

FAITH AND philosophy

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"FAITH SEEKING UNDERSTANDING"

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ORTHODOXY AND HERESY

Eleonore Stump

Alvin Plantinga's "Advice to Christian Philosophers" had the effect of getting contemporary Christian philosophers to recognize themselves as a part of a community with a worldview different from that found in the rest of academia, and to take seriously in their work their commitment to that distinct worldview. I argue that in the current climate of opinion, generated at least in part by Plantinga's advice, it would be worthwhile for contemporary Christian philosophers to consider that we also belong to a community of Christians that extends across centuries, and to ask what we are committed to by our participation in that larger community.

Introduction

Alvin Plantinga's "Advice to Christian Philosophers"¹ had the effect of getting contemporary Christian philosophers to recognize themselves as a part of a community with a worldview different from that found in the rest of academia, and to take seriously in their work their commitment to that distinct worldview. Plantinga's advice generated some controversy when he first presented it; but, in my view, it has had a very beneficial effect on philosophy as it is now practiced by Christian philosophers. Many people took his advice to heart, and the result is noticeable not only in the research of Christian philosophers in recent years but also more generally in an increased willingness on the part of Christian philosophers to remember and reflect on Christian standpoints in the pursuit of all their professional duties. In the current climate of opinion, generated at least in part by Plantinga's advice, I think it would be worthwhile for contemporary Christian philosophers to consider that we also belong to a community of Christians that extends across centuries, and to ask what we are committed to by our participation in that larger community.

One of the issues that such reflection raises has to do with the distinction between orthodoxy and heresy.

There is, of course, a problem here. Serious use of the word 'heresy' is guaranteed to raise anxiety and indignation or even fury.

In Pakistan it is against the law to say things about God that the authorities judge contrary to Islamic orthodoxy. Several years ago, the Pakistani law made headlines in this country when a fourteen-year old Pakistani boy was sentenced to death for disobeying that law. The Prime Minister of



Pakistan at that time, Benazir Bhutto, said that she was shocked at the boy's predicament, but that she could not interfere with the law. Cases like this make us feel that focus on orthodoxy is plainly pernicious and that acceptance of the distinction between orthodoxy and heresy tends only to promote social injustice.

When we look at religious history, we certainly find ample support for such a feeling. Among Christians, Catholics have persecuted Protestants, and Protestants have persecuted Catholics—in each case because the offending group failed to hold the beliefs that the dominant group took to be required for orthodoxy. As far as that goes, Protestants have persecuted other Protestants for heresy—Calvin was instrumental in the burning of Servetus, for example—and Catholics have fought endlessly among themselves. In the Middle Ages, the seculars fought with the mendicants, the Dominicans were regularly at odds with the Franciscans, and the Franciscans themselves were split over the issue of monastic poverty. And, of course, Christians have no monopoly on persecution in the name of orthodoxy. Think about the conflicts between Sunni and Shiite Muslims, for example, or the contemporary conflicts between fundamentalist and liberal Muslims in north Africa. Devotion to orthodoxy has been a stimulus to violence and oppression, across cultures and times.

We are so far from fighting for orthodoxy in religion in academic circles now that we are positively embarrassed by the very distinction between orthodoxy and heresy. We are not surprised that *antiquarians*—scholars interested in history just for history's sake—would take an interest in the distinction. But apart from antiquarian investigations, we tend to take mention of heresy as a figure of speech at best and as right-wing extremism at worst. It is still possible, if rare, to hear someone publicly make an accusation of religious heresy, but those who hear the charge are more likely to wish that the accuser would go away than that the accused would reform.

In fact, many academics, even those with strong religious commitments of their own, find any attempt to uphold the distinction between orthodoxy and heresy in religion offensive. Someone who wants to distinguish the orthodox from the heretical seems to be claiming not only to know the truth but to know it better than her heretical neighbors, whose views she regards, disrespectfully, as false. Gordon Kaufman speaks for people who feel this way about the distinction when he says,²

the new consciousness of the significance of religious pluralism, the growing awareness of the way in which all our ideas are shaped by the cultural and symbolic framework of orientation within which we are living and thinking, the sensitivity to Christian responsibility for certain aspects of the massive evils which confront us today ... [all] tend to promote a deep humility about the religious and philosophical traditions we have inherited and a profound questioning of the propriety of making dogmatic claims of any sort with regard to their ultimate "reality" or "truth."³

I do want to take the distinction between orthodoxy and heresy seriously. But in the atmosphere suggested by this quotation, it seems to me a

good idea to qualify my thesis about orthodoxy and heresy before I say what the thesis is and give advice to go with it. In fact, the bulk of this paper will consist in qualifications; the advice comes in only briefly, at the end. This is a modest, seemly approach to giving advice.

First Two Qualifications

Here is the first qualification. Although I am going to take seriously the notion of *heresy*, I think the notion of *heretic* should be discarded for any purpose other than historical description. That's because a heretic is supposed to be someone who is committed to a heresy and who because of his heresy is worthy of being thrown out of the community of the orthodox.⁴ But it's a great mistake to suppose that one can make a legitimate inference from the appropriateness of rejecting a belief to the appropriateness of rejecting the person who holds that belief. A person might hold a belief which no reasonable person would consider orthodox, and yet that person might be someone whom the community of the orthodox should admire and extol for spiritual excellence.

To see what I mean, consider the story of William Hunter in *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*.⁵ I won't tell you what I take Hunter's heresy to be, just in case I didn't succeed in picking an example of a doctrine which no reasonable person could take as Christian orthodoxy.⁶ Use your imagination and pick some theological position which in your own view is not only theologically beyond the pale but philosophically illiterate as well. Imagine that to be Hunter's heresy, and in my view you won't be far off the mark. But if in fact you go to the relevant passages of Foxe and find that you don't think as I do about Hunter, trust me: somewhere in the history of religious persecutions in Britain, there is someone whom you would evaluate as I evaluate Hunter. Feel free to substitute that person for Hunter in this context. In the same spirit, I should point out that Foxe isn't generally considered the best authority on the history of martyrs; but if the story he tells isn't accurate in all its details (or even any of them), there is some story just like it somewhere which is accurate.

According to Foxe, William Hunter was a nineteen-year old apprentice during the reign of Queen Mary, who was convicted of heresy by the Catholic authorities in his region. The authorities gave Hunter every opportunity and every incentive to recant. The bishop put him in stocks, imprisoned him, and even tried to bribe him with the offer of a job and a large sum of money; in the end, the bishop just threatened him with execution if he didn't recant. But the teenager was as oblivious to threats as to bribery, and he maintained his position steadfastly. When he was finally condemned to be burned to death as a heretic, he comforted his weeping mother by telling her, "For the little pain I shall suffer, which shall soon be at an end, Christ has promised me, mother, a crown of joy. Should you not be glad of that?" And he was burned to death with the words of the 51st Psalm on his lips: "a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise."⁷ Perhaps his theology was hopeless; but, as for the man himself, who among us is worthy to sit next to him?

In my view, then, it is a wretched mistake to judge a person's Christian

character or his standing with God on the basis of a judgment that some of his Christian beliefs are not orthodox.⁸ As the story from *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* shows, a person can hold a belief which is not orthodox and yet be someone whose Christian excellence is far beyond our own.

Here is the second qualification of the as yet unstated thesis. It's an even more lamentable mistake to suppose that coercion of any sort should be used to stamp out unorthodox beliefs.⁹ As the history of attempted repression shows, it is not possible to have a society which uses coercion against beliefs it wants to eliminate without making that practice known to those in the society. The result is that, even if (*mirabile dictu*) the beliefs that society is trying to protect are all true, the coercive practices of that society will nonetheless undermine love of truth. Those who hold orthodox beliefs will realize that it is prudent for them to do so, so that whatever love of truth brings them to orthodox beliefs, their acceptance of those beliefs will also be motivated by prudential considerations. Those who are undecided about orthodox beliefs will weigh them with mingled concern for truth and for their own well-being. And those who pride themselves on their unwillingness to let prudential considerations motivate their adherence to religious beliefs will be more inclined to reject than to accept the truth of orthodox beliefs, because to accept them in such a society is not to seek the truth but to yield to pressure. Even those who reject orthodoxy, then, will evaluate orthodox beliefs with some self-regarding concern—for ensuring their independence of political pressure—and will be more inclined to the role of rebel than to the seeking of truth. So in virtue of choosing coercive means to try to protect truth, a society does serious damage to the love of truth. This is bound to be a concern for any community, but it's disastrous for the Christian community.

So those are my first two qualifications of the thesis which I haven't yet expressed. It's wrong and self-defeating for Christians to judge harshly a person's standing with God solely because he holds unorthodox beliefs or to bring any political pressure on such a person to change his views. There is actually one more qualification important for my purposes here, but I'd like to put it in the more usual place, after the statement of the thesis it qualifies. I hope that these two qualifications relieve enough of the anxiety generated by taking seriously the distinction between orthodoxy and heresy that we can now turn to the nature of the distinction itself. After that, I'll say what my thesis is.

One more preliminary point

There are lots of questions raised for Christians by the distinction between orthodoxy and heresy. For example, how does one decide which beliefs count as orthodox for Christians? If one came to hold beliefs supposed on some grounds to be orthodox, how would one be justified in the higher-order belief that those grounds were the right ones? Or, again, is Christian orthodoxy compromised by accommodation with local non-Christian religions, such as that exemplified by the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci in 16th-century China?¹⁰ As far as that goes, what are we to think about Christendom's past missionary efforts? Without missionary

concern that religiously orthodox beliefs be shared by people everywhere, would the west African slave trade, for example, have prospered as it did in the early modern period?¹¹ What is the relation between orthodoxy and political domination of marginal groups? Has orthodoxy been used as an excuse for oppressing women or people of other races and ethnic groups? All of these are good questions; all of them are questions that interest me. But none of these questions is at issue in what I want to talk about here.

I want to talk about something that is preliminary to all these questions, namely, the very distinction between orthodoxy and heresy. Furthermore, it is clear that upholding the legitimacy of the distinction is compatible with very different answers to the questions I mean to leave to one side. Tomas de Torquemada and Matteo Ricci, for example, both cared deeply about Christian orthodoxy. But Torquemada's care for orthodoxy brought it about that at least two thousand people were killed for their unorthodox beliefs and 160,000 Jews were expelled from their homes, while Ricci's care for orthodoxy was such that even now, among Communist Chinese in the academy, his name is a symbol of tolerance and respect for other cultures.

Orthodoxy as right beliefs

So what is the distinction between orthodoxy and heresy? There are, in fact, two ways to take this question, internally, from within a particular religious perspective, and externally, from the perspective of an outsider. For a Muslim, for example, orthodox Muslim beliefs must be true beliefs. Jews also, however, can recognize that some Muslim beliefs are orthodox and others are heretical. To do so, the Jew need not grant that orthodox Muslim beliefs are true; he needs to grant only that they are taken to be true by orthodox Muslims.

But to speak of orthodoxy from within a religious tradition requires accepting that some religious beliefs are true and others are not. Disputes about the legitimacy of the notion of orthodoxy are therefore connected to certain theological disputes about realism and idealism with regard to the claims of a religion. For example, in a recent paper, "Realism and the Christian Faith," William Alston argues that George Santayana, Paul Tillich, and John Hick are all idealists as far as religion goes and would reject the claim that some and only some religious beliefs are true.¹² If we as adherents to a religious tradition take some religious beliefs to be orthodox, then we will have to reject this position of these theologians.¹³ We will have to hold that there is a fact of the matter in the realm of religion, and that religious statements have a truth-value. In that case, given the diverse and incompatible set of religious statements, some of the religious statements' human beings have made will be true and others will not; not all religious beliefs will be right.

Orthodoxy as central claims of a religion

The distinction between orthodoxy and heresy, of course, requires more than just supposing that some beliefs pertaining to a religion are true and others aren't. Another presupposition of the distinction is the idea that religions can

have an order or structure to them. The same point applies also to secular worldviews. Among the claims included as true in a particular philosophical or political position, some will be central to that position, constitutive of it, and others will not. On this way of thinking about the matter, the claims that constitute orthodoxy are the central, rather than the peripheral, claims of a religion or worldview. Furthermore, people can be mistaken about what these claims are. Not everything that anyone takes to be a central claim of a religion or worldview really is central to it. Devout Muslims can be wrong about what counts as a central claim for Islam, for example.

For present purposes, we can think of this understanding of a religion as a matter of taking a religion doctrinally.

It is also possible, however, to take a religion or worldview sociologically, in the sense that we take the religion or worldview to be whatever the adherents of the religion at any time suppose it to be.¹⁴ On this way of understanding a religion, a devout Muslim couldn't be mistaken about what the central claims of Islam are. They are what he thinks they are.

Our understanding of a worldview or religion will differ markedly depending on which way we take it.

Suppose we ask, for example, whether Confucianism is compatible with Buddhism. Our answer will vary depending on which way we take Confucianism. If we take Confucianism sociologically to refer to all the claims held as Confucian by those who took themselves to be Confucian, then we are likely to suppose that the question whether Confucianism is compatible with Buddhism can be answered only by historical or sociological research. Sociologically considered, those who took themselves to be Confucians have frequently been favorably inclined towards Buddhism and seen no conflict between Buddhism and their Confucianism. So, for instance, in the eighteenth century, in the middle of the Ching period, the Ch'ien-lung emperor, who was strongly committed to Confucianism, began each day with a devotion to the Buddha.¹⁵ On the other hand, not all Confucians took such an attitude. Earlier, at the start of Manchu rule in the middle of the seventeenth century, the literati argued that *true* Confucianism required the rejection of Buddhism. On a sociological understanding of Confucianism, we can say only that Confucianism has been sympathetic to Buddhism at some times and not at others. If we take Confucianism in this way, we will have to hold that the seventeenth-century Confucians were confused or even just historically naive in taking Confucianism to be incompatible with Buddhism.

But the seventeenth-century Confucians weren't historically naive. In fact, it was precisely their historical knowledge that led them to take the attitude they did; they thought that their Ming predecessors had declined morally and lost the rule of the Empire in part because they had abandoned *true* Confucianism for a syncretistic substitute. These seventeenth-century Confucians were taking Confucianism doctrinally, rather than sociologically, and in their view Confucianism doctrinally understood required the rejection of those Buddhist claims which had been assimilated to Confucianism at the end of the Ming dynasty in the late sixteenth century.¹⁶

Some contemporary scholars of religion reject the idea of taking a religion or worldview doctrinally and suppose that there is no legitimate alternative

to taking it sociologically.¹⁷ But this position seems to me implausible.

Consider, for example, Maoist political theory. Among the claims associated with Maoist theory is the claim that revolutionary fervor declines in old age; another Maoist claim is that in China the main or most important revolutionaries are peasants in rural areas. Those familiar with Communism and twentieth-century China would, I think, take a Maoist who denied the second of these claims to be holding a very unorthodox Maoist position. An important part of what distinguishes Maoist from Leninist political theory is the focus on the rural rather than the urban underclass. A different judgment is called for, however, in the case of the first claim. Even a very orthodox Maoist might part company with Mao on that score. A Maoist who supposed that revolutionary fervor was just as great in old people as in the young would not thereby be an unorthodox Maoist. He might still suppose that perpetual revolution generated by those in rural areas was necessary, but he would think it might be made by revolutionaries of any age.

Accepting the legitimacy of the notion of orthodoxy requires supposing that it is possible to take worldviews doctrinally and that some claims are central to particular worldviews, doctrinally understood. The claim that China's revolution is dependent on the rural peasantry is central to Mao's version of Marxism, as the claim about revolutionary fervor's relation to age is not. From a Maoist point of view, denial of either of these claims is false; but only the denial of the one about the peasantry is unorthodox.

It's important to point out here that nothing in the view that some claims are central to a worldview requires us to suppose that all the implications of those claims are always understood by the adherents of that worldview, or even by the creator of it. So, for example, although Mao always maintained that literature and the other arts must serve the needs of the proletariat, it wasn't until the 1970's that he came to see that some works, such as the classic novel *Water Margin*, which various Maoists had repudiated as tainted by feudal and Confucian values, could nonetheless be thought of as serving the people because such works could be taken as teaching by "negative example."¹⁸ This later position of Mao's allowed him to continue to demand that literature be ancillary to Communist concerns without requiring him also to jettison much that the Chinese had traditionally been proud of in their literary heritage. Given the great value Mao set on Chinese culture and his demand that the arts serve the people, his claim that the arts can teach by negative example is implicit in his original core beliefs. Here there is an interval of decades only between the original core claims and their later explicit elaboration. Some medieval Franciscans supposed that the interval might stretch to centuries.

The importance and usefulness of the view that only some claims included as true in a worldview are central to it can be seen by considering what can happen when we reject such a view. If we reject it, there is a danger that the denial of any of the claims included as true in a worldview will seem equally as serious as the denial of any other.

For example, in the thirteenth century Peter John Olivi held as one of his Christian beliefs the view that quantity is not something distinct from the parts of a substance. This metaphysical view shapes his theory of the

Eucharist. Called to account by the Church authorities for this theory, Olivi defended himself by arguing that his claims about quantity were peripheral rather than central to Christian doctrine and that therefore even if his claims about quantity were false, they shouldn't count as heretical. He says,

I do not want to see those things which do not directly affect the articles of our faith treated or held as if they were themselves articles of faith. Such things should rather be treated as ancillary to it. ... In such matters no single opinion should be advanced as the faith, for unless I am mistaken about such matters (which I do not believe) dangers of the highest sort lurk in such an assertion....¹⁹

He seems to me entirely right here. The Church authorities of his day, who were not as clear as they should have been on the distinction between beliefs central to a worldview and those peripheral to it, burned four Franciscan spirituals at the stake in Marseilles in 1318 because they refused to obey Church authorities about the length of Franciscan cloaks (among other issues).²⁰ Even if one of the competing claims about the right length of Franciscan cloaks had been true, it seems the height of absurdity to suppose that Christianity requires the acceptance of that claim or that failure to obey Church authorities on this issue warrants death by burning. This sort of absurdity didn't vanish with the Middle Ages. At Mao's death one of the groups competing for power was called 'the Whatever Faction', because the members of that group were committed to maintaining, as true, and compulsory for all Chinese to believe, anything Mao said, whatever it was.

If we accept the notion of orthodoxy and with it the recognition that not all the claims included as true in a worldview are central to it, it becomes easier to recognize the dreadful folly represented by the Whatever Faction or the fourteenth-century Church authorities responsible for the Marseilles burning.

Orthodoxy and pluralism

As I said at the outset, our awareness of and attitudes towards the great plurality of religions and other worldviews has made some theologians wary of claims of orthodoxy. Since the claims a particular religion maintains as orthodox are those the religion holds to be true and central, the partisans of that religion in claiming orthodoxy for their views seem to take a disrespectful attitude towards different beliefs held by their co-religionists and, by extension, towards all religions incompatible with their own. Some theologians consequently suppose that claims of orthodoxy are arrogant or even sinful. So, for example, Gordon Kaufman says,

If we try to overcome and control the mystery within which we live—for example, through philosophical or theological ideas in which we take ourselves to be in a position to present conclusive evidences and arguments, or through religious rituals or practices which promise us a secure place in the ultimate scheme of things—we sin against God....²¹

Kaufman recommends instead "a certain agnosticism," a recognition that religious matters are an "ultimate mystery."²²

Now it is certainly true that a parochial focus on what is taken to be the orthodoxy of one's own religion can lead a person to be arrogant or disrespectful to others. But it's not at all clear that simply maintaining some beliefs as orthodox entails disrespect towards adherents of other views. As I said in my first qualification, it is important to make a distinction between attitudes towards persons and attitudes towards their beliefs. Respect and sympathy are attitudes shown primarily towards persons and only secondarily or derivatively towards systems of belief. To say that one is in sympathy with Marxism, for example, is just to say that one is inclined to feel about things as committed Marxists do, or that one can understand how somebody in certain circumstances could come to believe what Marxists believe. And an adherent of one worldview could clearly feel respect for an adherent of a different worldview without actually feeling about things as the other does. Aquinas, for example, wasn't in the least tempted to adopt Islam but nonetheless had enormous respect for Avicenna. To suppose that we can't respect persons with whose religious worldviews we disagree is to make precisely the sort of mistake responsible for a great deal of religious warfare.

Furthermore, if, contrary to what I've just argued, respect is a function of sharing beliefs, then it isn't at all clear that an agnostic of the Kaufman variety who rejects the notion of orthodoxy will turn out to be more respectful of others than a proponent of the orthodoxy of a particular religion will be. Kaufman's agnosticism requires us to hold that all the claims on the part of the world's major religions to know some religious truth are not true. Even so parochial a medieval as Aquinas wouldn't have repudiated other religions so drastically. He, at any rate, supposes that Christians share significant religious knowledge not only with Jews and Muslims but even with polytheistic pagans. Unlike the agnostic of Kaufman's sort, Aquinas is willing to suppose that adherents of non-Christian religions know some religious truths.²³ So even if we tie respect to systems of belief rather than persons, it's hard to see Kaufman's agnosticism as the more tolerant or respectful position here since such an agnostic has to reject many more claims to know religious truth on the part of the adherents of some religion than the non-agnostic adherents of other religions do.

Finally, it is worth noticing that in order to have a plurality of religions, we have to have different groups which accept the notion of orthodoxy and which suppose themselves to know at least some orthodox truths. The distinctions among religions are in part a function of their differing understandings of what is to count as orthodox. The plurality of religions would be at least significantly diminished if the differing groups all gave up any claim to orthodoxy. In fact, we couldn't even have agnosticism if we abandoned the notion of orthodoxy. Like religious believers, the agnostic, too, has some claims he takes to be true and central to his position—for example, the claim that we don't know the truth with regard to religion. Someone who advertised himself as an agnostic but who rejected the claim that we don't know religious truth would himself be rejected by the agnostics he was trying to associate with. In agnosticism, too, there is an ortho-

hold out for one's own opinion against the cumulative results of that community can seem sinfully proud.

I put this last point in a hedged way, because, unfortunately, it is clearly the case that sometimes a whole community goes wrong. This is what happened in the case of the Roman Catholic Church's opposition to Galileo when the Church authorities as a group were convinced that orthodoxy entailed a scientific position that, as it turned out, is false.²⁷ Furthermore, I think—and, no doubt, you do, too—that in the history of Christianity this is hardly the only occasion on which the whole community has gotten something wrong (though perhaps we wouldn't have exactly the same list of such occasions). What is orthodox is what is true and central to a worldview, but our determinations of what is to count as orthodox are included in what we believe, and not always in what we know. Subsequent information or reflection may show us that we have to revise what we have believed to be orthodox.

There is, therefore, a tension between granting that expertise in determinations of orthodoxy is vested in a community and recognizing that even communities can go wrong.

Here I think there is one helpful point of analogy between a religious and a scientific community.²⁸ We speak disapprovingly of unorthodox medical beliefs, for example, because we think—and quite correctly, too—that expertise in medicine is vested in the medical community as a whole and that individuals choosing to reject a view held by the medical community at large are highly likely to be not only wrong but pridefully, obstinately, wrong. So in medicine we tend to be traditionalists, implicitly maintaining a position analogous to Aquinas's position on heresy. On the other hand, however, we know that occasionally the medical community as a whole is wrong and that a lone unorthodox individual has a more nearly correct view. So, for example, the biologist who earlier in this century insisted that the Rous sarcoma, a cancer found largely in chickens, was caused by a virus was hounded for much of his career by the medical community for his unorthodox position. The Rous sarcoma was agreed by all researchers to run in families and be inheritable, and medical orthodoxy of the time held that no disease could be both inheritable and also caused by a virus. But because of the efforts of that supposedly unorthodox biologist, a major breakthrough was made in our understanding of cancer, and we now know that cancers can result from the actions of genes and viruses simultaneously.

Even with our knowledge of such notable cases as that involving the Rous sarcoma, however, most of us would still be inclined to side, most of the time, with the general consensus of the medical community in its pronouncements about disease. That is, when it comes to medicine, most of us are still disposed to accept that expertise is vested in the medical community as a whole. And this is a sensible position. It is much more likely that the cumulative results of the labors of a whole community be right than that any individual operating on his own outside that community could do better.

And if this seems generally right as regards medicine, then perhaps, with additional caveats for the effects of passion in religion, a similar attitude is appropriate in religion. In fact, there is more reason for adopting

doxy. Accepting the notion of orthodoxy therefore seems to be necessary in order to have any coherent worldview at all.

Orthodoxy and heresy

One further preliminary point is helpful here. What is being opposed to orthodoxy in this context is not unorthodoxy or even heterodoxy. It's heresy, and heresy is a contrary, not a contradictory, opposite of orthodoxy. Something which is heretical isn't orthodox, and something which is orthodox isn't heretical; but there can be many religious beliefs which are neither orthodox nor heretical. We might suppose that heresy consists in the rejection of any claim which a religion or worldview includes as both true and central to it.²⁹ But heresy is a complicated notion, and this characterization still hasn't got it quite right. Even for claims that are not only included as true in but also central to a worldview, it isn't necessarily the case that the rejection of one of them is tantamount to heresy. Aquinas, for example, cites with approval a view held by Augustine, the great heresy-fighter of his time: "By no means should we accuse of heresy those who, however false and perverse their opinion may be, defend it without obstinate fervor, and seek the truth with careful anxiety, ready to mend their opinion when they have found the truth."³⁰ And this holds, in Aquinas's view, not only with regard to religious matters peripheral to faith, but also with regard to claims that are central to the faith.

We must be careful not to let the quotation mislead us; Aquinas's opinions about heresy are more nearly like Mao's in the Hundred Flowers campaign than they are like those of liberal American academics. In Aquinas's view, all it takes to count as defending a position with obstinate fervor or failing to seek the truth with sufficient anxiety is standing against the authority of the Roman Church. But what is interesting and worth noting here is the distinction Aquinas makes between unorthodoxy—even in claims he takes to be central to Christianity—and heresy. For a person's belief to count as heresy he must also know that a certain position is one held to be central by the Church and decide, nonetheless, to reject it.³¹

If Aquinas is willing to be tolerant towards those who "seek the truth with careful anxiety," why does he take so negative an attitude towards those who go against the authority of the Church? Why couldn't those who reject the Church's teachings also count as people who were seeking the truth with careful anxiety and thinking that they'd found it, but elsewhere than among the Church's teachings?

The answer to these questions is not hard to see, I think. Aquinas supposes that in matters of theology as in all other areas of human thought there is such a thing as expertise. And he takes the expertise of many generations of theological thinkers reflecting on revelation and tradition to be expressed in the teachings of the Church, teachings which were built up gradually through the labor and thought of many different minds over a long period of time. To reject the teachings of the Church, then, is to suppose that one person has got right what generations of thinkers, operating communally, have gotten wrong. For Aquinas, the determination of what counts as orthodoxy stems from the expertise vested in a community. To

truth to be discovered by a lone individual or his group in the twentieth century, the thought that God has actually done so isn't one that we should arrive at lightly.

There are a great many other issues that need to be addressed in order really to understand the nature of the distinction between orthodoxy and heresy. For example, we'd need to ask how long a consensus has to be in place before it counts as long-established. We'd need to know how to tell the experts from those who think they're experts but aren't. Is expertise a matter of education and training? Or is it instead a matter of saintliness? Or are both required? Or is it even possible to tell who the experts are without a kind of vicious circularity? If virtuous and well-educated Donatists disagree with the rest of the Christian world, we don't conclude that there is no consensus; rather, we discount Donatist views as heresy. But then it seems as if we have to know what counts as orthodoxy before we can tell whom to include among the experts. Or, to look at the same problem from a somewhat different angle, what about all the internal lack of consensus on apparently crucial matters? The wars of religion weren't fought over nothing, even if it sometimes looks that way. What happens to orthodoxy if there is no consensus? And there are other questions as well. Nonetheless, I think that this is enough for my purposes here. I need to get just clear enough about the distinction between orthodoxy and heresy to articulate my thesis about it, to which I want finally to turn.

The thesis: advice to Christian philosophers

I think contemporary Christian philosophers should reflect on the distinction between orthodoxy and heresy. They should do so not in order to police their ranks, trying to weed out or put pressure on the heretics. As I said at the beginning, the notion of a heretic is not a useful one, and it is pernicious in the extreme to try to promote orthodoxy through political pressure of any sort. In my view, contemporary Christian philosophers should think about orthodoxy and heresy not in order to take the mote out of somebody else's work and thought but in order to ask themselves whether there is any beam in their own.

For this purpose, I think that Christian philosophers should be willing to put some time and effort into learning about the history of Christian philosophy and theology. Whatever the difficulties of determining the experts and their agreements, they're considerably magnified by ignorance of the historical tradition.

And then I think that we should care if we find ourselves disagreeing with that tradition, or even with some large or important part of it.³²

So my thesis is simple. Christian philosophers should know enough about their tradition to have some idea when they are at odds with it; and when they are at odds with it, or some significant part of it, they should care.

The third qualification

Somebody might suppose that I'm recommending a reactionary, hide-bound, slavish deference to religious tradition, which would impede all

such an attitude with regard to Christianity than medicine. If there is a long-established Christian consensus that some claim is true and central to Christianity, and you (or you and your little group) in the late twentieth century have discovered that it is false, then we have to wonder about the providence of God, who let so many generations of Christians be deceived about an important matter of faith.³⁰ And we may equally wonder what it is about you (or your group) that this truth should be revealed to you although it wasn't revealed to many Christians before you, at least some of whom were conceivably smarter, better in character, or stronger in faith than you.

The distinction between orthodoxy and heresy

So I think the distinction between orthodoxy and heresy is a good one and worth preserving.

There is an objective fact of the matter with regard to religion, and some religious statements, those which track that fact of the matter, are true. Among the claims included as true in a worldview, some are central to that worldview, taken doctrinally, and others are only peripheral to it. Those which are included as true in a worldview and which are in fact central to it constitute the orthodoxy of that worldview.³⁰

The plurality of religions in the world means that religious believers will have differing views about what counts as orthodoxy in religion. Nonetheless, rejection of the beliefs of religions other than one's own is compatible with great respect towards the adherents of those other religions. Respect is an attitude shown primarily towards individuals, and only derivatively towards beliefs. But if respect were an attitude shown towards systems of beliefs, too, then there would be more respect shown towards other religions by a religiously orthodox adherent of the orthodoxy of one of those religions than by those who reject the notion of orthodoxy altogether.

Not every unorthodox belief is heretical; more than the rejection of a belief which is orthodox is required for heresy. For a belief to count as heretical, it is also necessary that the person holding that belief recognize that it has been rejected as unorthodox by a long-established consensus of the accepted experts in the religious community.

Furthermore, it is sadly clear that the accepted experts can be wrong about what counts as central to a religion, as well as what counts as true. So while rejecting their consensus about orthodoxy is a necessary condition for heresy, it isn't sufficient. One can reject the consensus and not hold a heretical belief, if the consensus is mistaken about which of the beliefs accepted as true by the religion are central to it.³¹ Olivi's view on quantity wasn't heretical even though it went against the consensus of medieval theologians regarding Christian orthodoxy, because the negation of that view, even if it were true, isn't central to Christianity.

On the other hand, although it is not guaranteed to be right, the cumulative consensus of a community of experts is more likely to be right than the views of one individual (or one small group) alone. From the point of view of Christianity, while it is possible that God would allow his church to be deceived for centuries about what is true and central to faith, leaving the

progress in philosophical theology and its related disciplines. But this isn't quite right.

If we were to give up views that we have arrived at by seeking what seems to us the truth in matters of religion just because those views disagreed with the tradition, then we'd be doing to ourselves what I said was pernicious to do to others. If it's pernicious to bring political pressure, or even peer pressure, to bear on someone to get him to adopt certain beliefs, it's equally destructive to love of truth to let ourselves be pressured by tradition into accepting beliefs that go contrary to what earnest, hard-working seekers for truth leads us to believe must be the case.

So if we find that the beliefs we have laboriously and carefully acquired go contrary to the tradition, or some large part of the tradition, I think we must hold on to our views. Even if it were possible to will to give up beliefs in this sort of way, to give up our beliefs in deference to the tradition would be a Pyrrhic victory for the tradition, as the whole sad history of politics and Christian belief shows. In this fallen world, love of truth is more precious than success in getting religious doctrine right, however important right religious doctrine is.

Conclusion and consolation

On the other hand, although, as I said above, the experts have been wrong in the past, when we disagree with the tradition, or some significant part of it, there is another possibility which we ought to take seriously. It might be that what has been responsible for beliefs of ours that are at odds with the tradition is not just a laborious, earnest process on our part of seeking for the truth. Perhaps stupidity also came into it. Perhaps there was ignorance or obliviousness or any of a number of other non-culpable epistemic faults.³³ Or maybe there were even culpable faults. Maybe there was carelessness, inattention, or neglect. It's also not outside the realm of possibility that pride, willfulness, or even perversity played some very small role.

Even if we must not give up our beliefs in deference to the tradition in such cases, then, I think we should care about our disagreement with the tradition. Love of truth isn't compatible with blind obedience to tradition, but it is compatible with wondering whether our efforts at finding truth have been (non-culpably) inadequate or even marred by sin.

So besides historical literacy in the Christian tradition, I'm recommending care and worry when we disagree with it—care and worry, but not guilt. Just as Mao thought that the feudal literature of an earlier period could serve the proletariat by "negative example," so Augustine thought that heretics performed a valuable service for the church.³⁴ The church would never search out so zealously the understanding that supports faith, Augustine thought, if it weren't driven to do so by the need to answer heretics. So if in spite of our best efforts to find the truth in matters of religion we fall into heresy, we have that best of Protestant consolations: we will still be useful.³⁵

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NOTES

1. Alvin Plantinga, "Advice to Christian Philosophers," *Faith and Philosophy* 1 (1984), 253-271.
2. Gordon Kaufman, "Evidentialism": A Theologian's Response," *Faith and Philosophy* 6 (1989), 35-46.
3. Kaufman 1989, p. 42.
4. It would no doubt be helpful to distinguish a heretic from someone who is simply an outsider to a religious tradition. Mao, for example, did not accept orthodox Christian doctrine, but it is clearly mistaken to consider him a Christian heretic. A heretic in some religion has to want to be an adherent to that religion and has to accept enough of the central doctrines of that religion to make it reasonable for others to take his claim seriously even if they reject it. Either conjunct is sufficient to explain why Mao is not a Christian heretic. I don't think there is any way of making precise the 'enough' in the second conjunct.
5. *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, ed. Marie Gentert King, (New York: Pyramid Books, 1968), pp. 231-236.
6. For those who take the trouble to look up the relevant passages in *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, I should say that what seems to me Hunter's heresy is not what the Church authorities of his time condemned him for. Although that was very controversial in Hunter's time, it isn't in ours, and I don't think it is a heresy. What I take to be a heresy is not Hunter's theological conclusion itself, but the theological position that his argument for that conclusion requires.
7. *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, p. 235.
8. My point here should not be construed more broadly than the statement of this claim, that we should not judge a person's Christian character or standing with God solely on the basis of his beliefs. In my view, we can judge his beliefs, and so we might perfectly well be able to judge his theological capabilities or his capabilities as a leader in the church. I am arguing against the practice of throwing people like Will Hunter out of the church, but nothing in this argument should be construed as implying that, in my view, Will Hunter would have been a good choice as a theology professor or a pastor of a church. (I am grateful to Richard Swinburne for prompting me to make this point clear.) On the other hand, nothing in what I say in the text implies that it is never appropriate to make any moral judgment whatsoever about a person on the basis of the way in which he arrives at a belief. It is sometimes, but perhaps less often than we suppose, clear that a person has arrived at a belief in a (morally or epistemically) culpable way. But to make an adverse judgment about a person based on the way in which he has arrived at a belief is vastly different from making an adverse judgment about his whole character or his standing with God based just on the beliefs he holds. (I am grateful to Michael Rea for prompting me to make this point clear.)
9. I say 'unorthodox' rather than 'heretical' here, because the former picks out a broader category than the latter, and I mean the point to apply to the broader category. Neither for the merely unorthodox nor for heretics is it a good thing to try to change beliefs by coercion. But the point here is a point only about beliefs, not about ways of acquiring beliefs. If there are ways of acquiring beliefs which are obviously culpable (breaking into the bank's computer system to get information about one's neighbor's bank balance, for example), then pressure of one sort or another might reasonably be brought to bear to put a stop to such practices. (I am grateful to Mike Rea for prompting me to clarify this point.)
10. For an interesting evaluation of Jesuit missions in China, see, for exam-

ple, D. E. Mungello, *Curious Land: Jesuit Accommodation and the Origins of Sinology*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai Press, 2nd ed., 1989).

11. For an interesting but controversial assessment of missionary work in West Africa, see Lamin Sanneh, *West African Christianity*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1992).

12. William Alston, "Realism and the Christian Faith," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 38 (1995), 37-60. Alston gives a persuasive argument against irrealism in religion.

13. In what follows, when I speak about Christian orthodoxy, I am talking about orthodoxy from the perspective of an insider; in all other cases, I am speaking about what a religion or worldview takes to be true, whether or not it really is.

14. William Alston has objected to me in correspondence that a sociologist who ignored the difference between central and peripheral beliefs in a religion would be a bad sociologist. So perhaps the distinction I want to make here could be better described in some other way than as doctrinal and sociological ways of taking a religion. I've left the label as it is just because I couldn't think of a better shorthand description of the distinction.

15. Christopher Hibbert, *The Dragon Wakes: China and the West, 1793-1911*, (New York: Penguin Books, reprinted 1988), p. 31.

16. For an account of the change in attitudes among Confucians with the change of dynasty, see Mungello 1989, pp. 18ff.

17. See, for example, Paul Griffiths, "Stump, Kretzmann, and Historical Blindness," *Faith and Philosophy* 10 (1993), 79-85.

18. See, for example, Tien-wei Wu, *Lin Biao and the Gang of Four: Contradictions in Historical and Intellectual Perspective*, (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), pp. 147-173.

19. David Burr, *The Persecution of Peter Olivi*, (Philadelphia: Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, new series, 1976), vol.66, part 5, p. 59.

20. Burr 1976, pp. 81-82.

21. Kaufman 1989, p. 44.

22. *Ibid.*

23. See, for example, *Summa theologiae* (ST) IaIae q.2, a.8.

24. Besides the qualifications of this claim which I discuss in the text, there is one other which I will leave to one side. We generally use the term 'heresy' in such a way that a heretical belief is one held by someone who is an insider to the worldview or religion with respect to which the belief is heretical. That is, if Jiang Zemin and I both think that revolutions are primarily made by the urban, rather than the rural, underclass, Jiang Zemin is a heretical Maoist, whereas I, who am an outsider where Maoism is concerned, simply dissent from Maoist views. See also footnote 4.

25. ST IaIae q.11, a.2, ad 3.

26. Although what is unorthodox will be the same for everyone, on Aquinas's view what is heretical will thus be relative to persons. The same belief can be a heretical Christian belief for one person A and not for another person B in case A and B both hold this belief but A knows, while B does not, that this belief is one which the Church rejects as unorthodox. What Aquinas would say about those who are ignorant of what the Church rejects as unorthodox when they might readily have known it, I'm not sure. Perhaps he would suppose such cases are analogous to drunk driving cases, where a current inability fails to excuse because the inability itself is culpable and could have been prevented. Scott MacDonald has pointed out to me in correspondence that if we found a person who accepted Donatism without realizing the Church had rejected it, we would say that he held a heresy, so that 'heresy'

seems just to refer to any doctrinal position officially rejected as heretical by the Church. I agree that we are inclined to talk in this way, but it seems to me that this way of talking is both imprecise and misleading. It's imprecise for the reasons just given in connection with Aquinas's position, and it's misleading because it suggests, wrongly, that we ought to consider the unwitting Donatist a heretic. So it seems to me safer to relativize heresy to persons in the way Aquinas's remarks imply.

27. For a helpful account of the nature of the dispute surrounding Galileo's scientific views, see Richard Blackwell, *Galileo, Bellarmine, and the Bible*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991).

28. As Richard Swinburne has pointed out to me in correspondence, it is only a small point of analogy, and there are many serious disanalogies, among which the most important is probably that Christian tradition claims to take its point of origin from divine revelation and the scientific community generally does not.

29. But notice that it might be easy to be deceived about what is an important matter of faith. The argument I have just given against accepting beliefs which run contrary to a long-established consensus might have been used (and for all I know were used) against Galileo; but the authorities who used such a claim would have been wrong in supposing that what Galileo rejected was an important matter of faith.

30. Because of the universal nature of this claim, I put the point speaking from the outside. If I were speaking of Christian orthodoxy, the orthodoxy of the worldview to which I subscribe, then I would put the point this way: those Christian beliefs which are true and which are in fact central to Christianity constitute Christian orthodoxy.

31. No distinction is needed here between orthodoxy from an insider's and from an outsider's position. That is because there is no way to remain an insider to a religion if one grants that a particular belief is central to a religion but not true. So, a Christian and a non-Christian can agree that for someone to hold a heretical Christian belief, she must reject the consensus of the Christian community with regard to a belief taken to be true by the Christian community when that belief is in fact central to Christianity.

32. I don't think there is any sensible way of making this vague claim precise. Philosophers don't like things to be vague, and so some readers will want to know how much we should care, for how long, in what contexts, with what constraints. I don't think that any formula can be given about such things. Not everything can be made precise.

33. I put this claim in the text and want to highlight it in a footnote to make sure no one supposes me to be claiming that a heretical belief is always acquired as a result of a moral failing.

34. Augustine, *City of God*, Book XVI, chapter 2.

35. I am grateful to William Alston, Scott MacDonald, Alvin Plantinga, Michael Rea, Richard Swinburne, and Merold Westphal for useful comments and questions, and I'm indebted to Norman Kretzmann for all his help on an earlier draft.