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# Orthodoxy and the Church Today\*

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ORTHODOXY MAY BE defined as the best approximation to the truth about God as a man can attain to it, given the evidence and sources which God himself has provided. It is Church-orientated and Bible-based. The old tag 'Orthodoxy is my doxy, heterodoxy is your doxy' leaves out of account both the givenness of God and the corporate or church environment each of which is necessarily involved. These are high claims for orthodoxy (some would prefer to describe them as a tall order) in an age marked by relativism in thought, permissiveness in conduct (in some though not all areas of action) and a general tendency to 'do one's own thing'.

The premise from which I start is the givenness of God. Without this I cannot see how Christianity can make sense. If the personalist model is the most reliable way of speaking about God it cannot be otherwise, for any personal relationship is inescapably a two-way traffic. But this two-sidedness involves two immediate qualifications. Nothing forbids a graduated givenness. Extending the model, I hope that I give myself more richly to my wife or my students than I do to the milkman when I take in the milk or pay the bill. So the givenness of God may admit of differences of degree (or better) of styling or idiom. The immanence of God, his general immanence within the Created Order, has a different styling from his action in the incarnation decisively for us men and for our salvation. The one presupposes the other. The speciality of divine action is supported by, would be incomplete without, but is not reducible to, the other. Secondly this givenness is attuned to the capacity of who receives it. It is, as my Roman Catholic friends would put it, *in modum recipientis*. Thus revelation is God speaking, but it respects the limitations of its addressees. The incarnation is the givenness of God but in a fully human setting at a given point in history. The church is the Body of

\*A paper given at the refresher course at St. John's College, Durham on June 27th 1972.

Christ but it is composed of sinful and fallible human beings like ourselves. Its sacraments use as vehicles of givenness the common stuff of daily life, water in baptism and bread and wine in the holy communion.

God's givenness, antecedent in itself, is related to creatures, particularly but not exclusively to men. This introduces at once the factor of history. God's givenness involves a *Here and Now* which is at once God's *Once for all* and which also becomes in course of time a *Then* and a *There*. Christianity is essentially, inescapably a historical religion with a tang of actuality which is its great asset among the world's religions but which adds an important complicating factor in the diagnosis of orthodoxy. It excludes shortcuts to theological success—a Bible considered as dollops of infallible 'gen.' dropped directly and unrelateably from Heaven, a docetic Christ, an infallible church. All these emphasise the givenness of God but look for the criteria of givenness in the wrong place or express it in the wrong way. They forget that the givenness is never an unrelated givenness, yet the relatedness does not destroy the givenness any more than the givenness makes the relatedness redundant or superfluous. The decisive act, the relevant word is God's and God's alone but it comes to twentieth century man through the conditions of an eighth century Hebrew, a first Christian century, the fourth or fifth century or the Reformation with its rediscovery of man's condition or lack of standing before God. There is identity of subject-matter, congruity of content but difference of style, idiom and historical context. If contemporary man is to receive the givenness of God he must even today have sufficient receptivity or attunedness, adequate loyalty to the past in which God has been at work and enough humility to sit down before the facts and hear the word of the Lord as it comes to us through them.

That there should be norms of orthodoxy, channels of divine givenness in the sense noted above follows from the argument we have just set out. But the context in which this givenness is set suggests that there may be some qualifications which must be respected and some delicacy in their detection or at least their application. A paper by the Warden of Keble 'The Dogma of Normativeness' read on one occasion to the Lightfoot Society in Durham opens up the question. The argument that the quest for norms is a false trail in principle ignores the vital importance of the givenness of God. An unmitigated theological pluralism leads at once to a theological relativism which would make all theological statements possible with an equal chance of success or failure. This would mean the end of Christianity as we or anybody else have understood it. No doubt it is part of the sovereignty of God that he should go on beyond what man can frame about him. That is part of the godhead of God as distinct from the manhood of man. God's self-existence which is the

antecedent and ground of his self-impartment must be preserved at all cost. His transcendence is the precondition of his immanence and both alike are involved in his givenness. The personalist model again helps us here, for, as G. F. Woods in his essay in *Soundings* suggested, there is a similar reciprocal between transcendence and immanence in a human person with his double characteristics of opacity and capacity for fellowship. Both are characteristics of selfhood. To describe the quest for norms as Judaistic and therefore as an affront to the freedom of the gospel is to miss the point. Freedom does not mean unlimited openness and any possible 'Judaism' lies not in the quest for or possession of norms but in certain ways in which they can be used or abused. What is more difficult is the delicacy required in using norms. Here in my reply to Nineham after his paper I found that I could agree with much of his detail, the historical conditioning, the need to overhear rather than to hear directly, the requirement of sympathetic historical imagination and the like. The norms belong to the givenness of God but also to the related givenness of God. The attempt was made to force the dilemma 'Either unrelated norms or no norms at all'. Those who pressed for the recognition of norms were accused of being or of needing logically to be fundamentalists. Or, if we weren't, then we had no business to be looking for norms at all.

The dilemma is neat and was rigorously pressed. But it still remains true and inescapable that God has acted, God has spoken even if in order to hear correctly what God has said we must take pains over the historical setting or context in which his words were first heard and then proceed to apply them to our own day and age. Those for whom devotional Bible reading is almost a third sacrament will find the task less formidable than Nineham appears to do but even a theologian using the Bible as a source for doctrine finds no reason to despair. To take the evidence in blocks rather than in pieces, to string together sequences noting the developments within the Bible itself, to select and to use the highlights as themselves a norm within the wider norm are all viable techniques for the distillation of the doctrinal normativeness of the Bible. This may sound terribly generalised but it can be readily illustrated and my impression is that it is how the Bible has more often been used in the past than is generally admitted. The point is that it is a use and not an abuse of the Bible, and I would defend it against those who are inclined to call it an under-use of the Bible.

The Bible then is the primary norm not only as the earliest, the most complete, the most wide-ranging in time and space record of God speaking, God acting, but also as containing within its pages the words and acts of God which bring salvation. It is the record in word and deed of salvation history. But it is not a piece of automatic writing on God's part, and cannot be treated as the subject of automatic reading. Neither God's action nor man's reaction can be

treated in this way. It is once for all but its decisiveness does not admit of being computerised even in a technological age.

That God's speech and action did not end with the Apostolic Age, that Christianity did not come to a full stop when the last document included in the New Testament was written, is a truism. This leaves open the possibility of subordinate and dependent norms but it also raises the thorny question of Scripture and tradition. It is argued that since the Bible is in a real sense the book of the church it can be satisfactorily regarded as the first, no doubt the basic and the most primitive, stage of an ongoing process. The New Testament literature was written by churchmen for churchmen or at least for intending or hoped-for churchmen. The form critic has shown that the *Sitz im Leben* of much of the gospel material is to be found in the life of the church; at least this approach to the siting of gospel material is not a superfluous question and that some progress in understanding the gospels better may proceed along these lines. The church took over the OT canon from Judaism and presided over the construction of a New Testament canon. The dilemma 'Holy Writ or Holy Church' is an unreal dilemma and the Bible can safely be absorbed without further ado into tradition in the interests of theological economy.

There is truth as well as error in this presentation. At least in the sphere of church administration the Bible represents a springboard rather than a terminus. Again, as later Lutherans were to admit, there was a class of things indifferent for which it was idle or indeed impossible to require scriptural warrant. It is difficult not to accept in some sense the principle of development of doctrine. As early as the fourth century St. Athanasius and others agonised over the objection that the vital term *homoousion* was not found in Scripture, even though without it the full scriptural affirmations about Christ could hardly be sustained. Yet some checks or safeguards to test legitimate and illegitimate developments were plainly needed. Even Newman admitted that, and the dangers of pushing questions further and further in the interest of the completion of a system can be illustrated from the mediaeval Scholastics, and, to take but one example, the rounding off of the section on the incarnation by the inclusion of mariology. But aside from this example there comes a point in every section when even a sympathetic reader will say 'Here real questions are ceasing to be asked', either through the demerit (some would call it the subtlety) of the question or because there is simply not the evidence in Scripture for a worthwhile judgment to be made. A similar passion for completeness can be found in the elaboration of Canon Law. The aim, a complete answer to every question of faith or action, need not be ignoble; it was certainly misguided and it was purchased at the loss of the main thrust of Scripture both in thought and action. The technique of a check-back into Scripture, not merely of terms or letters but of thrusts of life and action, is urgently needed as a corrective to

an oversimplified use of a positive principle.

But there are other objections too. The *Sitz im Leben* argument is heavily simplified. For it still remains necessary to ask *Sitz im Leben Jesu* questions as well as *Sitz im Leben Kirche* questions and this may be even truer or at least equally true of the intention of the gospels themselves. While admittedly the Bible is in the church, this assertion forgets the complementary truth that there was no time at which the Bible was not also over the church. This is certainly the case with the Patristic period. While the gap between the contestants has narrowed somewhat through better mutual understanding, it would be idle to hold that it had completely disappeared. Scripture is not simply part of tradition; it is normative to tradition. The Bible can be described as the book of the church; it is nevertheless over the church. It may be another case of the relation of transcendence-immanence reciprocal, but if the parallel does not help, let it go.

Under the primary norm of the Bible there emerged the first set of subordinate norms, the Creeds. It is certainly not difficult to establish a direct linear continuity between the Bible and the early baptismal creeds as expressions of filled commitment, but the conciliar creeds, beginning with the Creed of Nicaea show increasing signs of dependence upon a particular theological scheme using the thought-forms and categories of the period. The attack on norms has therefore been temporarily switched from Scripture to creeds. Perhaps I may be forgiven, in the light of my special interests, for putting the positive case first. The task of theologising, necessary alike for domestic reasons (the establishment of a coherent working faith) and for missionary motives (becoming or remaining within earshot of its contemporaries), led the church to think together the primary scriptural data into some sort of systematic and coherent whole. This the New Testament itself, which is more concerned with spearhead thrust than lateral roundedness, did not itself undertake. The drawing of the appropriate doctrinal inferences and their thinking together with each other in an appropriate thought-context was a subsequent but indispensable task. To do it justice the church did not hurry over its task, kept firmly in touch with the Bible throughout (biblical commenting went on side by side with philosophical theology) and did not overdefine. It had the advantage over later ages in undertaking the task together and reaching its results through a confluence of different approaches and traditions, though not without dispute or acrimony. Its unity was not seen as incompatible with diversity. It was fortunate too that a set of philosophical co-ordinates were available which formed a common universe of discourse between the church and its secular contemporaries. These were of course neither newly-minted to provide for the Christian realities nor were they at all points adapted to their new purpose, but they were used flexibly enough and were malleable enough to serve well for their particular purpose, chiefly the doctrines

of the Trinity and of the person of Christ. They were to prove rather less satisfactory in the development of the doctrines of man and of the church. The classical theology embodied in the creeds still remains for many the best possible network of inferences from Scripture: some would go as far as to claim that they were the only adequate synthesis.

The attack takes three forms both for what they say and for what they do not say and for the way in which they say it. Some are really moving the previous question in their objection to the inclusion of the Virgin Birth and the resurrection in anything like its traditional form. Those whose eschatology is at best decidedly sketchy with regard to the hope of the parousia and the doctrine of the after-life, naturally find the creeds say too much. The fault there (if fault it is) lies with the Bible and not with the creeds. More difficult is the ontological idiom in which some at least of the creeds are phrased the *homoousios* of Nicaea, the framework of the Chalcedonian Definition and above all the trinitarian section of the Athanasian Creed. If it be replied that the Athanasian Creed is never (or hardly ever) used and the Chalcedonian Definition accepted but not prescribed for use, they all belong to the same stable—the acceptance of ontology as an idiom viable in itself and appropriate to theology. It is not my task here to try to defend ontology as a philosophical approach, or to discuss the motives which have led most modern philosophers to avoid or reject it. The replacement of metaphysics by linguistic philosophy raises issues on which my opinion is of no great value. The replacement of theology by God-talk and the preference for the phrase 'reliable statements' for 'true statements' is characteristic of the thought of Ian Ramsey. Bound up with this is the tendency to suspect statements about the being of God and the tendency to confine attention to his operations. I can sympathise with the motives of modesty without taking that way myself. Even an ontological theology like Thomism uses the way of analogy, the recognition that even when we are trying to draw out the Godhood of God our thought is analogical not univocal, doing the best that we can with the categories which we have got. Theologically there is less heaven-assailing aggressiveness in ontology than might be thought. It is better to speak analogically or even mythically (as with the alleged three-decker universe or the clause 'sitteth at the right hand of God') than to fail to make intellectual or linguistic provision for divine transcendence. Its omission makes a worse nonsense by omitting the directive for theology which it contains. It is also alleged that ontological categories are too static to cover the dynamism of the Bible. So it has sometimes appeared in ancient and especially in medieval times but it should not be forgotten that St. Augustine (followed by the Scholastics) found no great difficulty in combining ontology with a strong doctrine of relations as well. Ontology may not in principle be incurably static even though it has often looked and behaved this way. I would defend it as an important

framework for theology but not equally applicable over the whole field. It works best for the doctrine of the Trinity, passably well for christology though it cannot and need not exclude other approaches; in my view it works ill, or not at all, for the doctrines of man, the atonement and the church. I would defend against all-comers the rights of the creeds to serve as the first of the subordinate norms—an expression under the Bible of the givenness of God, though historically and theologically conditioned to the thought-forms of their time. But it would be sheer anachronism to blame men of a different age for using the categories of their own time instead of our own.

The third crucial moment in the development of orthodoxy was the Reformation which has also left its mark on confessional statements in our case the Thirty Nine Articles. The Reformation must be regarded as a moment of recovery rather than of retreat, an attempt to recover the biblical thrust which had been overlaid by the passion for completeness which characterised the Middle Ages. The return to biblical emphases, the rediscovery of the penetrative power of the gospel was indeed a return to, rather than a withdrawal from orthodoxy. It was a tragedy that the pre-Reformation conceded too little and too late, and even more that the forces of reform were excluded from, and not retained within, the fabric of the church. Our own Reformation differed in important respects from that on the Continent. It was in some ways a conservative reform, an inclusive reform and it lacked the passion for completeness which marked alike scholastic Lutheranism and the ultra-Reformed movement which resulted in the Synod of Dort. Still less than the creeds the Articles do not present the heads of a mini-*Summa Theologiae*. They are concerned with the burning issues of the day and therefore they are phrased (even more than the creeds) in the thought-forms of the day. More questions are left more open than in many Continental confessions. The report of the Doctrine Commission on the Articles will be familiar to some of you and is still available. I think that I can claim some small share in preventing their complete abandonment. I was anxious to avoid the disorientation of the Church of England, the disownment of the deposit left by the Reformation which would have amounted to an abandonment of a vital stage of its history, and above all, the requirement for many of us that nothing stated explicitly or to be inferred implicitly from the Articles should be subject to censure by the Church of England. As you will see I do not restrict myself when I theologise to the subjects or even necessarily the limits of the Articles, but I find them the freehold of Evangelicals which puts our position in the Church beyond dispute. The attempt was made to produce a modernised version of the Articles in which I had a hand. It met with practically no support and I for one was not disappointed even though I had faithfully worked on this commission. Perhaps I am too much of a historian at heart to welcome changes in historic documents and



I found increasingly that the habit of theologising by article had passed out of account and I do not altogether regret it. An ecumenical age moves in quite a different direction.

Briefly, what about 'Today?' The givenness of God, the God who acts, the God who speaks is axiomatic. Relatedness did not come to a full stop in the sixteenth century; indeed the absence of an agreed intellectual idiom between the theologian and his contemporaries is one of the tragedies of our time. I would not, could not, exclude restatement in other terms provided that it was not either mis-statement or understatement, dangers to which modern man is particularly prone. But what I am certain about is that the primacy of the Bible together with loyalty to the past of the whole church and of our own church must be part of the story. God is given; he cannot change; he has by definition no history. We the recipients of his givenness are in history, and this involves not only experiment and adventure in the present but also loyalty to the past. Christ the saviour of men meets men where they are, but he is also the Lord of history and therefore he (and we) cannot disown the way in which he has led the Church in former ages. Modern man is not himself a unique phenomenon, no new vintage. More than he realises, he is conditioned by his past as well as by his present. *Aggiornamento* cannot involve either the abandonment of norms or disloyalty to our heritage. Orthodoxy witnesses to the truth about God, the continuity amid change of his action in history the recognition that there is a deposit to which we need to be faithful, that there are battles which recur in Christian history in which the victory has in principle been won for all times, that there are approaches to God which are metalled roads and others which inevitably peter out into quicksands. These are high claims but they can be substantiated by the historian. 'So far his hand has led us, sure he still will lead us on.'