

ORTHODOXY AND HETERODOXY: A RESPONSE TO THE CRITIQUE

Professor Sloyan's paper expressed his reaction to all three papers given by the panelists. In these remarks, I shall limit my comments to the first part of his paper, particularly to that section which commented on my own presentation, leaving the remainder of his critique for the observations of my colleagues on the panel. I should like to make the following points:

(1) At the beginning of his paper, Professor Sloyan (= S.) establishes his own minimal orthodoxy for Jesus, reducing it to three points which seem to focus on God the Father, Jesus, and eschatological judgment. Study of Jesus' "authentic sayings,"¹ says S., reveals that Jesus was not deeply concerned with religious orthodoxy except in these three important matters. I should hesitate to say that these alone were Jesus' deep concerns in the matter of orthodoxy. We must remember that Jesus exercised his ministry in the context of first-century Palestine. Consequently, he and the New Testament writers after him assume an orthodoxy shared by both Jesus and his hearers, within which Jesus brings his particular message. The fact that this context is not always explicitated or even in any way expressed does not mean it was of no concern to Jesus or that his orthodoxy is limited to the points selected by S.

(2) Although I have not developed this point in my paper, because of the limitations of the time and topic assigned to me, I should like to register strong disagreement with S.'s statement concerning Jesus' attitude towards religious practice, "Jesus seemed to be largely innocent of any concern with it [orthopraxis]." As many

¹ The only text of S.'s paper available to me before publication is without footnotes. Consequently, I do not know which texts S. considers "authentic sayings" of Jesus or how he arrived at this judgment, and so I cannot adequately make comment on those points of Jesus' "orthodoxy" raised by S. Obviously, however, in papers such as these, one must presume as well as use the best results of the form-critical method. One cannot display the whole of the critical apparatus lying behind his position when he is trying to cover the whole of the New Testament—and, *a fortiori*, the whole history of Christianity—within the half-hour allotted in this convention.

do, S. distinguishes between the internal disposition with which one performs religious deeds and the particular set of religious deeds performed as a "practice" of religion. Yet it is precisely of proper practice that Jesus speaks, e.g. in the materials found in Mt. 5-7. His ethical teaching during his earthly ministry centered particularly, but not exclusively, on the manner in which one used the twofold commandment of love of God and neighbor as a criterion in carrying out the practices of the Mosaic Law. Orthopraxis, right conduct, was very much his concern! Again, to appreciate this, we must consider the shared religious context of Jesus' ministry. If we do not, we run the risk of de-Judaizing him and of assimilating him to the religious attitudes of modern man.

(3) S. speaks of the modern problem of orthodoxy and the manner in which the Church reacts, and has reacted, to what it considers heretical. I am fully in sympathy with his implicit reproof of the loveless spirit with which Church authorities have often treated well-motivated dissenters. But, as my paper states, I am convinced, with Rahner, that a correct understanding of the faith's content is important because of the consequences when one's apprehension of the faith is reduced to practice. Despite even their egregious failures in the exercise of charity upon occasion, Church authorities seem to have grasped this importance and to have acted accordingly. Had they, in turn, fully understood the teacher and teaching they sought to protect, perhaps they would not have identified the concerns of Christianity with more selfish concerns.

(4) More directly related to my paper is S.'s comment that there is a "tension between the spirit of Jesus and that of some of his first-century followers." He cites the New Testament pattern of controversy as evidence of this. But the gap between Jesus and his followers here is not quite so large as it appears to S., because both Jesus and his followers engage in controversy according to the pattern. Although the focus of the dispute shifts in the apostolic age, phenomenologically, the pattern of controversy is the same throughout the New Testament. I have given samples of this pattern for every side, for Jesus and his opponents during his earthly ministry and for the apostles and their antagonists in a later age.

(5) In a subjective age such as ours, S. clearly scores when

he notes that *the* criterion of authentic witness to Jesus is human experience of that witness. This is a point well made, for it is the experience of Christ in his members today that most often provides the ring of authenticity to the message for modern man. Similarly, the New Testament stresses personal, authentic experience of Jesus when requiring it for the addition of Matthias to the Eleven (Acts 1:21-22). It is again to experience of Christ that Paul appeals in defense of his apostolate (1 Cor 9:1). Jesus is self-authenticating in his own age (in the manner of the prophets, he *knows* he is sent from God), and he is borne witness by those who experience him. It is because we must somehow experience Christ that it is so difficult for us to express Christianity in credal formulae. What we try to express in this way is some aspect of the contact with the living mystery of Christ that is mediated to us through his Church.

I should hesitate, however, to make as light as S. does of the various other New Testament criteria pointing to the authenticity of Jesus' mission in his own age or subsequently.² As the pattern of New Testament controversy shows, there was ever the demand for extra-subjective credentials, ever the search for one's authority to speak. In the New Testament, appeal is made to the foundational revelation both in defense of, and in rejection of, someone's pretended right to speak for God. Where this foundational revelation is mediated through passages (of Scripture) or personages (e.g., apostles) because of the distance from the foundational revelation, these objective criteria also have a part to play in the total authentication of Jesus and his message.

(6) Both S. and I agree that Rahner's treatise *On Heresy* excessively limits the concept of heresy by treating it as an exclusively Christian phenomenon. Rahner apparently began with the canonical concept of heresy and worked from that to express his views in this essay. In another context, he would, no doubt, say that since the Spirit of God is abroad in the world in more than the Christian community, it is possible to have deviations and heresies in religious truth and practice on a much wider scale than Christianity alone.

² John, according to a theme particularly favored by him, points to the witness of the Baptist (3:25-30), Jesus' works (10:25), Jesus' Father (5:37), the Scriptures (5:39), the Spirit (15:26), Jesus' disciples (15:27), etc.

In my paper, I widened Rahner's context to include first-century Judaism, although I remained within that (including earliest Christianity) for present purposes. S. rightly notes that the phenomenon of "heresy" itself is possible on a much wider and non-religious scope.

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