

Thinker, Poet, Philosopher Giordano Bruno Devoted to the Truth, condemned by the Roman Inquisition, 475 Years Later

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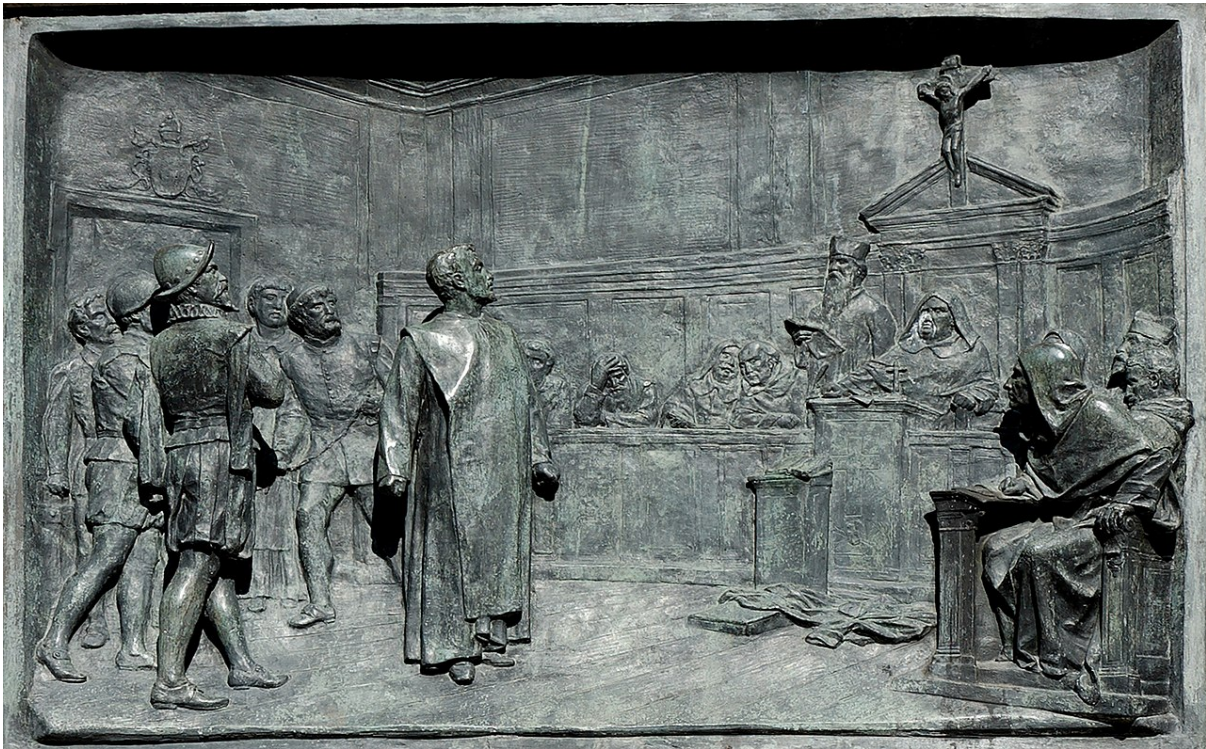
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In the early morning hours of February 17, 1600, a man was carted to Rome's Campo d'Fiori where, chained by the neck, he was stripped naked, hung upside down and burned at the stake, the culmination of seven long years of confinement in the Prison of the Roman Inquisition. His ashes were thrown into the Tiber River. If you make your way to the bustling and lively square today you will find at its center a statue honoring that man, Giordano Bruno. Described as the 'most militant statue in Rome,' the monument was erected in 1889 and presents the hooded Bruno in the cowl of a friar, facing toward the Vatican, as if silently reprimanding the Roman Catholic Church for his execution.

This year marks the 475th anniversary of Giordano Bruno's birth in 1548 in the small town of Nola, a short distance from Naples. The intervening years since his death have seen Bruno's status grow – as a thinker and poet, astronomer, philosopher and master of mnemonics, or the art of memory. It is now acknowledged that in claiming the universe was infinite, with infinite suns like our own, the Nolan was some 400 years ahead of his time. But what finally had him condemned by the Roman Inquisition was that the "apostate monk demanded free inquiry into truth, unprejudiced and unaffected by theologic authority." According to a more recent biographer, Bruno was delivered to the flames because he ultimately refused to acknowledge the authority of those who sat in judgment over him.

Bruno deserves to be remembered for his devotion to truth, and the freedom of thought to bravely follow wherever the truth may lead. His intrepid constancy was immense, his vision

of reality was profound and anticipated the greatest minds of the early modern era, including especially Baruch Spinoza. Bruno can be a very difficult read unless one is well-versed in the controversies of late renaissance thought. He can be daunting but he could also write clearly, pointedly, and with withering irony. He could also be outrageously funny.



The trial of Giordano Bruno by the Roman Inquisition. Bronze relief by Ettore Ferrari, Campo de' Fiori, Rome. (Licensed under the Public Domain)

In terms of his metaphysics, Bruno was, in a word, a pantheist. This is why it is often said that he was a forerunner to Spinoza, the true 'father of modern naturalism,' as Richard Bernstein has recently argued. As Hegel would characterize Bruno's conception of ultimate reality: 'The things which appear to be different are only modifications of one single thing which includes in its existence all other existence.' Schopenhauer once wrote that both Bruno and Spinoza would have been at home on the banks of the Ganges. Schopenhauer was referring to the theoretical or theological kinship between Bruno's One, Spinoza's Substance and the monistic conception of Brahman that we find, for example, in Advaita Vedanta, where it is an entirely pantheistic, homogenous (undifferentiated) principle of Reality.

Bruno is, among other things, a great thinker of the One, putting him in a tradition going back to Parmenides. As he writes in the dedication of his comedic play, *Candelaio* (The Candlemaker): "Time takes away all and grants all, everything changes, nothing is destroyed; only one thing cannot change, one, alone and eternal, and only one can abide eternally, consistent and identical. With this philosophy my spirit grows large, and my intellect is magnified... everything that is, is either here or there, near or far, now or later, sooner or later. Rejoice, then, and if you can, be well, and love the one who loves you." Bruno represents the indomitable power of thought, its irreducibility, its freedom to rise above the present, to see beyond the horizon, and grasp the infinite.

For Bruno, there is no limitation to which thought is irremediably bound. There is nothing

that in principle cannot be known. The fatal problem for every philosophy of finitude is that when it says thought can travel this far and no farther it has already gone beyond the limit. As Theodor Adorno would point out, once you assign limits to reason, “is there not a sense in which you already raise yourself beyond these limits? And if reason claims to tell you how far you may go and how far you may not go, does this not already imply that reason somehow stands beyond the limits which are set by reason itself?” This is also Hegel’s fundamental objection to Kantian idealism: as soon as you say that we cannot have knowledge of the world as a whole you’ve gone beyond the limit, because that requires you to make a judgment about the whole. Indeed, there is nothing that is intrinsically unknown or unknowable.

I have a modest claim to make: we need Bruno today more than ever. This is because he represents an intellectual antidote to the prevailing ideology of today which tells us that we are doomed to finitude, which comes down politically to the assertion that there is no alternative to the reign of global capitalism. Of course, Bruno did not know about capitalism, globalization or neoliberalism. What he did know however is that humanity is infinite. That we are limited only by our own narrowness of vision.



The monument to Bruno in the place he was executed, Campo de' Fiori in Rome (Licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0)

Bruno is a militant for truth: he “raises the human measure of faithfulness and strengthens reverence for what is of highest and best in man.” What would it mean to remain faithful to

the truth his life embodies? In a word: resist. It would mean to refuse to accept what is, to accept the given. Bruno was not a revolutionary as such, but his fidelity to the universal compels him to meet his enemies, who have all the power of authority on their side, with steadfastness and fidelity born of the truth. Copernicus's heliocentric model of the solar system "appeared to him an inspiration of genius. Therefore, he defended it, extended it further than its originator dared extend it, and finally died for it and for all that it meant to him."

Bruno fully grasped and embraced the philosophical implications of Copernican theory, including the homogeneity of substance between the earth and the celestial bodies, and the identity of laws governing their motion. There was no need for a first mover external to the material world, as movement was intrinsic to extended bodies. Bruno asserted that the universe was infinite, with infinite solar systems like our own; he even claimed that the universe was teeming with life. These were shocking claims for his era. "To Bruno and to Bruno alone the suggestion of Copernicus entered into the pattern of a completely new cosmological order." He did not simply anticipate Galileo and Kepler, but went beyond them, envisioning an "entirely new world which had shed all the dross of tradition."

We need to revive his legacy, because Bruno's life and thought evince the virtues of which we are in such short supply. What is so important about his cosmological and speculative daring is not simply that it is centuries ahead of his time. Bruno stands in eternal defiance of any effort to give finitude the last word. We are Immortals, not because we continue to live after our bodies die, but because we can participate in immortal truth. Or as Bruno wrote, "The wise feareth not death; rather she sometimes striveth for death, she goeth beyond to meet her. Yet eternity maintaineth her substance throughout time, immensity throughout space, universal form throughout motion." If it is the denial of eternity that is at the basis of the nihilism that we are witnessing today, then we have need of Bruno. We need Bruno not to propose us an afterlife of the soul, but to remind us that there are eternal truths, that 'the mind is eternal to the extent that it grasps the things from the perspective of eternity,' and in the final analysis it is only by keeping faith with what is eternal do we truly become Immortals.

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