Orthodoxy and Heresy

Introduction

Al 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. 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 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

---

1. Alvin Plantinga, "Advice to Christian Philosophers", Faith and Philosophy ***
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"."

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.

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. 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. 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. Use your imagination and pick some theological position which in your own view is not only theologicaally 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,

5. 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.
trust me: somewhere in the history of religious persecutions in Britain, there is someone about whom you would feel as I feel about 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". Perhaps his theology was hopeless; but, as for the man himself, who among us is worthy to be his disciple?

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. 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 heretical beliefs. 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 wellbeing. 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 adopt derogatory attitudes towards those whose views are unorthodox or to bring any political pressure on them to change their 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? 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? 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 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? Etymologically, of course, 'orthodoxy' means 'right beliefs' or 'correct beliefs', beliefs that are true rather than false. But 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 Jew, for example, orthodox Jewish beliefs are the true beliefs which are essential to his religion. Muslims also, however, can recognize that some Jewish beliefs are orthodox and others are heretical. To do so, the Muslim need not grant that orthodox Jewish beliefs are true; he needs to grant only that they are taken to be true by Judaism and that they are in fact essential to Judaism. When I speak about Christian orthodoxy, I am talking about orthodoxy from the perspective of an insider; in all other case, I am speaking about what a religion or worldview takes to be true, whether or not it really is.

---

9. 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 Jew, for example, orthodox Jewish beliefs are the true beliefs which are essential to his religion. Muslims also, however, can recognize that some Jewish beliefs are orthodox and others are heretical. To do so, the Muslim need not grant that orthodox Jewish beliefs are true; he needs to grant only that they are taken to be true by Judaism and that they are in fact essential to Judaism. When I speak about Christian orthodoxy, I am talking about orthodoxy from the perspective of an insider; in all other case, I am speaking about what a religion or worldview takes to be true, whether or not it really is.
than false. Accepting the notion that some (and only some) religious beliefs are orthodox 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 disputes about realism and irrealism with regard to the claims of a religion. If we take some religious beliefs to be orthodox, then we presuppose the correctness of realism in religion.

Not all theologians accept realism with regard to religion. In a recent paper, "Realism and the Christian Faith", Bill Alston\(^{10}\) argues that George Santayana, Paul Tillich, and John Hick, for example, are all irrealists as far as religion goes\(^{11}\). It isn't possible to examine the dispute between realism and irrealism in passing here, but I do want to say something briefly about what is lost if we give up realism. First, if we give up realism, then the traditional claims of religions are claims without truth-value. For example, it is not true that Jesus is the Messiah, as Christians suppose; it is not true that Jewish law is from God, as many Jews suppose; it is not true that there is one God and Mohammed is his prophet, as many Muslims suppose; and so on. In fact, even many of the traditional claims of atheism must also be rejected. If realism is given up, such atheistic claims as 'There is no God' are not true. Of course, such claims aren't false either if the irrealists are right; they simply have no truth-value at all.

Furthermore, if realism is rejected, we will have to abandon discussion of such long-standing and powerful challenges to religion as the problem of evil. The argument from evil tries to show that there is an incompatibility between the traditional claims about God and the claim that there is evil in the world. But if the irrealists are right and there is no truth-value for religious discourse, it isn't possible to show that the truth of some religious claims is incompatible with the truth of the claim that there is evil in the world. Adopting irrealism in religion is thus a short route to a solution of the problem of evil.

\(^{10}\) William Alston, "Realism and the Christian Faith", forthcoming***.

\(^{11}\) Kaufman, for example, says, "so-called "religious truth-claims, including those made by Christian faith .... are always in fact articulated in highly symbolical language -- language with many levels of meaning, language the primary function of which is not so much to articulate "truths" about the world and the human ... as it is to present a framework from within which basic orientation and meaning for the whole of human life can be found." (Kaufman 1989, pp.40-41.)
But it seems to me that these consequences of irrealism are unacceptable. Atheists' claims do have a truth-value, as they themselves would surely also insist, and the problem of evil needs to be taken seriously, rather than dismissed. On the other hand, if realism is right, then there is a fact of the matter in the realm of religion, and religious statements have a truth-value. In that case, given the diverse and incompatible set of human 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 essential beliefs

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 that a particular philosophical or political position takes to be true, some will be central to that position, constitutive of it, and others will not. The beliefs that constitute orthodoxy are the central, rather than the peripheral, parts of a religion or worldview.

On this way of thinking about the matter, there is a set of beliefs which is central or essential to a religion; and not everything that anyone takes to be an essential part of a religion or worldview really is central to it. Devout Muslims can be wrong about what counts as Islam, for example.

Understanding orthodoxy in this way requires that we make a distinction between a religion or worldview taken doctrinally and that same religion or worldview taken sociologically. If we ask, for example, whether Confucianism is compatible with Buddhism, our answer to the question will vary depending on which way we take Confucianism. If we take Confucianism sociologically to refer to all the views held as Confucian by those who considered themselves 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 considered themselves Confucians have frequently been favorably inclined towards Buddhism. 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. Not all Confucians were so tolerant (or syncretistic). 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 sometimes is and sometimes is not sympathetic to Buddhism. So 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 views which had been assimilated to Confucianism at the end of the Ming dynasty in the late sixteenth century.

Not everyone accepts the distinction between doctrinal and sociological ways of understanding a worldview. Some scholars of religion suppose that there is no alternative to a sociological interpretation of a religion or worldview. 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

---

13. For an account of the change in attitudes among Confucians with the change of dynasty, see Mungallo 1989, pp.18ff.
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 as well as sociologically and that some beliefs are essential to particular worldviews, doctrinally understood. The claim that China's revolution is dependent on the rural peasantry is essential 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 beliefs are essential to a worldview requires us to suppose that that worldview is always characterized by an explicit articulation of all of them. Some of the essential beliefs might be in the worldview inchoately or implicitly at some times and be made explicit only later. 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". ¹⁵ 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 view that the arts can teach by negative example is implicit in his core beliefs. Here there is an interval of decades only between the original core beliefs 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 beliefs taken to be true by a worldview are essential 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 rejection of any of the beliefs taken to be true by a worldview will seem equally as serious as the rejection 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 belief 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...."16

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 essential to a worldview and those peripheral to it, burned four Franciscan spirituals at the stake in Marseilles in 1318 because they disagreed with Church authorities about the length of Franciscan cloaks (among other issues).17

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. 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 beliefs taken as true by a worldview are essential to it, it becomes easier to recognize the dreadful folly represented by the Whatever Faction or the thirteenth-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 to orthodoxy. Since the claims a particular religion maintains as orthodox are those the religion holds to be true and essential, 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 to 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...."^{18}

Kaufman recommends instead "a certain agnosticism", a recognition that religious matters are an "ultimate mystery".^{19}

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

^{18}. Kaufman 1989, p.44.
^{19}. Ibid.
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. Such an agnosticism requires us to hold that most of the views held by the world's major religions, at least all their claims to know some religious truth, are not true. The agnostic, after all, is committed to denying that anyone knows the truth when it comes to religion, so he has to reject the claims of other religions to know some religious truths. 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 beliefs not only with Jews and Muslims but even with polytheistic pagans. Unlike the agnostic, Aquinas is willing to suppose that adherents of non-Christian religions know some religious truths. So even if we tie respect to systems of belief rather than persons, it's hard to see agnosticism as the more tolerant or respectful position here since the 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, notice 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 plurality of religions would disappear or at least be significantly

---

20. See, for example, *Summa theologicae* (ST) IIaIIae q.2, a.8.
diminished if the differing groups all gave up any claim to orthodoxy. The distinctions among religions are a function of their differing understandings of what is to count as orthodox. In fact, it is worth noticing that we couldn't even have agnosticism as a religious position if we abandon 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, as in other religious positions, there is an orthodoxy. 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. The opposite of 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. This should not be surprising. As we saw earlier, part of what is involved in the notion of orthodoxy is the claim that some beliefs a particular religion or worldview holds as true are peripheral, rather than central, to that worldview. Peripheral beliefs can be rejected without heresy. As I said, this is a view incompatible with the position of people such as those constituting the Whatever Faction, who thought that nothing Mao said or believed was peripheral to Maoism. For them any rejection of any saying of Mao's was intolerable Maoist heresy.

We might suppose, then, that heresy consists in the rejection of any claim which a religion or worldview takes to be both true and essential to it. But heresy is a

---

21. 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
complicated notion, and this characterization still hasn't got it quite right. Even for beliefs that are not only true but also essential 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." And this holds, in Aquinas's view, not only with regard to religious matters peripheral to faith, but also with regard to beliefs that are essential 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 essential to Christianity -- and heresy. Heresy requires knowing that a certain position is one held to be essential by the Church and deciding, nonetheless, to reject it.

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?

an outsider where Maoism is concerned, simply dissent from Maoist views.

22. ST II-II q.11, a.2, ad 3.
23. Although what is unorthodox will thus be the same for everyone, on Aquinas's view what is heretical will 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.
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 reflective theological thinkers 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 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. 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 essential 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 the scientific model is helpful. 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

24 Someone might suppose that in this case the Church was also mistaken in supposing that the beliefs in question were central to the faith, rather than peripheral. Church authorities of the period, however, tended to see the issue as one having to do with the reliability of the Bible; and, of course, this issue isn't peripheral to the faith. 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).
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's more reason for adopting such an attitude with regard to Christianity than medicine. If there is a long-established Christian consensus that some claim is true and essential to Christianity, and you (or you and your little group) in the late twentieth century see 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. 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

25. Scientific American ****
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 taken to be true by a worldview, some are essential to that worldview, taken doctrinally, and others are only peripheral to it. Those which are taken to be true by a worldview and which are in fact essential to it constitute the orthodoxy of that worldview.  

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 derivately towards beliefs. But if respect were an attitude 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 essential 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

26. 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 essential to Christianity constitute Christian orthodoxy. See also footnote 9*. 
as true by the religion are essential to it.\textsuperscript{27} 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 essential 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 essential to faith, leaving the 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 heresy 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 heresy 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

\textsuperscript{27} 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 essential 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 essential to Christianity.
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 think about 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, I don't think that the notion of a heretic is a useful one, and I think that it is pernicious in the extreme to try to promote orthodoxy through political pressure of any sort. I think 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.

So my thesis is simple. I think 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, hidebound, slavish deference to religious tradition, which would impede all 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 seeking 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. 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 I think it is compatible with wondering whether our efforts at finding truth have been inadequate or 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.\textsuperscript{28} 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

\textsuperscript{28} Augustine, \textit{City of God}, Book XVI, chapter 2.
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.\textsuperscript{29}

\textsuperscript{29}. I am grateful to Michael Rea, Merold Westphal for useful comments and questions, and I'm indebted to Norman Kretzmann for all his help on an earlier draft.