

Heresy

The word heresy developed within Christianity, where it signifies the deviation by Christians from what is judged to be true belief. Who does the judging has depended on the viewpoint, but for Roman Catholics it has been a role of pope and bishops. Historians will need to construct their own definition for analytical purposes, for two reasons. Firstly, the meaning of the word 'heresy' has not been stable within Christianity. In the late Antique/early medieval period it could still be used for a deviation from a doctrine only later defined (and in this sense a dead pope could be designated as heretical for). Later the word would only be applied to defiance of a doctrine already defined. A second reason for constructing a clinical analytical concept or 'ideal-type' is that it enables comparisons between Christianity and other religions, which obviously do not use the same word but who may have similar attitudes. The comparison is useful precisely because it shows how much more highly developed or 'rationalised' the attitude was in Christianity and especially in Catholicism. Heresy can thus be defined for analytical purposes and in a value-neutral way as 'beliefs arising from a religion system regarded by some of its adherents so false as to exclude those who hold them from belonging to it properly'. Within Catholicism the authority to identify such beliefs is seen as belonging to pope and bishops. In practice, such beliefs have been proscribed and seriously persecuted only when they have attracted a popular following outside intellectual ivory towers. A key development within Catholicism was the idea of development itself: with the consequence that a view can be licit up to the date of an authoritative document, and heretical after it.

The other great world religions do have roughly equivalent notions. In a sense, the early Christians were heretical Jews from the point of view of orthodox Jews. Islam is at the root a dogmatically simple religion, so 'deviant' belief is correspondingly simple: denial of basic tenets like such as the existence of God or the role of his prophet Muhammed. Nearer to the Christian notion is in Buddhism. An early council rejected as deviant the idea of a soul, for instance. The last Buddhist council ended with a division between the 'greater way' Mahayana, who thought that people who achieved perfection and could have moved into a state of Nirvana, remained instead to help others along the way. The role of Councils and the relative sophistication of the religious conceptions being defined are reminiscent of Christian history, though ideas about heresy were much more complex and intellectualised in the latter. At the level of individual thinkers, Buddhism, Hinduism or Islam have been intellectualised to an extraordinary degree, but this process has not extended to collective thought claiming authority over all the faithful, as with conciliar and papal decisions. Heresy is a photo-negative of orthodoxy. Orthodox belief has been highly rationalised at a collective level in Christianity, with a corresponding effect on definitions of heresy. Definition of what is orthodox has been the outcome of debate informed from early on by philosophical concepts sophisticated reasoning, distilled into highly compressed and economical formulae, and presented to the whole body of believers as official doctrine, from which it is heretical to depart.

Why has Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular developed in this way? From the beginning, Christians were faced with problems. The first was: 'are we Jews?', but a greater stimulus to the development of orthodoxy and accusation of heresy was the fundamental problem of whether Jesus Christ was human and divine. He seemed to claim to be both. Then, if he was divine, what was his relation to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? Had he existed from all eternity? In the ancient world the idea of degrees of divinity was quite familiar. Could they be applied. All this stimulated intense intellectual activity in early Christian communities, and could result in exclusion from the community of those whose beliefs were held to be fundamentally unacceptable. Already in the epistles of St John we find an attack on secessionists (from the same Johannine tradition) who so emphasis Christ's character as the 'pre-existing Word' as to neglect his humanity, suffering and death (Brown, p. 111).

The notion of heresy thus goes back to the very origins of Christianity. Perhaps the first identifiable individual *heresiarch* was Marcion, who propagated a form of 'Gnosticism'. For gnostics, the creator God of the Old Testament was not the God of Jesus Christ. This Old Testament God but a secondary divinity who had fallen from goodness. Christ came from the true God to rescue the spiritual sparks from this world. Marcion was excommunicated and widely attacked - in fact we know of his views through polemics against him. As repeatedly happens in the history of heresy, his views were an intellectual stimulus to his opponents: encouraging for instance the formation of a canon on accepted biblical books.

The conversion of the Roman Empire to Christianity marks a new phase. The question of what to do about Christians who has succumbed to persecution arose in connection with elections to the bishopric of Carthage. In 313 pope Miltiades held a council which came down against the rigorists. Donatists continued to flourish, above all in Africa where they drew the fire of St Augustine of Hippo. A key doctrine was that sacraments administered by men who had given in to persecution were invalid, because the Church must be holy. The reaction against them established in the Catholic Church the principle that the shortcomings of the individual priest do not affect their sacramental powers.

On a more theoretical but even more fundamental level, the Christian Roman empire is the period in which general councils took on the role of defining the line between orthodox and heretical ideas about God. The problems they tried to settle centred on Jesus Christ: what was his relation to God the Father, and in what sense was he both God and man? Those views condemned by the Councils subsequently accepted as 'oecumenical' have been regarded as heretical by mainstream Latin and Greek Christianity and the principal Protestant Churches. First to be condemned (at the Council of Nicaea in 325) were followers of Arius. They denied Jesus full equality with God. Then the attention shifted to the two natures of Christ. The Council of Chalcedon in 451 adopted a formula of Pope Leo I 'the Great' and declared that Christ was one divine person with two distinct natures - against Nestorians who tended to separate play down the unity of Christ and followers of Eutyches, who tended to present Christ's humanity as so transformed by union with his divinity as to be different from the humanity of ordinary people - a doctrine that would have been an obstacle to the much later development in the West of devotion to the helpless childhood and completely human sufferings of Jesus. This strand of heresy can loosely be called 'monophysitism', from the Greek 'mono -physis' - 'one - nature'. Nestorianism continued outside the boundaries of the Eastern empire to attract adherents as far away as in China (they were still there when mendicant missionaries arrived in the thirteenth century). Monophysitism also continued outside the confines of the empire, most notably in Armenian Christianity, and within the empire watered-down or compromise forms of it were periodically propagated by Eastern emperors, in the (vain) hope of ending divisions between Christians under their rule. These periods tended to involve conflicts between emperors and popes, who were otherwise only too eager to remain within the the imperial fold, in the hope of protection against enemies in Italy.

Tensions between papacy and empire were also generated by a later heresy, Iconoclasm, the rejection of religious images, which arguably had a certain affinity with Monophysitism insofar as the latter directed attention away from the human and representable aspect of Christ. The actual

'heresiarch' was the Greek emperor Leo III (717-41). Within the Greek empire iconoclasm was strongly and ultimately successfully resisted by monks, and in the West by the papacy/

The arguments about Christ were largely carried on in the Eastern empire, though the pope was always involved. The Latin West did produce its own heresiarch, Pelagius. He emphasised what God-given human nature could achieve even in its present state. His followers played down the effects of Original Sin. 'Pelagianism' provoked a strong reaction from Augustine of Hippo, changing the direction of his theology. In his earlier phase he had been reacting against Manicheism (a separate religion rather than a Christian heresy), rejecting its dualist belief in an evil principle responsible for the material world. Now he veered towards emphasis on the damage done by the Fall of Adam and Eve, and the utter dependence of man on grace. These anti-pelagian writings had a massive influence on later predestinarian thought, both among Catholics (especially Augustinians and Dominicans), but also on heresiarchs: Wyclif, Luther, Calvin, and Jansenius.

Between the eighth and the eleventh centuries no major heresies emerged. The Greek East now tended to see orthodoxy as a settled inheritance. In the West, social, economic and political conditions were uncondusive to original religious reflection of any kind, heretical or orthodox. Religious revival in the eleventh and twelfth centuries coincided with new heretical movements, and this was surely no coincidence.

One of the first real mass heretical movements and the only one. Only in the twelfth century can one speak of mass heretical movements. One of them survives to this day: Waldensianism. Its 'heresiarch' began the movement (c. 1170-73) in circumstances reminiscent of Franciscan origins. They were Franciscan *avant le mot* in their commitment to the apostolic life of preaching and poverty. In the Franciscan case, an imaginative pope coincided with a holy man who revered Church authority. The Waldensians were not quite so deferential and came up against episcopal opposition, and split from the Church over the issue of preaching without authorisation. They came to anticipate Protestantism in their emphasis on the Bible uninterpreted by bishops or pope as the source of doctrine. On most issues they were not far from orthodox belief, and under Innocent III a group returned to the Church as the 'poor Catholics'. Others survived underground and after the Reformation they took their place alongside other Protestant sects.

Far more radical were the Cathars, whose doctrines were reminiscent of Gnosticism and Manicheism in their conviction that the material world was evil. The genetic link with these earlier heresies has not been demonstrated, but origins in Balkan Bogomilism seem fairly certain. One or two historians - way out of line from the majority of scholars - actually deny that the existence of such dualist doctrines in the twelfth until the later thirteenth century, maintaining the counter-intuitive thesis that the heresy was constructed from nothing by its persecutors, whose imagined sect subsequently attracted actual adherents, just at the time when membership was become deadly dangerous. In fact it died out, destroyed by a combination of crusade, inquisition, and preaching by Dominicans and Franciscans.

The Franciscan order produced its own heresy, a combination of ideas about poverty as perfection and the prophetic theory of history developed c. 1200 by Joachim of Fiore. Some radical Franciscans came to think that in the dawning Age of the Holy Spirit the structure of true religion would be reformed in the same kind of radical way as with the coming of God the Son and the replacement of Synagogue by Church. Perhaps the new leaders of the Church would be poor spiritual men like themselves, and perhaps they would be persecuted by antichrist in a papal guise. The main body of the order rejected such theories, but a high proportion even of those hostile to the

'spirituals' were alienated when Pope John XXII went on in 1322 to declare that Christ and the apostles did own property in common, and that those who contradicted this would be heretics - henceforth. Before the definition, it would not be heresy.

John XXII took huge and unnecessary political risks by taking this step, for most of the Franciscans just liked to think they were the best order because only they had no property even in common - the pope owned it and let them use it. This legal fiction actually made them dependent on a property owning papacy. Aside from the trouble he caused himself however John was developing a new idea of development. He thought the pope should find problems in theology that had not been solved, start a debate about them, and, when all the experts had said their piece, reach a 'determinatio', like a professor after a university disputation. After John popes returned to the policy of waiting for problems to come to them rather than setting them up. Yet the idea of development of doctrine implicit in his policy continued to develop itself. In the fifteenth century it took the form of popes declaring that neither position in a given debate, such as the dispute between Franciscans and Dominicans on the Immaculate Conception, could or should be called heretical until the papacy felt ready to give a definition. In the case of the Immaculate Conception this was not until the nineteenth century. Thus it was that in the 'de auxiliis' controversy about grace and freewill has been left undecided this day by the papacy. (The documents of the inconclusive process at Rome are now available with a model catalogue by the Archivio Segreto Vaticano.)

The controversy was one in a line of debates about grace that run from John Wycliffe through the Reformation. The fourteenth-century English academic Wyclif believed in a Church of the elect and the primacy of the bible, which was a reflection of the 'bible' in the eternal mind of God. Thus he rejected the institutional Church as a source of sanctification and as a teaching authority. A milder form of Wycliffe's ideas inspired Jan Hus, who was burned at the Council of Constance but whose movement was never fully fought to a standstill, mixed up as it was with nascent Czech nationalism.

The combination of emphasis on a Church of the Elect and on the Bible as source of true doctrine also anticipates Luther and Calvin. Protestantism could be regarded as the first medieval heresy (or set of heresies) to survive persecution. Up until then, the state had ultimately come to the aid of the Church in driving the heresy underground or out of existence - leaving it rather late in the case of Wycliffe and, especially, the Hussites. Luther received political protection long enough for the tipping point to be passed. It could easily have happened centuries earlier with a different heresy. Luther's survival and success lead to a other breakaway movements, most notably Calvinism, which took his ideas about predestination to their logical conclusion and put the doctrine in a more central position in their world view. A later reaction against this strong predestinarian view developed within Calvinism in the form of Arminianism, which was condemned by the Calvinist Synod of Dort.

Although the Catholic Council of Trent had condemned some of the assumptions out of which the Calvinist doctrine of predestination developed it had skirted around the Augustinian formulations that had lead even Thomas Aquinas some way towards the Calvinist view, on one reasonable reading at least. Jesuit theologians begged to differ and the result was the 'de auxiliis' controversy to which reference has already been made. Neither side was declared heretical.

That Augustinian tradition of predestinarian thought showed its power again in the Jansenist movement. To oversimplify a little, the key idea was that it is impossible to resist the grace of salvation, so that the reprobate were never recipients of the grace in question. It took its name from Cornelius Jansen, Catholic bishop of Ghent and then Ypres. His big book *Augustinus* was published in 1640, after his death. His views were propagated by Saint-Cyran, Blaise Paschal (most

famously), and Paschauer Quesnel. The Paris convent of Cistercian nuns known as the Port Royal was a focal point of the movement, which was a powerful strand of earnest French Catholicism into the eighteenth century. Jansenism was condemned by the papacy in 1653 and 1713.

Protestants too had creeds and a concept of heresy. The rationalisation of dogma was an inheritance of the ancient and medieval Church. Luther thought that the Bible alone would teach true doctrine to any reader with the right frame of mind - that of a predestined person. Soon there were competing Protestant interpretations of the Bible. Solutions could take a traditional form. Michael Servetus was burned in Calvin's Geneva. The Synod of Dort (1618-19) defined true doctrine on Predestination. In the long run the problem of proliferation of different and incompatible answers has been solved by Protestants (when the State has allowed it) by splitting into separate Churches whenever the divergences on doctrine became too great.

The Catholic Church maintains the understanding of heresy as the pertinacious rejection of official Church teaching, but since the nineteenth century at least popes have recognized the likelihood of invincible ignorance and (consequently) ethical innocence in heretical belief. The Second Vatican Council made freedom of religion official teaching, while reaffirming the role of pope and bishops to teach believing Catholics with authority.

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