread, for worshiping by Christians and for “killing” by Jews).

## III

The contemporary reader may be tempted to dismiss all this as the magical thinking of medieval peasants. That would be a mistake. For if mistaking the bacterial discoloration of bread for the bleeding body of Jesus seems bizarre to the contemporary, intellectually enlightened reader, what does the belief in “ritual murder” seem like to him? By “ritual murder” I refer to the belief of some Christians, still current during my childhood in Hungary, that in order to celebrate the Passover holidays properly, the Jews need the blood of a Christian child as an ingredient for making the unleavened bread, or matzoh. To obtain such blood, so this accusation of ritual murder goes, the Jews kill Christian children before the Passover. Curiously, this idea seems to have sprung up at about the same time as did the organized belief in witchcraft—that is, in the twelfth century. In 1144, a young English boy, William of Norwich, was said to have been killed for such a purpose. Revealingly, he was supposed to have been killed by crucifixion.<sup>6</sup>

Although there was no evidence for this particular charge, the belief quickly spread and marked the beginning of a long series of anti-Semitic persecutions throughout Europe. Even in the nineteenth century, there were forty-two recorded cases of charges of ritual murder being brought against Jews, one of the most famous being that which took place at Tiszaeszlar, a village in southern Hungary. On April 1, 1882, a fourteen-year-old Calvinist girl disappeared near the home of

Joseph Scharf, the sexton of the Jewish synagogue in the village. Her mother accused Scharf of having murdered the girl in order to get Christian blood for matzoh. A local magistrate forced Scharf's son to confess participation in the crime. At the trial, Scharf was exonerated and the conspiracy to convict him was exposed. Because of the enormous publicity which this trial generated, it became Europe's best known case of the judicial persecution of Jews prior to the Dreyfus affair in France.<sup>7</sup>

Another famous case occurred in 1899 at Polna, Bohemia, where Leopold Hilsner, a shoemaker's apprentice, was accused of having murdered a nineteen-year-old seamstress. The prosecutor injected the motive of ritual murder into his charge. What gives this case special poignancy is that after a local court had sentenced Hilsner to death, Thomas Masaryk—who was later to go on to be the founding father and first President of Czechoslovakia—published several brochures and articles pleading for a new trial. In the second trial, where there was no reference to ritual murder, Hilsner was sentenced to life imprisonment. In his book on Austrian intellectual history, William Johnston, in an effort to recreate the temper of those times, concludes this story with the following important observation:

Coinciding with the climax of the Dreyfus affair, the Polna case intimidated Jews throughout Austria. One university professor, himself a converted Jew, appalled Masaryk by conceding, "You know that I am a Jew myself and I am convinced that this ritual murder business is merely superstition. But this case proves the possible existence of a secret sect which might after all practice ritual murder."<sup>8</sup>

This Jewish attitude, at once pathetic and shocking, became widespread during the Dreyfus affair and proved literally fatal when the Nazis rose to power. It