

1 A Formal Analysis of the Concepts

The concern of this section is to propose a formal analysis of the concepts of orthodoxy and heresy. The discussion begins with a consideration of the possible meanings of these terms in relation to each other according to their Greek etymology. Then these concepts are situated within the wider framework of the ways of relating to things that are constitutive of Christian life as such, namely belief-that, belief-in, and living-with. The discussion terminates by raising the question of truth and of what orthodoxy and heresy have to do with possessing it. This question remains in the background in Sections 2–4 and is brought to the fore once more in Section 5.

1.1 “Orthodoxy” and “Heresy”

The words “orthodoxy” and “heresy” are both of Greek origin. A consideration of their respective etymologies helps reveal their possible meanings and the relations that obtain between them (Liddell and Scott 1996: 41, 444, 1249).

“Orthodoxy” comes from the Greek word *orthodoxia*, which is itself a compound of two terms: *orthos* and *doxa*. *Orthos* is an adjective that means straight or upright. By extension, it means right, safe, true, or correct. It is in this extended sense that *orthos* becomes an evaluative term with a positive connotation. To say that something is *orthos* is to say that it is somehow good or right. *Doxa* has two principal meanings that are of concern for present purposes. In typically Hellenic contexts, it can mean opinion, notion, or judgment. *Doxa* in this sense refers to an attitude taken toward a proposition. Alternatively phrased, *doxa* can refer to the propositional or hermeneutic attitude taken toward something. To have a *doxa* in this sense is to think or say that something is of such and such a quality or nature. In Hebraic contexts, however, it more commonly denotes glory or splendor. In this sense, the term refers to the imposing manifestation of a thing in experience. This is the meaning in Exod. 16:10 LXX, which says that the “glory of the Lord” (*hē doxa Kuriou*) covered Aaron in a cloud. Matt. 4:8 likewise recounts how Christ is taken during His temptations to a high place from which He can see all the kingdoms of the earth and “their splendor” (*tēn doxan autōn*). The *doxa* of a thing would be the power with which it imposes itself in experience. This duality of meanings of *doxa* according to context also applies to the related verb *doxazō*. In Hellenic contexts, this can refer to thinking, imagining, supposing, or holding an opinion. In the Hebraic context, it especially means to magnify or extol. Thus in Exod. 15:2 LXX the Hebrews sing after their liberation from Egypt: “He is my God, and I will extol (*doxasō*) Him.” In the same way, Paul writes in Rom. 1:21 that the idolatrous Gentiles did not worship God as God (*ouch hōs theon edoxasan*).

And John 7:39 affirms that the Holy Spirit “was not” while Jesus was not yet glorified (*Iēsous oudepō edoxasthē*).

Orthodoxia thus can be taken in at least two senses, depending on the interpretation of *doxa*. If one opts for the meaning more prevalent in Hellenic contexts, *orthodoxia* comes to refer to right or proper belief. Aristotle refers to this idea without using the precise term in *Nicomachean Ethics* VI, 9, when he writes that truth or *alētheia* is *doxēs orthotēs*: “correctness of opinion” (1142b11). On the other hand, if one interprets *doxa* as exaltation or magnification, then *orthodoxia* refers to proper worship of God. And if one considers holding proper beliefs as a constituent element of worship, then the two senses of *orthodoxia* blend together.

“Heresy” comes from the Greek word *hairesis*, but the connection from the Greek original term to the English theological term is indirect. *Hairesis* principally means taking – for example, the taking of a town by some foreign ruler. As derived from the verb *haireomai*, it means choice. The connection of these senses is obvious insofar as everything one takes is something one chooses for oneself. Lev. 22:18 LXX thus speaks of the gifts to be offered by any man of the children of Israel or by any stranger “according to all their choice” (*kata pasan hairesin autōn*). Closely related to this is the meaning of purpose or course of action. And from this is derived the meaning of sect, school, and religious party. *Hairesis* in this sense refers to a collection of persons who have chosen for themselves a particular way of living and of thinking about things.

Hairesis – much like the English word “sect” – can also be taken as a neutral or negative term. Understood neutrally, *hairesis* calls to mind the fact that not all persons are born into the same way of life. Human beings find themselves in the situation of having to make choices about what to think and how to lead their lives. There is no “default” life for humanity. Every *hairesis* in this neutral sense of “sect” thus constitutes a possible way in which a person may choose for him- or herself to live. Acts 5:17 speaks in this sense of the “sect of the Sadducees” (*hē ousa hairesis tōn Saddoukaiōn*) and at 15:5 of “some of the sect of the Pharisees” (*tines tōn apo tēs haireseis tōn Pharisaiōn*). Acts 24:5 likewise contains a reference to Christians as “the sect of the Nazarenes” (*tēs tōn Nazōraiōn haireseis*). Sadduceeism, Pharisaism, and Christianity as *haireseis* thus represent religious choices in the first-century Palestinian context.

From the perspective of a person who has already assumed a particular sect, more specifically for whom there cannot in fact be any freedom of choice about some matter, *hairesis* can take on the negative sense of heresy. Those things with respect to which it is considered that there can be no choice to live or think differently become possible objects of heresy. It is in something like this negative sense that the apostle Paul lists “factions” (*haireseis*) at Gal. 5:20 as

the effects of the flesh that exclude from the kingdom of God. And 2 Pet. 2:1 likewise warns of the forthcoming appearance of false prophets and teachers who will bring “destructive heresies” (*haireseis apōleias*) into the church. To the extent that involves choosing to live or think in a certain way where there is in fact no freedom to choose, *haireisis* as heresy becomes a manifestation of a certain perversity of spirit. Thus Tertullian notes that the apostle Paul at Tit. 3:10–11 calls the *hairetikon anthrōpon* or “heretical man” self-condemned “because he has himself chosen that for which he is condemned” (*Prescription against the Heretics* 6).

On the basis of these etymological and semantic considerations, it is now possible to appreciate the relationship between *orthodoxia* and *haireisis*. Understood in the neutral sense, every *haireisis* or sect is one possible way among many of living and thinking about things. As long as one is still not committed to any particular sect, there would apparently be for one as yet no such thing as *orthodoxia*. The distinction between proper and improper ways of thinking and of worshiping God can only arise for a person to the extent that he or she has already committed him- or herself to a particular way of living and thinking. This means that every sect or *haireisis* in the neutral sense can become a heresy or *haireisis* in the negative sense only after one has made a choice, whether implicitly or explicitly, among the many possible options. One man’s orthodoxy is another man’s heresy insofar as the judgment of heresy presupposes a prior standard of orthodoxy. Only after one has decided in favor of a particular *haireisis* – that is, a sect for which there is in fact no freedom of choice about some matter – do alternative *haireseis* that see things differently become heresies.

These brief considerations should suffice for the illustration of the conceptual interrelationship between *orthodoxia* and *haireisis* considered in themselves. It will now be well to consider further the relation between these concepts once situated within the framework of relations that are constitutive of Christian life.

1.2 Belief-That, Belief-In, and Living-With

Being a Christian is a matter of being related in certain ways to external realities. For present purposes, three specific ways of relating to things are especially important: belief-that, belief-in, and living-with.

Belief-that can be variously characterized. One way of understanding it is to say that it is a matter of being related in a certain way toward a proposition. One can also say that it is a way of relating propositionally toward the world of things. It can be understood as a matter of assenting to the truth of some statement, of saying “Yes” in one’s mind to what another proposes for belief,

or it can be understood as adopting a certain interpretation of reality. In any case, the idea is that being a Christian is a matter of believing-that various statements are true – that is, believing-that things are a certain way. For example, one can believe-that God exists or else believe about God that He exists.

In the earliest days of the church, those beliefs-that that were taken as essentially constitutive of apostolic Christianity were called by some authors the *regula fidei*, the “rule of faith.” Not all statements of this rule were identical. Among these beliefs-that constituting the rule of faith, Tertullian mentions the belief-that “there is but one God, the Selfsame with the Creator of the world, Who produced all things out of nothing through His Word sent down in the beginning of all things” (*Prescription against the Heretics* 13). Origen of Alexandria too claims that “the holy apostles, in preaching the faith of Christ, delivered with utmost clarity to all believers . . . certain points that they believed to be necessary,” including the idea that “this just and good God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, himself gave the law and the prophets and the Gospels, who is also the God of the apostles and of the Old and New Testaments” (*On First Principles* Preface 3–4). And this is of course only a small sampling of the essential apostolic teaching as these figures understood it.

Belief-that can thus be understood either as a relation to a proposition or a propositional way of relating toward the world of things. But alongside belief-that, there is also belief-in. This is not principally a relation toward a proposition but rather to a person or community of persons. Believing-in is a matter of committing and entrusting oneself to another. Whereas belief-that can be understood as a relation toward a proposition, or else as a way of relating propositionally toward items in the world, belief-in is a way of orienting oneself toward another. These are very different things, as Jas 2:19 appreciates: “You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe – and shudder.” The demons also believe-that certain things are true about God, but they do not believe-in God in the way that they should as His creatures. They lack the appropriate orientation of the heart toward their Creator. Karl Barth describes well this sort of “personal orientation.” “Faith is the orientation of man on Jesus Christ. It is faith in Him. The man who believes looks to Him, holds to Him, and depends on Him” (Barth 1956: 743). Being a Christian is consequently not only a matter of believing-that various things are the case but also of believing-in God and in Jesus.

The precise relation between belief-that and belief-in for Christian life is disputable (cf. O’Collins 2011: 167). It is possible to believe-in a person without having very particular beliefs-that with respect to him or her. Children believe-in their parents and entrust themselves to their fathers and mothers without knowing very much about their personal histories or having a philosophically

robust understanding of the metaphysics of human beings. But it would seem impossible to believe-in a person without at the same time implicitly or explicitly possessing at least very general beliefs-that this person is reliable or has good intentions and so on. It can also be debated whether the failure to possess certain beliefs-that disorients one's belief-in to such an extent that one no longer believes-in the same person or community as others who believe-that differently. One might thus wonder whether a person who believes-that Jesus is not divine can be said to believe-in the same Jesus as one who does affirm His divinity (see Nemes 2021b).

In addition to belief-that and belief-in, a third relation constitutive of Christian life is living-with. This is also a nonpropositional relation to a person or a community of persons. Living-with means sharing one's life with another in such a way as to interact regularly and to have an overlapping set of concerns. Living-with can generally be positive or negative. Friends live-with one another in a positive way while enemies live-with one another in a negative way. A friend is a person one would like to live-with whereas an enemy is a person one would strictly prefer to live-without. But for present purposes, living-with should be taken in the positive sense.

Christians live-with each other in what can be called the communion or fellowship (*koinōnia*) of the church. This practice originated in the very beginnings of the movement. After the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, the apostles gathered in Jerusalem in a house where they were staying, “constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as His brothers” (Acts 1:12–14). It is there that Peter and the rest make the decision to replace Judas with Matthias after casting lots (1:15–26). Luke also writes that “When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place” (2:1). Upon the preaching of Peter and the conversion of the crowds, the community of Christians was expanded. The new converts who were baptized “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (2:42). The earliest Christians lived-with each other in the sense described earlier: “All who believed were together and had all things in common” (2:44). They prayed for each other (1 Thess. 1:2) and also asked each other for prayer (Eph. 6:19). They admonished one another when they did not consider that they were living up to the demands of the truth, as Paul recounts doing with Peter (Gal. 2:11–14). They gathered to worship God and to celebrate the Lord’s Supper (cf. 1 Cor. 11:20–21). And these various modes of living-with that are constitutive of Christian life as such continue to the present.

In addition to living-with each other, Christians also live-with God in Jesus through the Holy Spirit. To say that Christians live-with God is to say that their

lives are led “before God” (*coram Deo*) or with an awareness of God. The apostle Paul is recorded in Acts 23:1 as saying to the council, “Brothers, up to this day I have lived with a clear conscience before God.” What makes Christian faith distinctly Christian as opposed to generically theistic is that it is a living-with God that takes place through the mediation of Jesus. Thus Paul writes in 1 Cor. 1:9 that “God is faithful; by Him you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” First John 1:3 communicates the basic invitation of the college of the apostles. “We declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.” And John says later that “No one who denies the Son has the Father; everyone who confesses the Son has the Father also” (2:23). This conception of things is drawn from Jesus’s own words about Himself. He is recorded at John 14:6 as saying, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” And at Matt. 11:27 He says, “All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him.” Thus, according to the Christian conception of things, Christian life-with God is a matter of being welcomed into the circle of fellowship of the Father and the Son through the invitation of this Son Himself and of His followers.

Part of Christian living-with God is offering oneself to Him. The apostle Paul at Rom. 12:1 calls Christians to “present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” This self-offering is effectively obedience to the example of Jesus Himself, who according to Heb. 9:14 “through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God” as a sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. And 1 Tim. 2:5–6 writes of Jesus that He is the “one mediator between God and humankind . . . who gave Himself as a ransom for all.” There is of course a difference between Jesus’s self-offering and the self-offering of Christians who live-with God. Jesus offers Himself to God on behalf of others in order to make atonement for their sins. But by offering Himself for others, He also calls these others into friendship with Himself and His Father. The self-offering to the Father on behalf of others is a part of the greater outreach of God to human beings. This means that every Christian offers him- or herself to God simply out of love for God and obedience to Him in response to this invitation to friendship. This is the sense of the teaching at 2 Cor. 5:19 that “in Christ God was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them.”

Christian life thus consists in these relations. It is a matter of believing-that this or that is true – for example, the things enumerated as constituting the *regula fidei* by Tertullian or Origen. It is also a matter of believing-in God and

Jesus. This is not principally a matter of being related toward a proposition (or, alternatively, of being propositionally related toward the world) but rather of having a certain orientation of the heart toward another. Finally, being a Christian is also a matter of living-with other Christians as well as living-with God through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit. Many more things could have been said about this; for example, Christians also live-with their enemies in a certain way, namely by praying for them and returning good for evil (Matt. 5:43–48).

It is now possible to ask how the theological categories of *orthodoxia* and *haireisis* are understood with reference to the relations of belief-that, belief-in, and living-with that constitute Christian existence as such. *Orthodoxia* refers to *doxa* that is *orthē*. If *doxa* is understood to refer to opinion or judgment, then orthodoxy is a matter of believing the proper things. If *doxa* is taken in the sense of exaltation or worship, then orthodoxy refers to a proper way of believing-in and living-with God. If *haireisis* is understood in the negative sense of heresy, it refers either to a way of believing-that or believing-in or living-with that is considered by some persons fundamentally to compromise the integrity of the way of thinking and living to which every Christian is called. And if holding to proper beliefs-that is taken as a condition of living-with God positively, then the two senses of orthodoxy blend into one.

It is also obvious that judgments of heresy presuppose a commitment to a prior orthodoxy. Given the fact that the substance of Christian life consists in three essentially distinct if interconnected ways of relating to things, it is possible to ask whether one or the other of these relations is more fundamental and so to that extent more determinative of orthodoxy. Is it more important for Christian life-with God that persons believe-that certain things are true? Is the boundary marker between orthodox and heretic a particular set of beliefs-that? This is evidently the historically more predominant attitude. But one might also wonder whether it is rather more essential that a person believe-in Jesus somewhat separately from his or her beliefs-that this or that might be true. Such an opinion can appear attractive especially in light of the difficulty with which disputes about differences of belief-that are resolved. The difficulty or even impossibility of definitively establishing some point of belief-that might inspire skepticism about the practice of anathematization and the contempt with which heretics are spoken about. Indeed, if one cannot be certain of the truth of one's beliefs-that, it would become all the more significant if one were to believe-in Jesus in spite of or perhaps even because of that fact. This is a question of considerable import that is taken up in greater detail in Section 5. It suffices for now simply to raise it as a possible line of inquiry.

1.3 The Question of Truth

Before proceeding to more concrete historical and theological matters in the subsequent sections, it would be well to pose a final question regarding the formal analysis of the concepts of orthodoxy and heresy. It has already been said that *orthodoxia* as *doxa* that is *orthē* is a matter of proper opinion or worship of God. But to what extent is *orthodoxia* a matter of truth?

Aristotle provides a very compelling definition of truth. “To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, whereas to say of what is that it is, or of what is not that it is not, is true” (*Metaphysics* 1011b25). This definition seems acceptable and is taken for granted in the following. Truth is the relation of adequacy that obtains between what is said about something, on one hand, and the thing about which something is said, on the other. Truth is achieved when what is said is adequate to what is being talked about.

An honest person who believes-that this or that is the case generally has an interest in possessing the truth. This means that such a person has an interest in determining whether his or her beliefs-that are in fact true to the things themselves about which he or she believes them. But the determination of the truth of a proposition is not a matter of feeling one way or another about it. A proposition is not true (or false) simply because one is very strongly inclined to (dis)believe it. The possession of the truth is not signaled by a “monadic” state of spirit like feeling hungry or being sad would be. Truth is rather a relation, and the perception of a relation arguably requires the equal experiential givenness of the two related terms (Nemes 2019). If, then, truth is the relation of adequacy between what is said about something and that thing itself about which something was said, the “perception of truth” is only possible in the concrete experience of the thing itself about which one has some belief-that (Heidegger 1985: 51). One would see that the thing itself is such as one believes-that it is. For example, one sees the truth of one’s belief-that there is someone in the home when one descends the stairs and finds a person in the hallway. The question of truth thus also brings with it a concern for the “perception of the truth.”

To what extent is the truth so defined a criterion of Christian orthodoxy? To what extent are Christian faith and life a matter of “perceiving the truth” so understood? Here it is clearly a question of *orthē doxa* understood as proper or correct belief-that. Truth is a matter of saying of what is that it is and of what is not that it is not. Saying something about something is a matter of relating propositionally to that thing. Christians believe-that various things are the case – for example, that God exists and that Jesus was raised from the dead. But why do they believe-that as they do? What are the sources of Christian

belief-that? To what extent is their believing-that a matter of seeing-that something is the case? And to what extent are the things about which Christians possess a diversity of beliefs-that themselves accessible to every person who believes about them in a Christian way?

These questions regarding the place of truth in the discussion about orthodoxy and heresy in Christian theology are significant. They are questions about the sources of Christian belief-that, but also questions about the nature of the things themselves to which Christian beliefs-that refer, specifically whether these are experientially accessible to Christians. These inquiries cannot be answered now but take center stage in Section 5.

2 Orthodoxy and Heresy in Christian Scripture

Scripture here refers to those uniquely authoritative biblical texts that together as the Old and New Testaments form a shared canon among Christians of the various confessional and ecclesial communities constituting Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, and Eastern Orthodoxy. There is no formal or philosophical discussion of the notions of orthodoxy and heresy as such in these texts, but they do propose a particular vision of what constitutes proper and improper ways of believing-that, believing-in, and living-with God and others in the community of the people of God. It is naturally impossible to be comprehensive given the limitations of the present context. This section limits itself to a discussion of the following *loci*: God the Creator in relation to the world and the human being, the revelation given at Sinai, the problem of idolatry, and Jesus and the apostles.

2.1 God, the World, and the Human Being

The Bible opens with a statement of the creation of the world by God. The Hebrew text of Gen. 1:1 reads: *bereishit bara' Elohim eit hashamayim v'eit ha'arets*. According to the English translators of the New Revised Standard Version, this can be rendered in at least these three ways: “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth”; “When God began to create the heavens and the earth”; or “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” These differences of translation may be important for considering whether the Genesis text in particular teaches the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. Admittedly, the idea that God creates things out of nothing does seem to appear in the New Testament. Paul speaks of “God . . . who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist” (Rom. 4:17). But this idea is arguably not present in the Genesis text (Levenson 1994: 5). In any case, the more important teaching of the Genesis text is that the world – together with

everything that lives within it, including the human being – is the creation of the God of the Hebrew people.

If the world and the things of the world are the creation of God, then the question naturally arises whether God Himself has a creator. Jon Levenson very insightfully notes that “the God of Israel has no myth of origin. Not a trace of theogony can be found in the Hebrew bible” (Levenson 1994: 5). This point is highly significant for the Hebrew understanding of God. Indeed, on this point Genesis can be fruitfully compared with the creation mythologies of other societies of the ancient Near East. In the *Enuma Elish* or *The Epic of Creation* (Dalley 2009: 233–277), the order of the world comes about via warfare between gods who arose out of a mixture of Apsu and Tiamat, “the subterranean fresh waters . . . and the saline waters of the oceans” (Levenson 1994: 3–4). Marduk, the son of the god Ea, defeats Tiamat and forms the world out of her mangled body (Dalley 2009: 254–255). Genesis presents things very differently. The God who creates the world does not come from anyone else, nor must He first conquer a hostile enemy in battle in order to create something new from the entrails of His victim. He simply speaks and things appear in obedience to His will (Gen. 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14–15, 20, 24, 26). Levenson thus writes:

We can capture the essence of the idea of creation in the Hebrew Bible with the word “mastery.” The creation narratives, whatever their length, form, or context, are best seen as dramatic visualizations of the uncompromised mastery of YHWH, God of Israel, over all else. He alone is “the Lord of all the earth,” and when the cosmogonic events are complete, his lordship stands beyond all doubt. (Levenson 1994: 3)

One could say that God has mastery over all things because He alone exists of Himself and nothing else exists apart from Him. The doctrines of creation and of providence are thus closely related in the understanding of God presented in the Bible.

The Hebrew Bible is notable not only for its depiction of God but also for the way it presents human beings. One important aspect of Genesis is its presentation of the creation of the human being as peaceful. On the sixth day of creation, God said, “Let us make humankind [*adam*] in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth” (Gen. 1:26). The human being is formed “from the dust of the ground” and is made to live when God “breathe[s] into his nostrils the breath of life” (Gen. 2:7). Genesis thus contrasts starkly with the creation of the human being as told in the Babylonian *Atrahasis* myth. This teaches that there was once a labor dispute between classes of divinities.