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The "Orthodoxy" of Orthodoxy:

On Moral Imperfection, Correctness, and Deferral in Religious Worlds

Andreas Bandak & Tom Boylston

ABSTRACT

This paper uses ethnographic studies of Orthodox Christianities as a way to investigate the concept of "orthodoxy" as it applies to religious worlds. Orthodoxy, we argue, is to be found not in opposition to popular religion nor solely in institutional churches, but in a set of encompassing relations among clergy and lay people that amounts to a religious world and a shared tradition. These relations are characterized by correctness and deferral: formal modes of relating to authority that are open-ended and non-definitive, and so create room for certain kinds of pluralism, heterodoxy, and dissent within an overarching structure of faith and obedience. Attention to the aesthetics of orthodox practice shows how these relations are conditioned in multisensory, often non-linguistic ways. Consideration of the national and territorial aspects of Orthodoxy shows how these religious worlds of faith and deferral are also political worlds.

Keywords

Tradition, Aesthetics, Knowledge, Christianity, Authority, Correctness

Introduction

This article asks what it means to be "orthodox" from the perspective of an ethnographic view of Orthodox Christianities. We hold that attention to orthodoxy offers vital perspective on the relationship between religious actors and their institutions that may be missed in accounts of piety or fundamentalism, and sheds light on the continuing influence of liturgical religion and its discourses of truth and authority. A focus on the *ortho* of orthodoxy—rightness or correctness—gives a clue as to how Orthodox Christianities construct encompassing, authoritative religious worlds in the face of moral imperfection. We investigate how deferral to authority results not in rigid verbal or textual articulations of the true, but in a notion of correctness that is carried in the living and ongoing traditions of the Church, where tradition includes oral, scriptural, aesthetic, liturgical and other aspects taken together. Correctness thus understood cannot be encompassed by linguistic propositions, but leaves open theological and ideological possibilities, and modes of engagement with the sacred. We draw on ethnographic studies of (capital-O) Orthodox Christianities—and other institutionally-oriented forms of Christianity—to develop a notion of (small-o) orthodoxy that we hope will bear relevance to other institutional religions or religious movements that look to tradition as a source of the correct. Our aim is to promote a way that 'orthodoxy' can be used as an analytic foray into the way religious worlds are given and established as normative, how they come into being, and how they are attenuated in people's practices. As well as published material, we draw on our own fieldwork with Greek Orthodox and Greek Catholic Christians in Syria (Bandak) and Orthodox Christians in Ethiopia (Boylston) to illustrate our case. Our work may in some regards not be seen as typical of Orthodox Christianity in that Bandak has worked on both Greek Orthodox and Greek Catholic communities and their ways of forging

rapprochement and relationships, whereas Boylston has worked on non-Chalcedonian Orthodoxy in Ethiopia and forms of mediation in the countryside as well as in Addis Ababa. However, we contend that our research reflects broader trends in institutional and liturgically oriented Christianity, which in any case does not conform to any single standard. Our goal is to foster a more comprehensive understanding of orthodox religious worlds and their particularities. Ethnographies of fundamentalism and evangelical Christianity describe a language-oriented, and at times even textual, approach to truth that is quite different to the correctness posited by Orthodoxy (Crapanzano 2000; Harding 2000; Bielo 2009). Studies of "piety," on the other hand, while they provide important insights on the ethical self-fashioning of religious actors, present a rationalistic slant that de-emphasizes institutional and traditional forms and present a conscious religious project where Muslim leaders and shaykhs aim to instill particular morals and affects in their followers (Mahmood 2005; see also Hirschkind 2006; Deeb 2006).

The "orthodoxy" of Orthodoxy, by contrast, lies less in the idea of the individual or the text as holder of divine truth, than in the community of deferral. The individual and collective may feel assured of the correctness of their practice, belief, and traditions even if many aspects are beyond a clear answer. The answers are still believed to be there: just go ask the priest, the bishop, or if not, God Himself will know. Orthodoxy does not follow a conceptual split between discourse and practice; its correctness applies to word and action (or indeed to speech-acts) alike. Just as important, we should resist distinctions between "popular" and "elite" or institutional religions, because the institution of the Orthodox Church is conceived and practiced as an inclusive and encompassing hierarchy. Anti-clericalism, a common enough phenomenon, must be taken in the context of a notion that the eternal Church is the only locus of truth in a world of moral imperfection. Our aim is to elaborate how Orthodox religious worlds are formulated under such

conditions, and to ask how institutions with God's authority can exist while being, of necessity, morally flawed in their execution. Our answer is that correctness and deferral to a tradition that includes not only scriptural but practical, oral, and aesthetic practices produces a world in which divine perfection and fallible humanity are able to inter-relate. Such a world, we argue, works in that it incorporates mundane and more overtly political and aesthetic aspects in a unifying structure resting on an authorizing tradition. In such a world people, whether more or less active in their endeavors, are all allowed to play their part.

Moral (Im)perfection

There is no shortage of examples in Orthodox and Catholic Christianities of conflict between clergy and laity (Riegelhaupt 1984; Pina-Cabral 1986; Badone 1990a; Bacchiddu 2012). Often one faction finds the other to be morally lacking or to have failed in its duties in some way. However, in those cases that do not result in schism, conversion, or apostasy, such disputes are usually understood as negotiations of relationships within a religious division of labor in which both clergy and laity take part.

Complexity arises from the dual nature of the Church in Christian tradition: as the transcendent unity of all the faithful in the body of Christ; and as the historical institution or institutions that have manifested this idea. Here there is, according to the Russian theologian Sergey Bulgakov, an important distinction between Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism: where the Roman tradition places infallible authority in the Pope as the descendant of Peter, Orthodoxy places it in the Church as a whole, understood as humanity united in the body of Christ (Bulgakov 1988 [1935]: 88). This places truth beyond the capacity of any individual and means that authority, however hierarchically distributed, can only be realized in the mystic totality of the faithful and its unity with God.

In fact, even in the Roman tradition, many would question the distinction between institutional authority and the laity. Peter Brown (1981) points out how practices such as the cult of saints helped produce common ground rather than divisions. Certainly it does not make sense to think of one without the other. Maya Mayblin's recent work helps us understand how ideas of perfection can coexist with profound misgivings in social life (2010). Mayblin presents us with Catholics in rural Brazil who are bound up with quandaries of life and to whom family matters much even if can be difficult to live a morally virtuous life. For women life is hard work and suffering is part and parcel of the everyday. For men they are seen to put up with their tough situation and atone for their moral imperfection by harvesting the fields. When they drink, this is explained as a human reaction to the pressures they feel. Instead of guiding men away from a religious cosmos, conduct at odds with formal teaching or Christian morality is seen as part of a wider Christian narrative of suffering, sacrifice, and atonement. Moral imperfection may be and become the motor for change in both the individual and the community. In this reading, even if gender plays its part in allotting roles for men and women, the more critical moral aspect is a gap between God and mankind (cf. ibid: 34). People are assured of the perfection of God, but their own misgivings place them in diverse relationships of debt and forgiveness, where attempts at living right rest alongside the conviction that men of the church, saints, the Virgin, or Christ himself remain benevolent.

For our purpose the focus on moral imperfection is crucial, because it shows how religious worlds fashion incentive structures and ideas of a life trajectory. In Damascus, Fawaz, a key interlocutor of Bandak's, in his late-40s was troubled daily by his lack of perfection in living a Christian life. He would go daily to prayers at the shrine of Our Lady of Soufanieh; he would say his own prayers in front of her image, light a candle and place it in front of her, and listen for her response. He would join the rosaries and liturgical prayers at the shrine as often as he could, lamenting his scarce time. Every week he would go the mass at the shrine, listen to the sermon and

receive the Eucharist kneeling and touching the ground. In conversations he would tell of how he tried to corroborate her message of faith, love, and unity in his neighborhood in Damascus and beyond. However, a particular timbre reverberated: "I'm not worthy of this!" By taking on this Christian stance of humility, he placed himself in the mold of saintly figures such as John the Baptist, the apostles Peter and Paul and a host of other examples in Christian tradition. Such positioning was not merely to show the right appearance in front of others, but was also formed out of the toils of living separated from his wife and hence at odds with one of the most holy institutions sanctioned by the Church. This lack of perfection spurred him on to prayer and work in becoming a better person, a spiritual labor he was unceasingly preoccupied with.

The imperfection that Fawaz felt would not hold him back from severe criticisms of the established churches for a profound lack of devotional zeal. Fawaz's line of thought struck a chord with many Christians in Syria. People complain that priests and people of high office often care more about their positions than their flock. One particular discussion that many had in the Greek Catholic Church during 2009 was of exorbitant use of money for carved reliefs of famous scenes from the life of the holy family. The marble reliefs were placed in the courtyard of Kanisat Mar Kyrilios in Damascus to display these very scenes for contemplation. However, the most common reaction heard on the street was one of lamentation over the misuse of money. "Does the Virgin cry? Does Jesus cry because of some silly reliefs?!" Tony, a Christian in his mid-30s asked his family and Bandak one evening in his parents' home. His siblings and mother gave their expressions of support only for Tony to assail the church policies further. "Why use thousands of dollars on stone and decoration, when Christian families are in need? The church should rather support families and people in need. This would make the Virgin cry!"

In such instances of criticism it is important to note that it may not be the Church as such that is targeted. What is singled out is the way individuals who are supposed to represent the body of Christ in act and deed appear not to do so. It is not the institution and office as such that are castigated but the actualizations seen and heard of in one's vicinity. The lack of moral perfection here drives public sentiment because priests and people of high office are supposed to know better. In other words, people are not challenging the Church's monopoly on Grace and its legitimacy to perform the sacraments. Nevertheless criticism can be blunt and anti-clericalism of this kind can be seen as a way in which the religious world balances different tendencies of popular support and opposition (Herzfeld 1985: 242-247; Badone 1990b; Behar 1990; Brettell 1990:64ff.). Anti-clericalism does not necessarily equal a position outside the church; more often it represents a dispute from different perspectives within a Church more broadly construed. It is often not the case that the clergy seeks to impose orthodoxy and the people respond with looser, devotional, "popular" counter-practices. Very often what the laity seeks is to be orthodox: to see things done properly. In this light we seek to investigate the meaning of orthodoxy—both the "ortho" and the "doxa"—in holistic terms, as expressing relationships, whether communal or confrontational, among all members of the group.

Doxa and Praxis

Popular religion does not logically need to be opposed to orthodox tenets. Rather, such tenets work in tandem with popular conceptions at times in close proximity, and others with greater distance. Often the pressure from popular perceptions is deliberately considered by clerical leaders and used to promote the cause of the official institutions (Tweed 1997; Kormina 2013). Popular ideas force established powers to react. Popular devotions may be on the fringes of what the Church deems

acceptable and various attempts at incorporating or silencing such tendencies can be seen carried out (cf. Christian 1989[1972]; Greeley 2000; Hopgood 2005; Orsi 2005; Tracy 2011: 98).

Here we would like to call attention to the etymology of the word "orthodoxy." In most renditions the primary signifier here has been "doxa" which has been taken to mean "opinion." Furthermore, doxa has been aligned with a focus on belief or common belief, as is also entailed in its Greek etymology. On this understanding, one of the central proponents of praxis theory in the social sciences and humanities more widely, Pierre Bourdieu, has asserted a need to understand not merely opinions and beliefs, but routines and practices (cf. 1977: 159ff.). Where Bourdieu, to reach beyond doxa, needed to introduce praxis, we still do not see that there is an inherent tension between doxa and praxis. Rather, what we find is the relative distribution of a more general attitude which involves both opinions, sentiments, practice and much more not reflected in the dualism.

In work on Islam it has often been noted that practice rather than belief is central. Doxa has been pushed aside in order to focus on praxis, and in this vein it has been popular to debunk the notion of orthodoxy for asserting belief as central. Wilfred Cantwell Smith has argued on these grounds that one may rather want to focus on orthopraxy than orthodoxy (1957: 28, for various versions of this see also Gellner 1981; Eickelman 2003: 249ff.). Where several scholars on Islam have been sympathetic with this call, focusing on the apparent lack of unity in assertive beliefs but coherence in forms of practice, one still sees various forms of authority asserted not merely through forms of praxis, but in the authoritative readings and discursive traditions they fashion. Centrally, Talal Asad describes Islam as a discursive tradition, where texts and the traditions of reading and interpreting them were central (1986). For Asad, thinking of Islam, and for that matter "religion" as particular discourses was consonant with emphasizing its practical and disciplinary aspects (see also 1993). In a Foucauldian tradition, practices are part of discourses, just as the disciplinary and the popular are

mutually producing. Simion Pop (2011) builds on an Asadian notion of tradition as "authorizing discourses" that may be passed on by embodied, disciplinary, oral, or textual means, by a diversity of agents by no means limited to the institutional Church. He points out how Orthodox monasticism has frequently held positions critical of the Church (2011: 104), and remarks how pedagogies and practices are transmitted as much in the family home as they are between priest and parishioner (2011: 100). Orthodoxy therefore occupies, for Pop, an "Orthodox complex space" of relations, embodied practices, and discourses among Christians past and present: what we think amounts to a religious world.

The concept of tradition still requires some interrogation. It may be that Asad's use of the term still relies too much on texts as the primary components of authorizing discourses (1986: 14-15). Orthodox Christian theological notions of tradition, by contrast, refer to the Apostolic tradition of discipleship and oral transmission, pointing out the lack of written gospels until some time after Christ's life (Bulgakov 1988, Lossky 1974). This raises a second question of whether anthropological and Orthodox Christian notions of tradition are compatible. The theologian Vladimir Lossky, for example, distinguishes between vertical Tradition—the ongoing unfolding of God's truth to man via the incarnation of the Word—and horizontal traditions, the various ways in which people have passed on knowledge and habitual practice to each other, which comes closer to anthropological usage.

Since true Tradition, at least for the theologians, is incarnation, it cannot be encapsulated in language. Nor can it be completely known, at least until the end times (for Tradition does not just come from somewhere; it is going somewhere definite). Lossky talks about a dialectic of secrecy and revelation in which not all knowledge is revealed to all people at all times—some sacred things

must be kept esoteric (1974: 146). Moreover, the sacraments are the key repositories of Tradition, and the Church's monopoly on the performance of the sacraments is central to its authority. Sacraments are defined by their fundamental mystery (Amharic uses the Greek-derived *mist'ir*), which makes for a strange kind of authorizing discourse—as Lossky memorably puts it, "Tradition is Silence" (1974: 150). We point to this not to privilege an elitist conception of tradition over wider forms of practice, but to point to the ways in which a general distribution of attitudes are at play within a common frame of orientation. In an orthodox religious world one does not talk about the invention of tradition, but the intention of tradition.

This may mean that from a theological viewpoint anthropology is incapable of reflecting the truth of the vertical tradition, being stuck in the shallows of the horizontal, as one Ethiopian theologian remarked to Boylston. But this does not mean that anyone thinks the horizontal traditions—human traditions—are not important. The "orthodoxy" of Orthodoxy emerges in the relations between lay people and experts, between traditions of knowledge-practice and Tradition as silence. The nature of these relations is one of deferral—not just deference, implying that one's priest or bishop knows the answer, but acknowledgement that answers may ultimately lie shrouded in mystery. But a kind of certitude exists in the possibility of communion, which allows people to engage with the incarnate Word: through the taste of the host, the sound of the Liturgy and the smell of incense. It is these multisensory and deferential characteristics of practice that turn traditions into enveloping religious worlds.

The notion of a religious world implies the coming together of various kinds of meaningful action, at once symbolic, constructive, and disciplinary, into something vivid and ambient. Michael Lambek (2000) invokes Aristotle as a means of circumventing the discourse-practice dichotomy. He gives us phronesis (morally-directed action) and poiesis (creative action) as ways of thinking of

meaning as borne in actions, whether speech acts or otherwise. Religious worlds are creative, morally-charged productions, even or especially when they are created in a fashion that looks to tradition as its prime source of authority. What we find interesting here is the series of relationships that particular religious worlds thrive in. Here it is our position that the recent turn to piety as proposed both in studies of Christian popular culture (cf. Morgan 1998, 2012) and in the Islamic religious movements (cf. Mahmood 2005; Hirschkind 2006; Deeb 2006) may be less conducive to an understanding of religious life in relation to central institutions and authorizing traditions than a recuperation of the meaning and practices of orthodoxy. In recent work we have seen a push back against a too narrowly defined scope focusing merely on piety. Amira Mittermaier has shown how Sufi Muslims in Egypt most definitely work to cultivate a particular moral self, but that this is only one aspect of a being just as much guided by invitations by spiritual leaders, visions, and dreams (2011, 2012). Samuli Schielke has in many ways likewise shown how subjects at times may want to conform with norms and a project of moral self-disciplining, even if they at other times are less preoccupied with such a project (2009, 2010; see also Bandak and Bille 2013b).

If we here go back and more fully take on the meaning of both *ortho* and *doxa*, we may find a cue to a different trajectory than the one inherent in the binary of *doxa* and praxis. *Doxa* may as already stated mean opinion but its roots also include "resembling" and "praise". Ortho means right, true, and *straight*. However, as Ian Hacking argues *ortho* in Greek equals norm in Latin and has the peculiar capacity of being both a descriptive and an evaluative term (1990: 163). What is regarded as correct and ordered may also be what sets the norm. This means that the correctness of the *ortho* consists in allowing for both talking about how things are and how they are supposed to be. This different trajectory might thus give us a clue as to a better understanding of orthodoxy than the unhelpful doxa/praxis dichotomy. But since ample attention has been paid to the *doxa* of orthodoxy (cf. Bourdieu 1977), we would like to shift focus to *ortho*: the right, or the correct.

Correctness, or on the "Ortho" in Orthodoxy

Bruno Latour argues that religion is not about making true statements about the world. Religious statements affirm and create relationships; they transform the practitioner into some kind of (moral, loving, engaged) subject (Latour 2005: 31). Yet if they try to say things that reflect what is or is not the case, they run the risk of being false, that is, of the networks they refer to resisting the conclusions they proclaim. The "truth" that applies to religion, for Latour, is troth—trust, faith, pledge—a means of entering into a transformative relationship between trother and trothee (see also Ruel 1997).

Latour's critique of fundamentalism emerges from an unashamedly Roman Catholic notion of what religion is (Bialecki 2013), but it omits a definitive aspect of the liturgical Christianities that is perhaps less to Latour's taste, but which is absolutely integral to the actual practice of actual Orthodox and Catholic Christians: correctness. For Orthodox Christians truth pertains only to God. What humans can aspire to is correctness—the "ortho" of orthodoxy: to produce performances, utterances, gestures, actions, that are properly ordered. Ortho, like "correct" and the Amharic *tikkikkil*, means "straight" or level. It is an expression of order, of regulation, or of symmetry. Humans cannot know the fullness of God's truth but through correct performance they can hope to gain access to it. Moral imperfection may here not be a hindrance in and of itself, and in some formulations of Orthodox tradition paradox and moral transgressions in the form of holy folly may be central ways of pointing to God always being greater than man's rational thought (cf. Saward 1980; Ivanov 2006; Forbess, forthcoming). However, in many places the whole Orthodox world hinges on the notion of correctness while profound misgivings are also placed within its orbit.

In Zege, an Orthodox Christian peninsula in northern Ethiopia, those few people who wish to demonstrate dissidence from the prevailing Orthodox social regime do so by professing a different calendar. There used to be a small group of Unctionists (a heretical group who denied the original unity of Father and Son) living in Zege. When asked what the problem was with the Unctionists, a local scholar replied, "They don't change the date of Christmas on a leap year. We celebrate Christmas on Tahsas 29 (January 7) on normal years, but on Tahsas 28 every fourth year. But they always celebrate it on Tahsas 29 no matter what" (Boylston, fieldnotes, September 2013).

To a northern European reader versed in Enlightenment Protestant notions of the true, this statement seems like perverse, trivial factionalism. There is even a well-known joke about it:

> Once I saw this guy on a bridge about to jump. I said, "Don't do it!" He said, "Nobody loves me." I said, "God loves you. Do you believe in God?"
>
> He said, "Yes." I said, "Are you a Christian or a Jew?" He said, "A Christian." I said, "Me, too! Protestant or Catholic?" He said, "Protestant." I said, "Me, too! What franchise?" He said, "Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?" He said, "Northern Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?"
>
> He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern Region?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region." I said, "Me, too!"
>
> Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879, or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912." I said, "Die, heretic!" And I pushed him over.[i]

A regime of correctness means these trivialities matter, for better or for worse. For ordinary Christians in a place like Zege, at least, the familiar setup of the calendar is the mark of proper belonging. In Zege, Boylston has interviewed a renegade prophet, Tesfa, whom most people

regarded as simply mad. During the interview, a small crowd gathered to hear what crazy things he would say. After denouncing the Church as a construction of whores and murderers and describing how he had been sent by God to return Hosni Mubarak to the Presidency of Egypt, people began asking him what fasts he observed. Tesfa said that, like any decent person, of course he fasted, but that his dates were different. He observed 58 days of the fast of advent instead of 45, for example, and 40 days of Lent instead of 55. These remarks were greeted with incredulous hilarity among his little audience. He was just, apparently on purpose, wrong. He was being heterodox for the sake of it: proposing an alternative formalization outside of any obvious authorizing structure.

Tesfa's audience is not representative of the whole of Orthodoxy, although their attitudes about correctness and belonging are important. Rigid attitudes to correctness without attention to personal faith are usually not considered proper. A senior Ethiopian theologian told Boylston a story to this effect about a woman who wrote him a letter while working as a servant in the Gulf. There was no church nearby and no priest she could talk to. There was nobody to give communion. She wanted to take some holy water, at least, but there was no priest to bless it for her. So she just prayed over the water herself. Now she had written to him because she felt bad, was worried she had done something improper in trying to make holy water herself. As he recounted the story, he said, " I had to be very careful to think of the right answer because this was very important. Eventually I wrote back to this woman and said, "Please send me some of this water if you have some left. It must be very powerful, having been blessed with such faith.""

The theologian was deeply moved by the woman's faith, but he avoided in his reply saying that what the woman had done was technically correct. As a representative of the Church he could not say this. Nonetheless he found a way to comfort the woman and express his

admiration for her, to imply that some things are justifiable if the circumstances demand it, and to say that, when it comes down to it, faith trumps correctness.

So faith and correctness ought ideally to align. The job of the institutional Church is to maintain correct practice, even in the face of, in fact precisely because of, moral imperfection. Correctness produces a framework for people to engage with divinity despite their palpable moral imperfection, and to reflect truths that can never be fully encompassed by the means of their reflection.

Correct practice is not perennial in the dogma, doctrine, and canon of the Churches, it was set down at historically identifiable times. Nor does "correct" liturgy preclude the possibility of change in ritual, for example between classical and vernacular languages. But in correctness it is the following of a set form and order that matters—sticking to the religious calendar, for example—to condition and discipline the religious subject and attune her to the shape of something both wider and older than herself. What is important is the relationship of religious subjects to those ordering structures, which is one of deferral.

Deferral, Submission, and Obedience

If correctness, holds such a central position in Orthodox religious worlds, the scholarly concern must be directed to the particular moral attitudes that are fashioned. Here we see an intricate relationship between deferral, submission, and obedience. In Orthodox religious worlds what is problematic is not that the individual does not know their specific predicament; this is often left to God or religious experts or virtuosi. What matters is that some people know what is best, or at least have a model of what to do, even if the individual does not. On this understanding, what is

significant is less a matter of outright cultivation of a pious self, but that one does not deliberately seal off ways to access and plead with the divine. In Orthodox religious worlds, the authority of institutions rarely is drawn into question. Think of Fawaz in Damascus, and his criticism not of the Church *per se*, but of the way its office was carried out in specific churches by specific priests in a Syrian context. A person like Fawaz wants to defer to the Church, but he wants to do more than what he sees actualized in the life of many priests. It is precisely here we see how correctness and deferral account for and cope with the existence of moral imperfection; how institutions with God's authority can exist while being, of necessity, morally flawed in their execution.

In such a religious world authority is critical. The institution as such is seen as ordained and not to be questioned. The individual is expected to submit to the authority of priests and institution and to remain an obedient subject in personal and communal life. Authority is engrained in the individual and collective from early childhood, where children are learned to show respect to the priest and to devotional figures in the home or in their surroundings in the form of for instance icons, statues, and altars. Frequently, in Christian Syrian families an uncle will ask a child where Jesus, The Virgin, or a treasured saint is, and he will applaud the child in front of everybody when the correct answer is given; "there is The Virgin!" In churches in Syria it is a common feature to have children stand in front of the priest during mass during readings from the Holy Scripture. As the children are urged to stand here, the priest typically raises the heavy Bible upwards and then places it on the foreheads of the children, or allows them to kiss the book. The children here represent to the community a link to the future which is being incorporated into tradition, and for the children this is an experience of being placed in a tradition no matter what one may understand of what is taking place. In such practices religion is learned in a very practical and tangible manner

(cf. Berliner and Sarró 2007; Orsi 2005: 73ff.). However, what is underscored here is not understanding or belief but various forms of affective relationships.

What the child learns here is to submit to authority and to be obedient. But this works also in forms of deferral. As the child already from early on learns how to relate to authorities, it also learns how to defer or leave aspects for the sanctioned experts to judge (cf. Marcus 1985; Bandak 2012). In such a religious world one can submit to authority and be obedient by deferring judgment in difficult situations. In other cases deferral allows for diverse reactions to more complicated theological matters. In such theological matters when—or if—they are raised, it is possible to point beyond the individual to the sanctioned experts. This reaction was fairly common in Damascus when approaching more complicated questions. In talks on icons allegedly exuding oil, common for many would be a person lifting both hands saying: "God knows!" Or another saying: "You should go ask a priest!" Such responses were often given with a smile, which seemed to imply that the person responding was happy enough not to delve into the questions and become implicated in making his mind up. It was easier to point beyond to God, or in his place a priest. Such reactions therefore leave ample room for complying with a formal request to submission and obedience, while leaving aside more personal sides at least until it is more urgently required to deal with them—some questions are quite simply better left indeterminate. Here instead of positively focusing on correctness, we want to point to a lack of incorrectness: as long as the framework of correct practice is followed, certain theological or ethical questions can be left open, contested, or deferred.

What in some traditions is perceived as the ignorance of the broader masses could in this perspective also be seen as a set of strategies with which personal decisions are postponed. In Islam the age before Muhammad's revelations is termed the "age of ignorance" (Bille 2013: 109), and in

other traditions it can also be seen how ignorance or absence of positive knowledge about the religious tradition nonetheless spur people on (Højer 2009). The diverse grounds submission, obedience, and deferral rest upon therefore give a fertile opening for relating to the growing literature on ignorance and absence and how such features positively shape the particularity of the religious world dealt with (Dilley 2007, 2010; Bille, Hastrup and Sørensen 2010; High, Kelly and Mair 2012). In Orthodoxy these features hinges on a more central sense of knowledge as a mystery, namely that God always is bigger than the human faculty of reasoning.

Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw (1994), Maurice Bloch (2005) and Rita Astuti (Astuti and Bloch 2013) have made arguments for deference as a central aspect of ritual: practitioners voluntary give up their place as authoritative, critical actors, and instead defer to what was done in the past. They therefore do not question the rituals they participate in or, sometimes, the content of statements about spirits and ancestors, but rather defer the question to authority. All of these authors recognize the dual meaning of deference, either deferring to authority or putting off in time; we use "deferral" to highlight the second aspect, that key questions are left to some unspecified future point to be determined. The result, common to systems in which ritual authority is central, is that a great deal of interpretive space exists in which dispute, criticism, and a good amount of heterodox practice can take place. Yet the Orthodox know that the answers are there, in Scripture and in the tradition of the Church. So while ritual participants in Bloch's or Humphrey and Laidlaw's analysis defer back in time, to unknown founding ancestors, Orthodox Christians (and others) also defer forward in time: to a future moment when an answer may be revealed. Whereas most systems of knowledge involve some kind of deference to experts, this future-oriented deferral distinguishes certain religious approaches to tradition and revelation.

It would be too simplistic to see deferral as merely a way to resist the system or shy away from considering the personal ramifications of the matters of the Church. Understanding and lack of understanding are critically involved in the act of submitting oneself to authority; obedience can only be shown if one does not concur or is even at odds with what one is given to do (e.g. Kierkegaard 1940: 87; Žižek 1989: 37). Here the paradigmatic figure of Abraham may be worth pondering upon. Abraham did what he was asked to in silence, even if he did not understand why. In such an ordeal only submission to this impossible task allowed for God to intervene and replace Isaac with a ram (see also Kierkegaard 2008: 8ff.). What is critical here then is that the power of the Church as an institution is an irremovable part of its being. In one of his seminal pieces, *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*, Carl Schmitt pays homage to Max Weber and the *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (2003[1905]), but only to assert the radical difference in the ways power is located (1996[1923]: 3). The priest, according to Schmitt, is seen as Vicarius Christi, as a figure and a representative of Christ. And the only way to understand this is, in his reading, through the power tradition and institution hold.

We argue that deferral is necessary for orthodoxy to hold as a principle for lived religion. For a relatively fixed, institutional doctrine to apply to everyone, that doctrine must be sufficiently flexible in its application to encounter a very wide range of situations without being invalidated. It must also be able to cope with a certain degree of deviation on the part of its members, clergy and laity alike. Otherwise orthodoxies would become inapplicable to present circumstances. It is in this indefinite space that many Orthodox Christians and their institutions live for much of the time. In Ethiopia, many people who live their lives least in accordance with the tenets of the church, such as petty thieves or men with many girlfriends, often perform the fasts with great assiduousness. This is not merely penance, as in the stereotype of Catholicism that one can do anything as long as one confesses later, but also a way of maintaining identity as an Orthodox Christian, and a relationship

with God. For many people, for many reasons, what they consider a proper moral life seems impossibly far off, and in these circumstances adhering to some of the formal tenets of the Church provides a root of belonging as well as keeping open the possibility of becoming a better Christian in the future (Debevec 2012; Bandak and Bille 2013b: 22). A formal ritual framework provides these orientation points without encompassing the whole lives of the faithful or, just as important, steering them to making assertive statements that they will then be compelled to contradict. The formal structures of the Church persist even if priests fail you.

What, then, of disobedience? What do people do when they disagree with their priest, or find their ecclesiastical institutions corrupt? This is different from people who are loyal to their Church but who find themselves unable to live up to its tenets (which amounts, in the end, to everyone). Broadly, we can identify two possibilities: groups may propose alternative formalisms, as in the split between Old Believers and the Russian Orthodox Church (Naumescu 2011; Humphrey, forthcoming), or they may reject formalism and orthodoxy altogether for Protestant or secularist alternatives. In the former case when a group proposes alternative formalisms, a very valid question is whether these alternatives are to be taken to indicate substantial, meaningful differences in themselves, or whether they simply become iconic of underlying political differences. A deferral-based approach may help here in understanding how people may adhere to doctrinal points without entering into their details—so the content of the split may be crucial for some, while others follow the split according to other criteria of deference and loyalty. As long as the underlying principles of formalism and correctness are not undermined, all groups resulting from a schism may appear "orthodox".

Orthodox Aesthetics

One of the key reasons that the religious world of Orthodoxy remains powerful is that it from early childhood is being incorporated into a wider aesthetic. More than merely learning to be obedient the child learns to engage in a world and environment in which certain things are specially 'charged'. Even among those who have become skeptical, an Orthodox devotional sensorium remains potent. With highly secular Christian Syrians in Damascus one could at times find a reluctance to go to shrines famous for their thaumaturgical effects. Upon a request from one such secular intellectual Bandak went to a famous shrine with him. However, the intellectual very soon appeared unwell and needed to get out as fast as possible. Later in a conversation he revealed that a world from his childhood had resurfaced; a world of icons being sources of the scent of the divine in the form of incense. This was too much and the intellectual had to get out, as this was not something he wanted to re-access for the timing being. The incident, however, reveals how a general sensibility was still encompassed by a particular aesthetic even if this person might have preferred it to disappear altogether. Again, we see how the learning of religion in childhood greatly affects not merely stances towards authority, but also what is regarded as beautiful, even when one later more or less deliberately would want to have it silenced or done away with.

Where we already have pointed to the centrality of correctness in orthodoxy, here we want to emphasize how what is correct is tied to the tangible forms within which it is learnt, felt, and experienced. Correctness, order, and authority are learned and are quite often experienced as beautiful. And beauty, we posit, here needs to be seen as a central aspect of orthodoxy. Take for instance saints, icons, and the Liturgy, which are loci not just of piety, but of beauty. Orthodox worship makes use of the full sensorium: the sight of images, the smell of incense, the sound of liturgical chant, the feel of iconic statues or the priest's cross on one's hands, head, or lips; the taste of the Eucharist. These are those parts of the religious world where matter meets, incorporates, or mediates sanctity, and devout Orthodox Christians invariably describe it as beautiful. examples

could easily be accompanied by Muslim attitudes towards the Quran and its recitation, which likewise are seen as the utmost expression of beauty.

These expressions of beauty amount to an orthodox aesthetic, in which a general sensibility is formed around the notion that, as the best indicator of divine form, beauty is truth. The aesthetics of worship encompass popular and institutional practice, pertaining to worship in the church and in the home alike. And they are often stretched outside the home in the form of places of worship ranging from altars and shrines over churches to cathedrals that all dot a landscape as tangible markers of presence that outlast the individual and point to the ways the collective is grounded in specific localities (Ingold 2000; Manning 2008). This effect is also manifest in the form of pilgrimages where devotion literally and metaphorically moves people (Coleman and Eade 2004; Hermkens, Jansen and Notermans 2009). Pilgrimage in various ways can accommodate both official and informal levels (Dubisch 1995), and here again we see that the orthodox and the popular by no means need to be in constant tension. Pilgrimage may elicit contestation of various kinds over ownership, legitimacy, and efficacy (Eade and Sallnow 1991). However, pilgrimage continues to move people both within and at odds with the formal and sanctioned ways of institutional desires.

Orthodox aesthetics are participatory and immersive. In Christian tradition this point is manifest in iconic practice. Luehrmann (2010) describes at length how Orthodox icons are not objects for contemplation but figures to be engaged with; they are agentive social beings with their own biographies (Hanganu 2010). The icon is produced at the nexus between divinity and humanity, where it is "an index of the presence of God's grace" but equally an index of its own non-divine status (Luehrmann 2010: 59; Bynum 2011), and is believed to open a window to the divine (Hourihane et al. 2010). On this understanding, beauty is a quality of a multisensory engagement with the divine. An Ethiopian Orthodox painter must fast before producing icons or church murals.

The images must be produced under ascetic conditions, to increase the closeness between artist and God (see also Bowman 1991). Timothy Carroll's work shows the care with which material for priests' robes and for the altar cloth must be treated (Carroll, forthcoming). Clothed in sacred robes and conditioned by fasting and prayer, the human body is placed in a sacred orientation, in which everything it perceives must be conditioned for ritual; even the off-cuts of priests' robes must be treated with special care. Asceticism and aesthetics are closely linked not only because disciplining the flesh brings one closer to God, but because it opens new experiential possibilities. In *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, Caroline Walker Bynum reports ascetic women's description of the Eucharist as tasting like divine meat, along with a range of other highly intense, often erotic experiences of presence (Bynum 1987: 153). Orthodox Christians frequently describe their relations with saints as those of love: they feel strongly for the saint and infer, from the protection that saints give them, that they are loved in return.

If Orthodox art focuses on saints and martyrs it is not only because their acts are moral examples to be followed, but also because they are beautiful. Special emphasis falls on substances and sensory techniques that evoke divine presence and responsiveness. Juliet du Boulay's work describes in depth how Greek liturgy expresses and "emblematizes" a relationship with the whole world: with air, water, and earth, with folk spirits, and with the bread that is people's staple in and out of church, "never losing its relation with the liturgy and its inner relation with the body of Christ" (du Boulay 2009: 156). On the flipside, fasting transforms feelings of hunger and physical suffering into acts of devotion: suffering, pleasure, and beauty alike are drawn into the religious sensorium. What we take this to imply is not that all to the same extent are implicated in this

religious world, but that the ordering of the religious world allows the devotional sensorium to remain potent even if it lies dormant for long.

Like most kinds of aesthetics, it is also political. Ethiopian Christians pray to Mary for victory in war (Marcus 2001), while Orthodox priests in the Middle Volga use the iconic practices of their liturgy to pronounce anathemas on the pagan idolatry and Protestant iconoclasm they see around them (Luehrmann 2010: 60-61). Any kind of iconic practice has for centuries been a political act in itself, with many churches looking to eighth century iconoclasm and John of Damascus's Defense of Icons as points of departure for their current positions, and points of opposition to all subsequent iconoclastic movements (Luehrmann 2010: 57). The deep roots of iconoclastic dispute are felt particularly in the Chalcedonian churches, which under Byzantine rule were directly affected by these struggles. Regarding the role of sound in the aesthetic-political-spiritual nexus, there is no better example than Engelhardt's work on the "singing revolution" in Estonia (2009, 2010) in which, note, it is not just singing but "Singing the Right Way" that matters: correct aesthetic practice as a basis for political action in the name of the Church.

Politics of Saints and Nations

The sensory and aesthetic aspects of Orthodox world-building contribute to a developed sense of place. Orthodox religious worlds as we have described them produce and condition ways of addressing and understanding territorial authority. Their political dimension should therefore be apparent: as with any religion the relationship between divine and worldly power is a central concern, and often an ambiguous one. While Orthodox churches often appear closely entwined with territorial powers because of their current division along nation-state lines, this is a comparatively

recent development (Roudometof 2013) and obscures the ways that Orthodoxies have shifted between positions of critique and complicity. Even in situations in which the Orthodox Church is closely tied to the state, as in much of Ethiopian history, monastic traditions have often produced potent critiques of Imperial power on the basis of Orthodox morality (Taddesse 1972). This critical tradition coexists with a more prominent discourse of the prayers of the Church assisting the Ethiopian nation in war (Marcus 2001).

Part of the value of thinking in terms of religious worlds is in drawing attention to the way that religion can fashion how people understand their relationship to the polity in relationship to the religious conditioning of their everyday lives. In various forms of Christianity, Christ, the Virgin Mary, or specific saints are seen as the protectors of both Church and political collective, whether this entity is understood as congruent with the nation, as a minority within it, or as a transnational entity. Saintly relationship with place and polity is manifest in the title "Our Lady of…" and then a particular location. Villages and towns, but also cities and nations, give name to the Virgin and many countries have the Virgin herself as protector as in e.g. Mexico, Poland, Spain, Russia, Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt (cf. Wolf 1958; Christian 1996; Jansen 2009, 2012; Kozlowski 2008, de Busser and Niedzwiedz 2009; Bandak 2013b). Furthermore, the Virgin is believed to protect those exiled from the heartland and thereby to accommodate ties of longing and perseverance of the displaced communities (cf. Orsi 1986; Tweed 1997; Peña 2011). The national protector-saint is a figure that worshippers can build intimate relationships with through prayer and icon veneration, but whose power extends from this intimacy to the macro-political level. Saints are mediators that people can interact with and influence in a way that they often cannot influence governments. Because of this they can often serve as more effective means of popular participation than political institutions.

In these various instantiations locality and nation remains central contrary to the recent engagement with Pentecostal and Charismatic varieties of Christianity, where the extent to which Christianity is a deterritorializing force is often stressed (cf. Coleman 2000; Robbins 2004). From this perspective, Christianity does away with place and directs the Christian message at the world as such (see also Csordas 2009). However, this reading seems less fitting for older forms of Christianity such as Orthodoxy and Catholicism, where place has never lost out entirely. Here, particular places such as Jerusalem, Rome, Damascus, and Moscow matter as divinely chosen and they thereby attest to critical ways in which Christianity *also* remains a territorializing force (Christian 1989[1972]; Stewart 1991; du Boulay 2009; Boylston 2012). The fact that churches are mostly territorial while the Church is a universalistic notion perhaps emblematizes the relationship between perfection and imperfection that institutional Christianities play out: churches are partial and imperfect realizations of an eternal Church, in whose perennial presence Christians can partake by means of the sacrament of communion (Binns 2002; see also Turner and Turner 1978).

That said, orthodox communities are ardent users of novel technology and we see how the Virgin seems to be gaining ground and starting to reign in virtual space, too (Apolito 2005). YouTube has become a repository of both Syrian and Ethiopian Orthodox hymns, and quasi-iconic images circulate widely on Facebook. However, these novel mediated forms place more authority in the hands of the religious consumers and tensions may very well arise as to the extent with which the established churches are able to intervene and direct the circulation of devotional materials online. Established churches, and religious authorities more widely, have long held the media of communication under suspicion to the extent that they could not control them (cf. de Vries 2001; Apolito 2005: 16). And yet, as we have emphasized, what these decentralized consumers argue often produce is less a critique of institutional religion than an argument for greater orthodoxy and correctness.

The Orthodox engagement in the politics of place is not necessarily salutary. In the wars in the former Yugoslavia, the role bishops and saintly figures played in directing Serbian aggression against Bosnian Muslim counterparts is not to be underestimated (Perica 2002: 161; see also Forbess 2013). The very soil was believed to be anointed and to be defended ferociously. Here an orthodox tradition was a vehicle for mobilization, violence, and even atrocities committed against the adversaries and warfare was seen as a spiritual as much as a material matter. Likewise, in Russia the Orthodox Church seems to have gained ground after the fall of the Soviet Union and Putin has delicately balanced the weight he holds as a statesman and as a subject with a seemingly re-found Christian conviction.

In contexts where the churches represent minorities within the state, the religious world is placed in relation to different forms of resistance or accommodation with majority groups and national policies. In the Middle East Copts have had to find their way to be a part of the nation, one where an increasing separation from the wider society has been seen over the last decades (Mayeur-Jaouen 2012; Shenoda 2012; Galal 2012), and one where tensions after the Egyptian revolution have seen attacks on churches in worrying numbers (Abu-Munshar 2012; Heo 2013). In other countries in the region, such as Syria, the minority church is not a unified body as in Egypt. In Syria, the plethora of churches has traditionally coexisted within the Muslim majority society with cordial relations to the regime. Most Christians have here bought in to regime ideology on a strong secular state that protects the diverse groups as long as they respond with unquestioned loyalty (Bandak 2013a; see also Poujeau 2010, 2012). A general pattern seems to emerge in that many Mediterranean traditions of sharing sacred space are growing increasingly difficult to uphold, and contestations on various scales are on the rise (Kousis, Selwyn and Clark 2010; Bowman 2012; Albera and Couroucli 2012).

The political potency of sainthood always depends on public recognition, and if nobody confers special attention to the saintly prospect, the saintliness will in a social sense not be visible to others.

The saint and her followers must fashion social forms of recognizability if not to remain invisible in the eyes of the surrounding society. The matter of sainthood then is not one of perfect agreement on part of the local environment, but one where enough corroborates the claims and devotion through a specific person, dead or alive (see Brown 1981, 1983; Kleinberg 1991, 2008; Geary 1994; Cannell 1999). In this sense sainthood of course always depends on whom one asks (cf. Gellner 1969: 74; Delooz 1983; Maniura 2009).

Jeanne Kormina's ethnography offers an excellent example of the politics of recognition and sainthood (Kormina 2013). In post-Soviet Russia, the Orthodox Church canonized the martyrs of Communism: the thousand or more clergymen who had lost their lives under the Soviet regime. Some on the right continued to campaign for the canonization of Tsar Nicholas and the royal family. But these martyrs received little popular attention or veneration, as Christians flocked to the shrines of Matrona, a blind, disabled peasant woman who had quietly performed acts of healing during her life. The people chose a humble hero of the laity rather than an establishment figure, and in response the Church was forced to fast-track Matrona's beatification and therefore claim her as their own. By incorporating the people's favored saint, the Church was able to avoid a conflict that might have seriously undermined its claims to popular legitimacy, and became a rallying point for Russian Christians to express dissent over the Church's relations with Putin.

Beyond Christian traditions, sainthood also can be seen as a significant force in mobilizing various groups. Saints in both Jewish and Islamic versions also can be seen as mobilizing various forms of authority and charisma whether their particular salience is gained through public reputation or descent from the prophet or a saintly lineage (Crapanzano 1973, Bilu 2005, Zeghal 2009, Mittermaier 2011). Saintly diversity shows us that Orthodoxy is not simply characterized by deference to authority. In the right circumstances, humility is more persuasive. Nor is Orthodoxy

necessarily the antithesis of charisma in favor of routinization: sainthood and monasticism provide important grounds for moral critique based on special access to divine authority as granted by devotional or ascetic practice.

Conclusion

What is the "orthodoxy" of Orthodoxy, then? It is to be found not in an institution, individual, or text, but in the relationship between a normative, authorizing tradition, *and* the degrees of freedom, pluralism, and dispute that tradition encompasses. Structuring practices that establish a normative notion of correctness are transmitted between generations (Pop 2011; Naumescu 2011), but this correctness is only a framework that enables humanity in its diversity, its fallibility, and its historicity, to engage with God. Formality and correctness make the heterodoxy and moral imperfection of laypeople and priests alike subordinate to the order of the sacred practices they undertake. But they do not eradicate that diversity and imperfection.

We want to draw attention away from the well-rehearsed distinction between doxa and praxis, because religious worlds are most vividly seen in the coming together of diverse forms of opinions, sentiments, practices and much more which are not reflected in the dualism. To understand the "orthodoxy" of Orthodoxy we need to hone in on the *ortho*. This points us toward the correctness and order in and of tradition. What we have promoted here is a way where "orthodoxy" can be used as an analytic foray into the way religious worlds are given, how they come into being, and how they are attenuated in people's practices. The purchase of the focus on correctness for our understanding of orthodoxy is that it assists our analytical coming to terms with how people engage

with divinity despite their palpable lack of moral perfection, as well as how people reflect truths that can never be fully encompassed by the means of their reflection.

Understanding and lack of understanding are nested in a chain of moral dispositions learned from early childhood. Through a combination of deferral and engagement with sacramental and liturgical practice, Orthodox Christians root themselves in an incarnational tradition. This helps to ensure that one's inevitable deviations from correctness will not result in one getting lost. From this perspective, what is significant is less a matter of outright cultivation of a pious self, but that one does not deliberately seal off ways to access and plead with the divine. What we find is that people often live in the indeterminate space between myth and narrative, between symbolic and descriptive thought—somewhere between miracle and enlightenment.

What keeps the religious world working is an encompassing political aesthetic. Tradition is socially and culturally passed on not merely through learned attitudes towards authority. It is learned by cultivating relationships with one's immediate surroundings, which are believed to point to the divine. The Virgin, Jesus, and saints are seen as protectors of the landscape and they are placed there in the form of altars, shrines, churches, and cathedrals that in various ways are seen as divine markers of presence and beauty. In this, however, we also see various forms of politics at play. Saintly figures may be used to protect territories, to challenge other authorities and at times to circumvent traditional lines of communication. Orthodox religious worlds can therefore, depending on the regional context, fashion diverse forms of relations with the nation-state. In majority contexts, the nation itself may come to be seen as a divine being sanctioned by tradition. In minority contexts, the religious tradition becomes important in fostering a basis of belonging within the nation.

The "orthodoxy" of Orthodoxy is a matter of affective relationships crafted over time; relationships that place the individual in a wider set of obligations to authorities outside immediate reach. The orthodox religious world rests upon the notion of correctness, but works in and through deferral to account for and cope with the existence of moral imperfection both for those who are active and those who are passive in their religious endeavors. In this intricate interplay institutions with God's authority can exist while being, of necessity, morally flawed in their execution.

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[i] Emo Phillips http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2005/sep/29/comedy.religion