

Who Do You Call a Heretic? Fluid Notions of Orthodoxy and Heresy in Late Antiquity

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The Orthodox church, to which I belong, in the course of its long existence produced some of the most beautiful and innovative concepts of Christian theology,¹ and yet she somehow manages to uphold the notion that she is a champion of unchangedness and that everything that she does needs to be in total agreement with the tradition and the theology of the “holy fathers”. This obsession with continuity and tradition goes so far that in the era in which almost all other churches stepped on the path of modernization,² the Orthodox actually thought that they needed to take a step back and remove all the layers of modernity acquired during

¹This is especially the case for the era of Late Antiquity, in which the East was dominant in theology and which is often considered the golden age of Christian theology.

²This in most cases did not help them increase the number of their faithful. The best example is the Anglican Communion, which is always in tune with the spirit of the age, but which has suffered a significant decrease in the number of its faithful in the past few decades. There is a famous quote from the diary of William Ralph Inge, also known as “The Gloomy Dean,” connected to his lecture at Sion College in 1911 titled “Co-operation of the Church with the Spirit of the Age”. He writes: “[...] if you marry the Spirit of your own generation you will be a widow in the next”. See: William Ralph Inge, *Diary of a Dean: St. Paul's 1911–1934* (London: Hutchinson, 1949), 12.

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centuries, especially the accretions that occurred under the influence of Western scholasticism,³ by returning to the “theology of the fathers”, whatever that is supposed to mean.⁴

In this chapter, I seek to show that in many cases of the development of Christian (and in particular Orthodox) theology there is no such thing as continuity with the tradition and that church often used this continuity as a façade which served only to hide the fact that things had significantly changed.⁵ The best way to do this is to show how because of the change of the official doctrine certain persons were condemned for heresy even though they did not change anything in their positions. The only thing that changed was official church theology. Since most condemnations of this type occurred post-mortem even if they had wanted to change something they could not have done so.

As someone who comes from a church that has a rather black and white notion of heresy and orthodoxy, I have always been fascinated with the selection process of who is declared a heretic and who is considered to be orthodox or even a saint, which are often equated. Putting aside all of those considered by the modern Orthodox as heretics, in accordance with Warburton’s principle “Orthodoxy is my doxy – heterodoxy is another man’s doxy”,⁶ I would like to focus on some late antique theologians who had the misfortune to be declared heretics, even though they were not, and those who had the luck of remaining orthodox, even though there were valid reasons to consider them heretical, if we were to follow equal and just principles. Finally, as mentioned above, I will consider those who

³ Florovsky (borrowing from Luther) referred to this influence as to the “Babylonian” or the “Latin Captivity” of Russian theology. See: Georges Florovsky, *Ways of Russian Theology* (Belmont, MA: Nordland Pub. Co., 1979), 121, 181.

⁴ I am referring to the so-called neo-patristic movement of the twentieth century led by Georges Florovsky, Vladimir Lossky, Nicholas Afanasiev, Alexander Schmemmann, John Meyendorff, and ultimately John Zizioulas. For the emergence and motives of this theology see: Paul L. Gavrilyuk, *Georges Florovsky and the Russian Religious Renaissance* (Oxford: University Press, 2014). Of course, this is not an isolated phenomenon: there were similar movements in Western theology, such as “Nouvelle Théologie.”

⁵ The best example for this is the Council of Chalcedon (451), which introduced a political (middle way) solution for the long-standing Alexandrian (miaphysite) and Antiochian (dyophysite) Christological disputes. While introducing this artificial theology the fathers of the council felt need to state in the Creed of the council that they were only “following the holy Fathers” (ἐπιόμενοι τοῖνυν τοῖς ἁγίοις πατράσιν), which of course was only partly true.

⁶ Joseph Priestley et al., *Memoirs of Dr. Joseph Priestley: To the Year 1795, Volume 1* (London: J. Johnson, 1806), 372.