



## The Durability of Orthodoxy

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Heresy may seem glamorous to the journalist and alluring to spiritual connoisseurs, but most Christians have preferred the way of orthodoxy. Over the centuries the most enduring, resilient, and—one might add—most tolerant form of the Christian faith, has been Catholic orthodoxy.<sup>1</sup> This is a social and religious fact that is too easily ignored. Orthodoxy may not sell in *Psychology Today*, but it gets on well in Our Lady of the Blue Ridge or St. Paul's across the street from McDonald's. In the twentieth century most Christians continue to baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, confess their faith in the rhythmical cadences of the Nicene Creed, and bury their dead in the hope of resurrection. Orthodoxy is not the tardy and ill-considered fabrication of a cadre of bishops imposed from above; it is a way of life the faithful have practiced, theologians have taught, and the saints exemplified for almost two millennia. Orthodoxy has proven itself to be more durable than heresy.

Heresy is thought to be creative, inventive, imaginative; orthodoxy by contrast is termed rigid or wooden. How often have we heard the phrase "dead orthodoxy"? Recently I read again the tired assertion that in the early church those in authority "created a rigid religious culture with its twin poles of orthodoxy and schism." The heretics, however, are said to have "celebrated every form of creative invention," and their life is portrayed as "spontaneous, charismatic, and open." No one speaks of "dead heresy." Yet in the course of Christian history, more often than not, vitality and life were found among the orthodox; their teachers were flexible, open to change, receptive to new ideas, and willing to adapt traditional formulations to new circumstances in the name of faithfulness to the apostolic tradition. The heretics were often ideologues, fixed

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<sup>1</sup>The term Catholic with a capital "C" is, I think, preferable to "catholic" to designate the tradition to which Lutherans belong. Lutherans stand in continuity with the early and medieval church, and in most books with articles dealing with Christianity before the Reformation, and in translations of ecclesiastical writings from the early and medieval periods, the term Catholic is capitalized.

on particular formulations and terms, unresponsive to the correction of others. The hardest people to convince have always been the heretics.

Of course it is as easy to malign the heretics as it is to parody the orthodox. That is a game Christian intellectuals have played with relish from Irenaeus to Augustine to Martin Luther. One of the earliest and purest expressions of this invective is the opening paragraphs of Tertullian's treatise *Against Marcion*. He begins his work with a description of Marcion's birthplace on the Black Sea:

The sea called Euxine, or hospitable, is belied by its nature and put to ridicule by its name. Even its situation would prevent you from reckoning Pontus hospitable: as though ashamed of its own barbarism it has set itself at a distance from our more civilized waters. Strange tribes inhabit it—if indeed living in a wagon can be called inhabiting.... There is a sternness also in the climate—never broad daylight, the sun always niggardly, the only air they have is fog, the whole year is winter, every wind that blows is the north wind.... Even so, the most barbarous and melancholy thing about Pontus is that Marcion was born there, more uncouth than a Scythian, more unsettled than a Wagon-dweller, more uncivilized than a Massagete,... darker than fog, colder than winter, more brittle than ice, more treacherous than the Danube.<sup>2</sup>

## I. THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF HERETICS

For centuries the heretics have been vilified and abused, and it is one of the merits of the twentieth century to have reclaimed some of the lost voices in Christian history. There were many “good heretics,” men of nimble mind and profound spirituality. Among these were Valentinus, the inventive Gnostic thinker in the second century; Origen of Alexandria, the most original intellect before Augustine; Apollinaris, a daring theologian of the Incarnation; the acute exegete Theodore of Mopsuestia; and the monophysite Severus of Antioch, who stated the arguments against Chalcedon and for “one nature” more cogently than any other figure in Christian history. Beside rehabilitating these individual figures, we realize today that several great traditions of Eastern Christianity, e.g., the Copts in Egypt and Nestorians in Syria, diverged so little in theology, liturgy, and church order from the main trunk of the Eastern church that they hardly deserve the name heretics. Their chief sin was to reject the divisive formulation of the fourth council, the Council of Chalcedon.

Without such visionary thinkers and spiritual traditions Christian history would not only be less interesting, but the orthodox faith itself would be much less biblical, less reasonable, and lacking in clarity, precision, and persuasiveness. The history of heresy illustrates the worn adage that the church did not know what it believed until someone stated its teaching partially or wrongly. Christian doctrine did not come into the world fully formed but was formulated as the result of controversy and debate, of correction and patient refinement of terms, phrases, and concepts over generations and centuries.

Often the “heretics” were the first to sense the limitations of traditional formulations, to pose fresh questions, or to retrieve biblical texts and themes

<sup>2</sup>Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem* 1.1.

that had been forgotten or ignored. In some cases their primary error was a lack of subtlety and nuance. Only those who came later, after the problems had been thoroughly aired, seemed capable of finding the way to a satisfying solution. Others (who bear the name “heretic”) made false starts that prompted their “orthodox” critics to propose new ideas that would have been unthinkable before the “heretic” appeared. Marcion, for example, was the first to suggest the idea of a canon of Scripture as a norm for faith and belief. His proposal turned out to be too radical, because he abandoned the Septuagint, eliminated certain books already on the way to general

acceptance, and went at others with scissors and paste. But his initial insight about the need for a standard was sound, and within several generations a canon of apostolic writings was enthusiastically embraced by Catholic bishops and teachers.

As we have become more familiar with the writings of the heretics, often through the discovery of original writings (e.g., the Gnostic books from Nag Hammadi), or editions and translations of treatises that have been known solely through the works of their critics (for example, Eunomius' *Exposition of the Faith*), the heretics have earned our sympathy and gained our respect. "We too are Christians," they say, and on occasion even their harshest critics were willing to allow them the name Christian. It is no longer possible to read Irenaeus' *Against the Heresies* without first studying the writing of his opponents, e.g., the Gospel of Truth or the Epistle to Rheginos, both now available among the Nag Hammadi documents, just as it is not possible to appreciate the writings of the early Christian apologists without first reading Galen or Celsus or Porphyry. Indeed, the discipline of understanding the spiritual world of the opponents has its own rewards. They too have something to teach us about the faith.

## II. THE CASE FOR THE ORTHODOX

Yet in its zeal to vindicate the heretics, our generation has unwittingly become their apologists, and theologians and historians who once pilloried the heretics now caricature the orthodox:

In much current writing about Christian origins the Fathers are no longer put on a par with the heretics; they are put on the defensive, and it is assumed that the heretics are the true religious geniuses, and even more, the bearers of the authentically radical spiritual breakthrough inaugurated by Jesus.... We have moved from historical criticism through historical evenhandedness to historical advocacy. The historian is not content to assure the heretics a fair hearing; the historian has become an advocate in their cause.<sup>3</sup>

Who will speak a good word for poor plodding Bishop Irenaeus when Gnosticism is touted as the precursor of depth psychology? Gnostic writings sparkle and glisten in new translations, and Irenaeus languishes in the dense columns of the *Ante-Nicene Fathers* published over a hundred years ago.

So deeply has the critical spirit permeated theological discourse in our time that Christian thinkers have forgotten that one responsibility of theology is

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<sup>3</sup>Patrick Henry, "Why is Contemporary Scholarship so Enamored of Ancient Heretics?," *Proceedings of the 8th International Conference on Patristic Studies, Oxford, September 1979*, ed. E. A. Livingstone (Oxford: Pergamon Press).

to *transmit* to those who come after us what we have received from those who preceded us. This task requires not only critical, but also sympathetic—indeed reverent—understanding of the tradition. It asks of us that we identify with, if not always embrace, what others have wrought.

Perhaps the time has come to cease belittling orthodoxy as regressive and authoritarian and to ask why it has persevered up to our own time. The Christian movement did unite around

certain practices, beliefs, and institutions and for very good reasons. Orthodoxy not only seized the center but has been able to hold it for the entire span of Christian history. Gnosticism may have its attractions, but its teachers perverted Christian truth on a point where compromise was impossible, the role of Christ's humanity in redemption. Irenaeus had the better of the argument, not because he was a bishop wielding a heavy club, but because he took the Scriptures with greater seriousness, he was more respectful of what others in the churches believed and taught, and he saw with exemplary clarity the theological significance of Christ's life as a human being. He did not bludgeon his way into Christian affections by the use of episcopal authority.

In our myopia we have viewed orthodox Christianity primarily as a matter of right doctrine or correct teaching. But doctrine has only been one mark of orthodoxy. Catholic Christianity created a *distinctive kind of community*, one that was formed by reverence for those who had gone before, by respect for bishops and teachers in other parts of the Christian world, by veneration of exemplary men and women (the martyrs and saints), by the discipline of fixed forms of worship and a common calendar, by an ordered ministry and ecclesiastical structure, and—yes—by commitment to shared belief. In his book against the Gnostics, Irenaeus appealed to “communal” standards, not to private traditions. His teaching was informed by what Christians believed in Rome and Ephesus and elsewhere. He was the exponent of a common “rule of faith” and a public tradition transmitted through an office that reached back to apostolic times. By contrast, the heretics imposed a private and sectarian way of life on their followers that was inimical to fellowship with other Christians. Gnosticism was composed of obdurate and fractious sects that spurned received *wisdom* and communal tradition. For Irenaeus, however, individual churches were part of a larger fellowship that imposed a responsibility on all who shared its life.

### III. ORTHODOX DOCTRINE AND DISCIPLINE

The great doctrinal debates in the early church have dominated our account of the Christian past, but if we look more closely at the ancient writings, we see that Christians were just as interested in the moral discipline that bound the churches together as they were in the doctrinal symbols. The bishops were seen as models of virtuous life as well as teachers of doctrine. A remarkable development in early Christian history was the emergence of hagiography, the writing of lives of holy men and women. In the earliest period of Christian history, the only models of faith were the great heroes in the Bible—Abraham, Joseph, Moses, and David. But by the fourth century Christians began to write lives of holy men and women who lived in the present, people who came from one's town or village, yet who became the models that formed the community's self-understanding and exemplified its ideals. Their actions and their words, passed

on in pithy and gnomic sayings, spoke not of the decrees of Nicaea or of Chalcedon's formulation of “two natures and one person,” but of humility, obedience, discernment, love, boldness, justice, wisdom.

Orthodoxy not only bound the faithful together by doctrine and life; it also united them around ritual and calendar. One of the first great debates in Christian history centered on the fixing of the date of Easter, the so-called paschal controversy. The dispute arose because there was no firm tradition on how the Christian festival should relate to the celebration of the Jewish

Passover. Should Easter, for example, be celebrated on the date of the Passover, i.e., on 14 Nisan in the Jewish calendar, on the Sunday following, or remain completely independent of Jewish reckoning?

To modern students the debate may seem picayune, displaying an unnecessary fastidiousness about external matters. In Lutheran parlance it was a debate about “adiaphora.” Yet it is only because Christians have enjoyed relative unanimity on the dating of Easter and a common liturgical calendar that the controversy appears distant and removed. Few things are as central to religious life as calendar, and few things are more divisive than disputes over liturgy, as any pastor realizes. In matters of ritual there is no way to fudge; there can be no middle ground. By insisting that Easter be celebrated on the same day across the Christian world, leaders created a sense of community that transcended city and region, binding Christians together by a single ritual.

In the early church, as in the church today, liturgical practices differed from city to city and from region to region, but on the dating of Easter orthodox leaders sought to impose unity on the Christian world. This was another way of emphasizing that Christians belonged to a fellowship they had not invented, a way of life that bore and carried them, not one they had created. In another liturgical dispute—this one between Catholics and Donatists in North Africa—Augustine argued that Baptism is not the property of the local church, and certainly not of a sect within the church. The Donatists had insisted that only those priests who were pure and untainted—which meant of course Donatist priests—could administer Baptism. To which Augustine responded that Baptism belonged to Christ and that its holiness did not depend on the sanctity of the priest who administers it. It is not the Baptism of schismatics, but of God, wherever it may be found and wherever it is handed on.

Orthodox Christianity has honored and cherished the office of bishop and pastor, not as a convenient way of organizing and administering the affairs of the church but as an *office* instituted by Christ. It is easy, especially in our society, to view the office of bishop as an elected position resting on the consent of the majority like political offices in the city or state. But the pastor or bishop, unlike the congressman or senator, does not represent the people; he or she represents Christ. How one comes to the office is always secondary to the authority which comes from Christ. As Luther says in the Small Catechism, the office of the keys “is that authority which Christ gave to His church.”

It is deleterious to view the Christian ministry in “functional terms” as though its tasks could just as well be distributed in some other way. Even a casual consideration of the historic ministry shows how different it is from other types of leadership, whether in a corporation, in the city, or in voluntary associations. At least three “functions” are included in the office: teacher, liturgical

leader, and pastor (or administrator). In most other “organizations” these or equivalent functions are distinct and separate, e.g., in a corporation or university. But in the church the three are combined in one person, even though some persons may be more skilled at one task, e.g., teaching, others at another, e.g., administration. Yet orthodox Christianity did not separate the functions into three different offices. Each activity benefits from association with the other, making the office more than the sum of the parts. The bishop is not simply a functionary of the

local church but a member of a “college of bishops,” who stands within a tradition of office that extends back to the apostles. There is nothing comparable to this in other organizations.

To be a member of this kind of community requires trust. Every time we say the creed we confess not only our faith in the triune God; we also say: “we *believe* in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.” Like the Holy Trinity, the church invites faith, and this returns me to the matter of heresy. Almost from the beginning Christian teachers have claimed that heresy is as much a matter of bad faith as it is of intellect. Tertullian charged the heretics with *perversitas*, perhaps best translated “wrongheadedness” in English. The heretic, Karl Rahner once said, is not the kind of person with whom one can have a quiet chat.

St. Augustine was convinced that heresy (and hence orthodoxy) is not simply a question of doctrine but also of *will*. In his debates with the Manichees, Augustine despaired of convincing them by appeal to reason. “In your case,” he writes, “we must not try to make you *understand* divine things, for that is impossible, but to make you *want* to understand.”<sup>4</sup> Where there is no openness to persuasion, no desire to share a common confession, no will to bend or to adapt one’s views to the views of others, there can be no understanding. In an argument between two solitary philosophers, such imperiousness may appear arrogant and self-serving. But Augustine was not a lonely philosopher. He spoke for a community, and his opponents shunned the wisdom, experience, and correction of this community. Hence, says Augustine, they not only “misunderstand” the Scriptures; “they *want* [*volunt*] to misunderstand.”

Augustine’s book against the Manichees bears the title, *De moribus catholicae ecclesiae*, usually translated “On the Morals of the Catholic Church.” But the term used here—*mos* [*mores*]—does not really mean “morals” in our sense of the term, but practices or customs, even habits or character, behavior as it is exhibited in conduct. Augustine realized full well that the differences between the Manichees and the Catholics were not evident in the conduct of individual persons. The Catholic church was not a community of saints, and the Manichees had their holy men and women as well. Augustine, it must be remembered, was the first Christian thinker to acknowledge that the church included sinners as well as saints. What is at issue in the debate with the Manichees is not individual behavior but what kind of a “community” the Catholic church was, what the spirit and temper of its common life was. Augustine’s answer is that the “Catholic church” is a community that can be trusted, that it is a truth-telling institution, that it can be embraced without fear. Hence the “Morals of the Catholic Church” is a little essay on virtue, and

<sup>4</sup>Augustine, *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae* 17.31.

Augustine sets forth a Christian interpretation of the four cardinal virtues: prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude.

#### IV. ORTHODOXY AND AUTHORITY

Now an appeal to the virtues may seem a far piece from a discussion of heresy and orthodoxy, but it is linked to another characteristic of orthodoxy: authority. Augustine first recognized the importance of authority in debates with the Manichees and in writing to philosophically astute pagans whose ideas of God, like those of Augustine himself, had been formed by acquaintance with the great Platonist, Plotinus. In *De vera religione*, Augustine,

unlike other apologists, does not make an appeal to reason; rather, he introduces the community—i.e., the church—as an argument in favor of belief in one true God. If it had not been for the Catholic church, he said, he would not have found his way to faith. In this context he makes the statement that there are two different methods by which one arrives at truth, authority and reason.<sup>5</sup>

In probing what Augustine means here, we must eschew modern conceptions of authority, especially as they have been influenced by Roman Catholicism, and particularly, the papacy in the last two centuries. There authority is linked directly to office. In this view authority is legitimate only if it emanates from a person who has power and jurisdiction. One speaks of submitting to authority or of obeying authority even if one does not understand. In Augustine's discussion of authority, however, there is no mention of office, nor of bishops, and certainly no hint of the bishop of Rome or the papacy.

For Augustine, authority is closely tied to the root meaning of the term *auctoritas*, which is a derivative of the word *auctor*. The word is sometimes translated “author,” but its sense is much wider. It designates a person who attests to the truth of a statement, a guarantor, one who teaches or advises. Authority, then, has to do with trustworthiness, with the confidence a person engenders in others, with veracity and truthfulness. To say we need authority is another way of saying we need teachers. This idea is expressed in a rabbinic tale:

A certain man once came to Shammai. “How many Torahs are there?” he asked. Shammai replied: “Two, the written Torah and the Oral Torah.” The man replied, “I believe what you say about the written but not about the oral. I will become your disciple on the condition that you teach me only the written Torah.” Shammai repulsed and scolded him. Then the proselyte went to Hillel who accepted him as a disciple. On the first day of his instruction he began with the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, Alef, beth, gimmel, dalet. When the man came back the next day, Hillel reversed the letters of the alphabet, and the proselyte complained, “You did not teach them to me that way yesterday.” To which Hillel responded: “If you need to rely on me to teach you the proper order of the letters, then you also need to rely on me with respect to the Oral Torah.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup>*De vera religione* 24.45. Translation in *Augustine: Earlier Writings*, ed. John H. S. Burleigh (The Library of Christian Classics 6; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953) 247.

<sup>6</sup>Babylonian Talmud, *Tractate Shabbat* 31a.

The point is obvious: to learn one must begin with a teacher, that is to say with authority, someone in whom one can place confidence, someone who has already known or experienced what one is to learn and can, as it were, lead us through unfamiliar terrain by the hand.

In the passage from *De vera religione* mentioned above, Augustine says: “Authority demands belief and prepares man for reason. Reason leads to understanding and knowledge.” Rendered in this way (in the Library of Christian Classics), the text can easily be misunderstood. The phrase “authority demands” seems to invite a modern understanding of the text. Similarly the term “belief” or “faith” (*fides* in Latin), after Kierkegaard and neo-orthodoxy, bears too many subjective overtones. The text might however be translated: “Authority invites trust” (*Auctoritas*

*flagitat fidem*). At once the whole passage takes on a new light, and what Augustine says next becomes clear. “Reason is not entirely absent from authority, for we have to consider whom we have to believe, and the highest authority belongs to truth when it is clearly known.”

“We have to consider whom we have to believe.” Here the LCC translator is more helpful. He renders the Latin *cui*, which could be masculine as well as neuter, as “whom,” making it personal. Authority rests in a person, a person who by his words and behavior invites trust and confidence. Augustine’s idea of authority is modeled on the relation between a teacher and student. The starting point of genuine education is trust, the student’s confidence that the teacher understands what he or she teaches and is therefore able to explain and interpret difficult or obscure points. If the matter under discussion is “the treatment of the soul,” the student’s trust is won not simply by words but also by actions, by the kind of person the teacher is, in short, by character.

Two features are apparent: authority rests not on external legitimation and authorization, but on the trustworthiness of the teacher; and authority’s purpose is to clarify, illuminate—in short, to teach. It persuades; it does not coerce. If authority does not enlighten, it undermines trust, and finally obfuscates. If the teacher constantly says “believe me” without giving reasons, the student may assent, but will hardly be enlightened, nor convinced. As St. Thomas wrote: “If the master determines the question by appeal to authorities only, the student will be convinced that the thing is so, but he will have acquired no knowledge or understanding and he will go away with an empty mind.”<sup>7</sup>

Now Augustine’s remarks on authority, it will be recalled, are an extension of his appeal to the church, which brings us back to the topic at hand. Augustine is saying that the Catholic church is a community that is trustworthy, one that has spoken truthfully in the past and will speak truthfully in the future, a community that will not deceive. He is not saying that it is without fault or blemish. Like other historical communities, it has its shortcomings and limitations, its sins great and small, its moments of shame and disgrace. Nevertheless, even with its faults, we know that it is the kind of community that can be relied on; that it can be the object of trust as we confess in the creeds.

If the church is an object of faith, it is more than what we see and perceive, more than we know and experience, more than it has been in the past. It is easy to reduce Catholic orthodoxy to a paltry and petty institution, just as it is easy,

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<sup>7</sup>*Quaestiones quodlibetales* 4, art. 18.

so very easy, to turn the sacraments into social rituals, quaint customs that give cohesion and a sense of identity to the members of our tribe. No doubt this is why Luther said in the Small Catechism, “Baptism is not water only, but it is water used *together* with God’s Word and by His command.”

Orthodox Christians *believe* the church is not a human institution just as they *believe* that Baptism is not simply water, that Holy Communion is not simply bread and wine, that the office of the ministry is not simply a utilitarian structure to make the organization run smoothly, and that the words of the Scriptures are not simply the words of human beings.

Hope, says the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz, means “that sight, touch, hearing tell the truth,” that the things that make up our life are what we believe them to be. Only by looking at



the concrete and particular and by trusting the contingent can we accustom our eyes to see that which gives light to what we see and touch.

And anyone who wants to take his brush and try  
To paint the Earth must not look straight up at the Sun  
Or he will lose the memory of all he's ever seen,  
With only a burning tear to fill this eye  
Let him kneel down and press his cheek in grass and then  
Look till he sees the beam the Earth reflects back upwards  
There he will find all of our lost, forgotten treasures  
Stars and Roses, the setting and the rising Sun.

Milosz is speaking of art, and art is by nature concrete and specific. It can only proceed by indirection, through paint and canvas, wood and marble, words and sounds. What he says, however, might just as well be applied to human life. It is only by participating in specific human communities that we learn to know the truth, to pursue the good, and to perceive the beautiful.<sup>8</sup> As Alasdair MacIntyre writes: "To cut oneself off from shared activity in which one has initially to learn obediently as an apprentice learns, to isolate oneself from the communities which find their point and purpose in such activities, will be to debar oneself from finding any good outside of oneself."<sup>9</sup>

In the revolt against authority and tradition in our time we have forgotten that Christians come to know God in and through a particular historical community. The Catholic faith invites us to trust this community even though we may not have chosen it, and even though it is imperfect. For in saying "we believe in the church" we confess that the things that bind us together as Christians are not the transient expression of an ephemeral fellowship, not the result of private choice and individual preference, nor the product of social arrangement or political maneuvering, but the creation of the Holy Spirit and the bearer of Christ. In the words of St. Patrick's Breastplate, a hymn sung at Baptism: "I bind unto myself today / The strong name of the Trinity / By invocation of the same / The three in One and one in Three."

<sup>8</sup>On this use of Milosz's poetry, see Donald Davie, *Czeslaw Milosz and the Insufficiency of Lyric* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1986) 68-71.

<sup>9</sup>Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1981) 240.