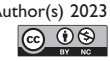
Theology

Article

Is orthodoxy radical? Revisiting G. K. Chesterton and John Robinson

Theology
2023, Vol. 126(6) 407–414



DOI: 10.1177/0040571X231209466
journals.sagepub.com/home/tjx
Sage

Gerard Loughlin
Durham University, UK

Abstract
That orthodoxy can be radical might be thought a rallying cry from the 1990s. But in fact it was already being made in the 1960s by John Robinson, and before him by G. K. Chesterton, at the start of the twentieth century. This tradition of radical orthodoxy – the idea that orthodoxy is both rooted and uprooting – is here recalled, and it is further argued that its possibility and practice are founded in the Eucharist, in the performed story of a body that is both human and divine.

Keywords
Chesterton, Eucharist, forgiveness, orthodoxy, Robinson, rootedness

G. K. Chesterton (1874–1936), in what he described as his 'slovenly autobiography', *Orthodoxy* (1908),[1] offered a disarmingly witty and paradoxical apologia for what he called the 'thrilling adventure of Orthodoxy'.[2] For Chesterton, orthodoxy is the Apostles' Creed and the 'general historic conduct of those who held such a creed'.[3] Orthodoxy is 'perilous' and 'exciting'. It is a 'whirling adventure', a 'wild truth', a 'heavenly chariot . . . thundering through the ages'.[4] More importantly, it is unconventional and unrespectable, refusing to go along with current fashions and passing fads, keeping firmly to its own fixed vision of what it should be. Yet it is this very obstinacy that allows orthodoxy to be the 'fountain of revolution and reform', truly radical because truly conservative.[5]

Corresponding author:
Gerard Loughlin
Email: gerard.loughlin@durham.ac.uk

Chesterton knew that his account of orthodoxy would appear bizarre and provocative to many people, especially to those who had fallen into the 'foolish habit' of thinking orthodoxy something 'heavy, humdrum, and safe'.[6] No doubt orthodoxy is still thought to be like this. For in many ways our modern world has been constituted *against* orthodoxy, against the claims of a tradition to think rightly. Orthodoxy is heard as authoritarian, claiming to outwit reason and assert truths on the basis of nothing more than the force of the assertion. Any claims to something like an intuitive knowledge, gained through schooling in a tradition, are dismissed as mere rhetoric.

The modern world is one guided by reason, one where the clear light of human intelligence shines impartially, showing us firm ground on which we may safely tread. To view the world by the light of reason alone was the project of Enlightenment, which began in the eighteenth century and which still frames our attempts to understand the natural, social and moral worlds in which we live. Such a project was most famously announced by the philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), who had heard and rejected the 'terrible voice of orthodoxy'[7] that had enjoined him to believe in 'pure revealed doctrine' and observe the 'practices prescribed by the church (prayer, churchgoing, and the sacraments)',[8] but for no good reason. Instead of going to church, Kant sought God through speculative and practical reason alone, and in this way produced a purely moral religion, for people without a past, relationships or desires: a morality for monads.

For the enlightened, such as Kant, orthodoxy, as faith sustained in and through tradition, could be understood only as an arbitrary and intolerant claim to right belief and practice. It is founded on that which is historically contingent, a story told by priests, lacking the support of universal reason. The orthodox are children who have yet to learn how to think for themselves, while the heretical are those who have passed through adolescence and no longer need the 'leading-string of holy tradition',[9] but can fend for themselves.

It is because the modern world sets reason against tradition that to affirm the latter must appear to deny the former, and thus modernity itself, which seeks to establish its beliefs and practices 'objectively', as opposed to the 'subjective' beliefs of the ignorant and religious. The affirmation of tradition can seem like a retreat to a pre-enlightenment world of credulity and superstition that now popularly goes by the name of the 'medieval', the dark ages set between those of classical light, ancient and modern. To be in a place such as a cathedral is to have retreated into the very domain of the medieval, the traditional and the orthodox. There, we are surrounded by the 'heavy, humdrum, and safe'. But this view, of course, is predicated on a false dichotomy between reason and faith, and one that forgets the reasons of the heart.

Faith is no less rational for being undertaken within traditions of prayer and argument, traditions that school its participants in devotion and discussion. Faith is no less rational an undertaking than others, such as philosophy or physics, which also turn out to need the tutelage of tradition. Philosophers and physicists also need to learn their craft through the habits of physics and philosophy. Kant was no

less a child of his age for having thrown off the 'leading-string of holy tradition', though perhaps he was less observant of where he was being led. This is why the theological movement that called itself 'radical orthodoxy' – associated with John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward – sought to reaffirm traditional orthodox belief as no less rational than other traditions.[10] Indeed, radical orthodoxy claimed that it was capable of understanding those traditions better than they understood themselves, because to have true knowledge of the world is to participate, somehow, in the knowledge of God.

Insofar as the twentieth and twenty-first centuries inherit the Enlightenment rejection of tradition and orthodoxy, any appeal to a *radical* orthodoxy must appear oxymoronic, since to be a radical is to be an exponent of drastic and dramatic change, challenging and undoing established complacency, undoing established tradition and orthodoxy. The modern radical is not, as the name suggests, someone who is rooted, but someone who uproots, digs out and throws away the old. The modern radical is a heretic who stands against the status quo, whether political or religious; and, in religion, the heretic stands against credal orthodoxy, which is to be uprooted and thrown away. This can justly be said of those theologians in the 1960s who proposed to make theology out of secularism and the 'death of God'. They were radical because, with the rest of the modern world, they were not for, but against, orthodoxy. However, there was also another version of radical theology in the 1960s.

Although this alternative radical theology was sometimes confused with secular or 'death of God' theology, it affirmed orthodoxy as radical in the sense of being both rooted and uprooting. It is the sense in which a former lecturer at Wells Theological College, and later Bishop of Woolwich, John A. T. Robinson (1919–83) could think of himself as both radical and orthodox. John Robinson felt that he could be radical because he was rooted in what he called the 'Anglican ethos', and rooted at its heart, having been, as he wrote, 'born and bred under the shadow of Canterbury Cathedral', where both his father and his maternal grandfather were canons.[11] More importantly, of course, he believed himself rooted in the Scriptures, creeds, sacraments and ministry of the Church. It was because he held fast to these at the centre of his faith that he could be open at its edges, as he liked to put it. The idea of a determinate core with indeterminate, 'fuzzy' edges allowed Robinson's orthodoxy to issue in radical fruit. For Robinson, it was the 'depth of root' that allowed Christians the 'freedom to be radical', to be 'men and women who go to the roots'.[12] The radical – the political, social and ecclesiastical reformer – 'has to be a person of roots and deep roots'. Robinson considered himself to be such a man, and, writing at the end of the 1970s, he was unrepentant of the stands he had taken in the 1960s – 'on Lady Chatterley or capital punishment, on immigration or censorship, on homosexuality or abortion' – and instead urged as a rallying cry for the 1980s the motto '*Twice as rooted, twice as radical*'.[13]

In an essay from the late 1960s, Robinson offers a useful distinction between the reformer, who seeks to update the tradition, and the radical, who goes to the root of the tradition and asks 'what it is for'.[14] Robinson understood his own work as

asking this question, and the same can be said of the newer radical orthodoxy, one that announces a 'return to patristic and medieval roots', and thereby a recovery of orthodoxy as seeking to know the world in the light of the divine, in the light of reason illumined by grace.[15] But this radical undertaking is not exclusive of reformation, of the need to 'rethink the tradition', nor of revolution, since if radical orthodoxy achieves what it claims, it achieves the thought and, at least, incipient practice of a world other than that in which most of us live, a traditioned life other than that which most of us experience. Indeed, if it were not for the promise of a revolutionary existence, and the taste of a life to come, radical orthodoxy – understood now as the life of the Church rather than as an academic fashion – would be truly intolerable.

Such a view of radical orthodoxy is not peculiar to the Anglican tradition, nor simply the result of 1960s radicalism or 1990s postmodernism. Already, at the beginning of the twentieth century, G. K. Chesterton had offered a remarkably similar analysis of a rooted, radical orthodoxy. On Chesterton's account, if we are to be reformers we must have some idea of the form into which we are trying to shape our present existence. We must have some idea of the future to which we are trying to lead the world. The world in which we live, natural and social, is the means by which the vision is materialized, and in its materialization the world is reformed, transformed into the world it is to be. In short, if we are to be reformers, we must have a vision of the world to come; and, for Chesterton, that vision is given in orthodoxy, and progress in orthodoxy means 'that we are always changing the world to suit the vision'.[16] For Chesterton, reformation is not an option for orthodoxy; rather, it follows from its vision.

Writing at the beginning of the twentieth century, Chesterton argued that the modern world had got things back to front, because it thinks that progress means 'always changing the vision'. We moderns, he complained, 'are not altering the real to suit the ideal. We are altering the ideal: it is easier.'[17] Lacking a fixed and firm vision, lacking resolve and steadfastness, lacking conservatism, the modern world lacks radicalism, and is unable to change.

Chesterton was remarkably prescient when he declared that the 'little clerk in Mr Gradgrind's office' is kept to his task by being fed a diet of 'revolutionary literature'. 'He is calmed and kept in his place by a constant succession of wild philosophies. He is a Marxian one day, a Nietzscheite the next day, a Superman (probably) the next day; and a slave every day. The only thing that remains after all the philosophies is the factory.'[18] Chesterton had not envisaged the advent of television, let alone the internet and social media, or the spectacular growth of the consumer market, but his analysis of how the modern world of his day pacifies its 'slaves' through the endless consumption of dreams is precisely repeated by those analysts of our own day, who explain how global capitalism both secures and dissembles its ubiquity through the ever greater proliferation of consumer merchandise. The relentless homogeneity of the market is rendered invisible by a maximum of differentiation. Each identical pair of jeans or squirt of perfume, bottled in tens of thousands, promises a supreme individuality. They will make

you stand out from the crowd. 'As long as the vision of heaven is always changing, the vision of earth will be exactly the same.'[19]

Thus, for Chesterton, the revolutionary requires a fixed and firm vision, an abiding dream of a different, better world, and it is this that orthodoxy provides. It is because orthodoxy has a vision of a world that was and is to come, of a world restored, that orthodoxy is revolutionary.[20] As long as orthodoxy holds to its vision, it is rooted and uprooting, resident and reforming. And the still calm centre of orthodoxy, which is yet the motor of its reforming zeal, is the Church's vision of time issuing from eternity, of divinity touching humanity in the story of Christ's body.

From the first, Chesterton held together creed and conduct, story and performance. He knew that orthodoxy is at one and the same time orthopraxy: right acting as well as right thinking, with each constituting the other. To believe is to exist in a certain way, and, for Chesterton, who was a narrative theologian before narrative theology, 'Christian existence is a *story*, which may end up in any way'.

> All Christianity concentrates on the man at the cross-roads . . . Will a man take this road or that? . . . The instant is really awful: and it is because our religion has intensely felt the instant, that it has in literature dealt much with battle and in theology dealt much with hell. It is full of *danger*, like a boy's book: it is at an immortal crisis . . . Life (according to the faith) is very like a serial story in a magazine: life ends with the promise (or menace) 'to be continued in our next'.[21]

The choice at the crossroads is not only a matter of belief, but of practice. It is a matter of cleaving to a story through its performance, and that, as Chesterton insisted, can lead to revolutionary action, which may go right and may go wrong.[22] What appears lacking in Chesterton, who was not yet a Catholic when he wrote his spiritual autobiography, is an account of how the dangerous story of orthodoxy is learned and sustained.[23] There is no account of the sacramental life of the Church, and yet it is in the practice of the latter, and above all of the Eucharist, that it becomes possible to perform the story, because one is a participant within it.

The Eucharist is the revolutionary root of orthodoxy, the still centre where divinity touches humanity, and in that touch changes the world, radically. For in the Eucharist the body of Christ is recalled, anticipated and realized. Christ gives us to eat the eucharistic meal now, following his injunction to recall his giving of himself up to death, as each one of us may also be called. At the same time, we also recall Christ's Resurrection and Ascension, and promise to return, so that in the Eucharist we look and call for the coming of Christ, arriving from the future. And we are not disappointed, for the past and future body of Christ is once more present as the food by which we are fed, by which we are transformed into Christ's body. Just as Mary gave birth to Christ, and fed him with her own body, so Christ, whose flesh is entirely from his mother, gives birth to the Church and feeds her with himself.

The story performed in the Eucharist is truly startling, and yet perhaps too familiar, or too incredible, to strike us as revolutionary, as turning the world upside down. After all, it is a performance for which places such as cathedrals and churches were built, and such places – theatres of the (mystical) body – epitomize what is for many, if not most people, 'heavy, humdrum and safe'. In order to see why orthodoxy is radical we need to see why the eucharistic practice of the Church counters the daily practices in which most of us are involved.

Chesterton set orthodoxy over against a world of multitudinous, ever changing dreams. As already suggested, he was not only describing his modern world, but our own as well; and our modern world has no real place or time for the practice of the Eucharist. For our world has no place for the corporate, understood as the reciprocal bonding of human bodies. It does not want to think that each depends on all, so that no one is complete in themselves, and only comes to be in and through others; and, moreover, it doesn't want any of us to think this either. The modern state refuses the truly corporate, because social bodies can rival its power, which is at its most intense when the state can deal with people as isolated individuals. The same is true of commercial corporations, which can present themselves as communal, but which more nearly seek to repeat the relation of state to isolated citizen. For the successful corporation must be able to move its capital at will, irrespective of the people it employs and then un-employs; and it must produce goods that everyone wants, and wants repeatedly, and don't want to share. Thus, in the modern world, both nation state and global corporation favour those forces that tend to atomize the social body and isolate the individual. The Eucharist, on the other hand, calls all and sundry together, each as a part of one body, related and dependent on all the rest. No part of the eucharistic body is of less worth than any other part.

The eucharistic vision is startling – so startling that few people have ever taken it seriously. For one, it imagines that there really is only one human body, which is also a divine body, the body of Christ, which is at the same time the maternal body of the Church, a body with enough sustenance for everyone and composed of everyone. Thus, violence against any one member of the body is violence against all, against Christ. For a Christian to raise their hand against another, any other, is to raise it against Christ, and so violence is not a Christian option. It is a failure in the performance of the story, but a failure that occurs all the time, and a failure that all nation states require of their citizens.

The Eucharist is also a story of forgiveness, since Christ, who always returns when he is called upon, returns to those who have always already disowned him, and nearly always more than three times. The Eucharist is itself the gift of forgiveness, a gift that we receive as we forgive in return. But then, why do we so often refuse to forgive, and instead seek the comfort of vengeance? It is another failure in the performance of the story, but a failure that occurs all the time, and a failure in which states and corporations, often through press and media agencies, school

their citizens. For a society where each is fearful of all is a society of nascent violence, where a fragile peace and a simulated community can be maintained only through public displays of adulation or rejection.

The Eucharist is a story of infinite hospitality, since all are called to the meal and there is always enough food for everyone. There is no scarcity in Christ. But then, how is it possible that some members of the body go hungry? How is it possible that some are turned away from the table? Again, it is a failure in the performance of the story, but a failure that occurs all the time, and a failure that both nation states and global corporations require us to make. For the legitimacy of the state is maintained by securing its borders against the threatening hordes of the 'bogus' destitute, the 'illegal' refugee or migrant who would otherwise overrun the nation. At the same time, powerful commercial interests are served by producing more food for the 'developed' world than it can possibly eat, while selling guns rather than grain to the starving world, where nascent states also want the comfort of policed borders.

States and corporations institute social imaginaries, ways of picturing the world that form our own imaginations, and hence the possibilities that are open to us. But the Church, in the performance of its eucharistic story – in its orthodoxy – likewise offers a social imaginary.[24] It is one that is truly radical, because it imagines that we are to be other than we are. We are not to be fearful of one another, but joyful with our neighbours. But, of course, matters are not so simple. Even if we participate in the Church's eucharistic imagination, we also participate in the imaginations of others, in those of state and corporation. This is why each performance of orthodoxy, each attempt to believe and act rightly, must begin – as in eucharistic celebration – with the confession of sin and the request for forgiveness. Radical orthodoxy exists only as a humble hope, as a prayer. And this is why, as we hope and pray, Christ does not desert us but comes again when we call upon him, and always we are having to call upon him. We are always having to ask for his forgiveness and receive him once more in the body he gives of himself, until the day when he comes for the last time, in glory.

Notes

1. G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995 [1908]), p. 17. Chesterton wrote a second autobiography, published shortly after his death. See G. K. Chesterton, *Autobiography*, introduced by Richard Ingrams (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1986 [1936]).
2. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, p. 107.
3. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, p. 17.
4. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, pp. 107–8.
5. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, p. 145.
6. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, p. 107.

7. Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, 6:130; in Immanuel Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, translated and edited by Allen W. Wood and George Di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 39–215, here p. 158.
8. Kant, *Religion*, pp. 276–7.
9. Kant, *Religion*, p. 151.
10. See John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward (eds), *Radical Orthodoxy: a new theology* (London: Routledge, 1999); John Milbank and Simon Oliver (eds), *The Radical Orthodoxy Reader* (London: Routledge, 2009).
11. John A. T. Robinson, *The Roots of a Radical* (London: SCM Press, 1980), p. 10.
12. Robinson, *Roots of a Radical*, p. 24.
13. Robinson, *Roots of a Radical*, p. 5. Robinson based his motto on one suggested by the anti-Vietnam War protester William Sloane Coffin: 'Twice as radical, twice as non-violent.' For Robinson's 1960s views on various social issues, see John A. T. Robinson, *Christian Freedom in a Permissive Society* (Philadelphia PA: Westminster Press, 1970).
14. John A. T. Robinson, 'Not radical enough?' in *Christian Freedom*, pp. 232–40, here p. 233.
15. Milbank, Pickstock and Ward (eds), *Radical Orthodoxy*, p. 2.
16. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, p. 112.
17. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, p. 112.
18. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, p. 114.
19. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, pp. 114–15.
20. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, p. 117.
21. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, p. 143.
22. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, pp. 144–5.
23. Chesterton was received into the Catholic Church in 1922.
24. I have taken the idea of a 'social imagination' from William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: theology, politics, and the body of Christ* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1998).

Author biography

Gerard Loughlin is Professor in the Department of Theology and Religion at Durham University.