

Understanding the Term “Orthodoxy”

Promise and Peril

Whenever we use the word “orthodoxy” in the contemporary world we are faced with a dilemma. The term speaks both bane and blessing, curse and gift, peril and promise. At its heart, it is clear that it describes access to a treasury of inner wisdom that has been transmitted through the centuries. But the term itself is almost always synonymous with associations which, at the very moment of the bestowal those gifts, in some sense also contaminate the offering.

Look up “orthodoxy” in a standard dictionary or thesaurus and the words that define it are: compliance, obedience, acquiescence, submission, towing the line, adherence, conformity, observance, and deference. Taken singly or together, these terms express a conceptual history which has come to signify religious coercion, and even oppression. Its original intent, however, seems to be quite different from this history. Etymologically, the Greek compound *ortho* (meaning straight, right, or right) and *doxa* (can mean opinion, but also glory, worship, or praise). Together these suggest a singular relationship to the divine Reality which is pure and undiluted in transcendent worship or praise. There is, then, a way forward into a relationship with that Ultimate Reality (that infinite Beauty and divine Glory) that is direct and straightforward. And, in the end, that relationship is pure praise which issues from the heart as *orthodoxa*. So, then, how are we to approach the religious traditions of orthodoxy (with their limitations and rigidities) that will rescue this term from its many negative associations and raise it, perhaps, to a new level of significance?

For those who are familiar with the early formation of eastern and western Christianity, orthodoxy stood for a tradition which not only honored the power of the original revelation of Jesus, but expressed the multiple streams of interpretation of that vision coming through the early fathers and mothers of Christianity. That visionary spirit, which extended both East and West, was full of an immense inner beauty illuminating a new way of perceiving the sacred (*See Clement’s text for a clearer and more comprehensive description of this vision*). Eventually, however, its primordial brightness was sullied by temporal power and politics, becoming a pale representation of its former glory.

Orthodoxy and Its Many Dimensions

To regain access to that original vision and its primary intent, we must distinguish dimensions of orthodoxy as a historical progression from its original relationship to the Divine. Orthodoxy is not simply an expression of a correct historical lineage of doctrinal definition on the horizontal level, it is an attempt primarily to establish a right-relationship to Ultimate Reality itself. A distinction must therefore be made between dogmas or doctrines (as a necessary component of religious teaching) from their transcendental antecedents—those realities to which doctrines and dogmas point. These realities are always transcendent to language and symbol, which come to express the revelation in historical terms. Without such a distinction between Ultimate Reality

and the symbols which point to that Reality, we often reduce Truth to a doctrinal formulary and orthodoxy only to its linguistic or symbolic representations in history—to truths which are only aspects of the greater Truth of revelation from which they descend. When that occurs, we end up devaluing the actual experience of the divine Reality whose Presence is ultimately beyond words, symbols and abstractions.

In an extensive evaluation of this phenomenon, one modern writer on the contingencies and difficulties of the use of the term *orthodoxy*, Shah-Kazemi, offers this insight: Considered vertically, as a reflection of the vertical realities of transcendence and immanence, the orthodoxy is replete with an “infinite resonance.” Nothing of orthodoxy’s original vision, uniqueness or veracity is sacrificed on the horizontal level if we are able to connect with its vertical dimensions. Rather its particularity attains “the touch of the Absolute precisely by opening out onto the plane of the Absolute, and not remaining bound to a relative and exclusivist viewpoint” (Shah-Kazemi, 43). Understood in this manner, orthodoxy is an opening for humanity into the infinite expanse of the glory of God and not adherence to doctrinal rigidity maintained by religious institutions per se.

Particularities of Orthodoxy

How then are we to understand the term orthodoxy as a description of religious formalism along the horizontal axis? Orthodoxy perceived from the standpoint of a particular historical and religious perspective is most helpfully defined with reference to four fundamental elements outlined by Marco Pallis (9). First, historical orthodoxy must be defined by a higher source of Revelation than itself—that is, it must be an attempt to describe the Ultimate Ground of Reality and Being understood from the unique perspective of the Tradition in question, however limited that description might ultimately prove to be. Second, a religious orthodoxy is also an expression of a means of grace issuing from that Source and transmitted across history through a variety of exoteric and esoteric forms and channels integral to that transmission by which individuals might touch the Infinite. Third, orthodoxy must possess a means of personal verification and realization which, if faithfully followed, will lead a human being to successive levels of the actualization of the truths communicated by that Revelation. Finally, the transmission of the tradition through its formal embodiment (that is, Tradition expressed within a tradition), comprises sacred teachings expressed through literature, the arts, and the sciences which, when taken together, determine the character of the civilization to which it gives shape and meaning. Understood in this way, Christian orthodoxy, in its various forms or channels both East and West, has provided a particular, and necessary, foundation for the diverse temporal expressions of the Christian faith through the millennia. These four fundamental elements also inevitably describe not only the formation of the orthodoxy of Christian faith but also those of the “orthodoxies” of all the sacred traditions.

Our use of the term, therefore, has to do with a way of seeing that includes not only the historical advantages of an Oriental basis toward religion through its historical development, but more importantly the greater foundation which is built upon the divine ground of *Sophia perennis*—

that is the wisdom that ultimately grounds all theology and philosophy because it is rooted in the Ultimate Reality itself. Oriental Orthodoxy, then, defines itself as a stance taken inwardly toward the divine immanence and transcendence which allows our love and longing for the divine wisdom to be built upon these foundations and to come alive in history and within the sacred space of life when is axially oriented heavenward and yet attentive earthward at the very same moment.

Olivier Clement. **The Roots of Christian Mysticism**. London: New City (1997).

Reza Shah-Kazemi. **The Other in Light of the One**. Cambridge: The Islamic Text Society (2006).

Marco Pallis. **The Way of the Mountain**. London: Peter Owen (1991).