Martha J. Horne Lecture series

Title: ‘Living into Orthodoxy: What does that mean?’

Abstract: In this lecture we think about what Christians are claiming about the world and the extent to which Christians can disagree about these doctrines. The distinctive claims of the Trinity and Incarnation are explored.

At the end of the 20th century, something rather odd started to occur. The conservative wing of the Episcopal Church, who felt that traditional marriage excluded sexual intimacy between persons of the same sex, insisted that the ‘orthodox’ faith needed protection. And those who disagreed with this had betrayed the ‘orthodox’ faith.¹ (By orthodox here we are not referring to the communion of churches known as the Eastern Orthodox Church or sometimes – rather misleadingly – the Greek Orthodox Church.² Instead, I mean all those Christians who affirm ‘the correct belief’ of the Church.)

Now regardless of which side of the homosexuality debate you are on, I want to suggest that there is something rather odd in defining the term ‘orthodoxy’ to those who are opposed to homosexual intimacy. After all, homosexuality is not mentioned in the Creeds nor in the Gospels. And there are plenty of non-Christians (for example, most Muslims) who oppose homosexual intimacy, but are definitely not orthodox Christians.

¹ Two good illustrations of the use of the word ‘orthodox’ are found on two conservative websites – for the website ‘Virtue Online’, the subtitle is the ‘Voice of Global Orthodox Anglicanism’ and the American Anglican Council advocates ‘biblical authority and Christian orthodoxy’.
² It is misleading because there are sixteen churches that use the Byzantine Rite and recognize the importance of the Patriarch of Constantinople, many of whom are not Greek speaking.
Martha J. Horne, the dean of Virginia Theological Seminary for 13 years, took a different view of orthodoxy. With her own deep commitment to Scripture, she was ideally placed to invite Virginia Theological Seminary (VTS) to think through the issue of sexuality from an orthodox perspective. She was determined that VTS should remain at the heart of the Episcopal discussion. VTS would not be lured into the twilight world of CANA (the Nigerian church) or other African ‘mission’ programs; instead it would remain part of the Episcopal Church – an Episcopal Church big enough to accommodate all the sides of the debate. For Martha Horne, the obligation to be placed in the midst of the conversation was part of her commitment to orthodoxy. For Martha Horne, orthodoxy cannot be reduced to a single issue of one’s view on sexuality.

Let me state right at the outset that I think Dean Horne was entirely right. In this inaugural lecture, we shall look at the world of orthodoxy – precisely what does it entail? I shall argue that it entails a commitment to the God disclosed in Christ, which is expounded through Scripture. Understanding orthodoxy in this way offers an account of the Christian faith which is open and generous. Developing the way in which orthodoxy can be seen as open and generous is the theme of the second lecture next week.

So let us start with the problem that the orthodox Christian faith is attempting to solve. The central religious problem is epistemological. How do we know what God is like? How do we know which religion is right? Here we are small creatures in a vast solar
system trying to work out what ultimate reality is like. How can we know when we have the right answers?

These questions are so obvious. Yet these questions are so difficult to answer. Ever since the European Enlightenment, Christians in the West have flirted with relativism or even agnosticism. Relativism becomes attractive because the argument goes that given there is no way of knowing which religion is true, then we should recognize the validity of all. Agnosticism becomes attractive because the range of different metaphysical answers suggests to some that there is no way of knowing the ultimate answers.

To avoid the twin challenges of relativism and agnosticism, all the faith traditions of the world respond in a similar way: we need to trust that somewhere there is a definitive disclosure of God. We need to trust a revelation of the transcendent. If we are going to guess what God is like, then agnosticism makes perfect sense. However, if we are going to make any sort of claim for knowledge, then we must trust that the gap between humanity and God has been bridged by God’s initiative. For Jews, God’s definitive disclosure is found in the Torah; for Muslims, it is the Qur’an. Christians are in this respect no different. We also trust a revelation.

However, the location of this revelation is interesting. For Judaism and Islam, it is a text which is central. For Christians, it is not a text but a life. Granted all knowledge of the past depends on texts (so a text, namely the Bible, becomes very important), but still the location of revelation is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.
It is interesting when you look at our Creeds. Almost two thirds of the Apostles’ Creed and perhaps just over half of the Nicene Creed focus on the telling of a narrative – they describe the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. They talk about a person who came from heaven, was born of the Virgin Mary, was crucified under Pontius Pilate, rose again from the dead, and then ascended back into heaven. This narrative is the focus of the creed. It is interesting how inadequate the Creed looks from the perspective of certain Evangelical and Fundamentalist traditions. Although Evangelical and Fundamentalist churches affirm the historic creeds, it is interesting to note how they insist on supplementing their ‘Statements of Faith’ with the inerrancy of the Bible, a substitutionary view of the atonement and, of course, an affirmation of traditional marriage. In contrast the Nicene Creed keeps it simple: it is belief in God, belief in the Trinity, and a deep commitment to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

The two key and distinctive doctrines of Christianity are the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation. Both of these doctrines are attempting to make sense of Jesus – one within the life of God and the other as a human.

Now let us go in stages: in the first stage, does it make sense to trust that God was in Christ revealing Godself to the world? In other words compared to other claims to revelation is this the right one? Then in the second stage we look at the doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation and explore precisely how a life can be a revelation of God. Then finally, in the third stage we explore precisely what do we learn of God in the life, death
and resurrection of Jesus. At the end of the exercise, we are left with the question as to what does this say about the character of Christian orthodoxy? And what does this imply for the theme of our second lecture – the ways in which Christianity can absorb change?

Stage one: Can this revelation be trusted?

So why trust Christ as the disclosure of God and not the Qur’an? This is a beguiling and tempting question, which often results in deeply misleading answers. So let us try and think it through. First, it is important to recognize that there is much disclosed in Christ that is found in the scriptures of other faith traditions. Where a witness to an idea is found in a variety of traditions, I think it can be treated as good evidence that the Spirit of God is at work. Orthodox Christianity has always recognized that all truth belongs to God, wherever that truth is to be found. Second, it is also clear that God invites us to embark on the quest for truth with humility and in conversation. God has not made the ‘right’ revelation blindly obvious. It is true that we are formed in community and shaped by a certain language and therefore worldview. The faith (or lack of faith – because atheists and agnostics are also subject to the same socializing tendency) of one’s parents is likely to be passed on to their children. Yet this sociological truth should not make us despair. There are certain things on which there is widespread agreement across traditions (the existence of God, for example); there are other things that certain traditions discover which have such compelling plausibility and explanatory power that they persuade numerous people (for example, the narrative of medical science, although even here there are many who want to supplement that narrative with a commitment to complementary medicine); and there are other things that make overwhelming sense
within a tradition (I think the doctrine of the Trinity is a good example) but, due to its complexity, do not command much support beyond that tradition. There is no reason why Christians should not acknowledge that they are more sure about certain ideas and less sure about others. Let us celebrate the almost universal witness to the transcendent (in Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and beyond) as providing us with an overwhelming confidence that God is; and let us acknowledge that the doctrine of the Trinity is part of the internal grammar and logic of Christianity, about which we are not permitted complete confidence, but ‘we believe is true’. There is a beauty in the expression ‘we believe is true’. The word ‘believe’ is the recognition of our inevitable creaturely contingency (we are born in families and look at the world in a certain way), while the word ‘true’ embodies the conviction of a discovery about the ultimate nature of reality. Like all traditions, we are invited to have degrees of ‘confidence’ about the assertions that define the worldview of our tradition.

Now the Episcopal Church does attract those who see faith as a journey – one that embraces doubt and questions. Fortunately, the sense of faith as a struggle is also in Scripture. The beauty of the Psalms (our hymn book in Scripture) captures bewilderment with God and the struggle at certain moments with believing. Mark’s Gospel is the untidy Gospel, where the identity of Jesus is mysterious, the one cry from the cross is the cry of despair, and the ending of the Gospel is enigmatic. Add to this witness the reality that God clearly built into creation the sociological reality of knowing being heavily influenced by culture means that we should honor those who want to see the Christian story in different ways. Bishop John Shelby Spong has pioneered an account of faith that
is very alternative. Although Spong’s arguments do not persuade me (and I would be strongly opposed to his theology being officially adopted by the Convention as Episcopal or Anglican Theology), he reassures those who want to stay in the Church while at the same time seeing the drama of the Christian faith in a different way. Given the Biblical witness that understands doubt and given the complexity of knowing, the Episcopal Church needs to recognize that there will be a pluralism of positions even over fundamentals.

However, I want to defend the traditional view of Jesus – a Jesus that shows us what God is like. So we return to our question: why trust the revelation of God in Christ and not a different revelation? And let us modify it a little in the light of the preceding discussion: why do Christians believe it is rational and compelling to believe that it is true that God was in Christ? The answer is found in the Bible. What we find in Scripture is that Jesus lived approximately 2000 years ago and those near Jesus found themselves forced to admit that here was a life that was worth worshipping. The New Testament scholar Larry Hurtado has argued that ‘worship’ of Jesus emerged suddenly and early on, amongst Jewish believers. Much of the New Testament pulsates with the message ‘Jesus is Lord’. There are so many passages that celebrate Jesus (see for example Colossians 1:15-20, Acts 2:36, Philippians 2:1-11). Hurtado explains:

Christians were proclaiming and worshipping Jesus. Indeed, living and dying for his sake, well before the doctrinal/creedal developments of the second century…

Moreover, devotion to Jesus as divine erupted suddenly and quickly, not

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3 For Bishop John Shelby Spong his project is outlined in a range of different works. His book *Christianity must change or die*, where he argues for a non-theistic form of Christianity is perhaps his most radical.
gradually and late, among first-century circles of followers. More specifically, the origins lie in Jewish Christian circles of the earliest years.⁴

The question now becomes this: should we trust those close to Jesus who insist that they have encountered a life worthy of worship? These initial Jewish followers are committed monotheists. They know how important it is to worship God and God alone. They are also making a decision that for almost all the disciples would cost them their lives. It was a ‘literal cross’ which was taken up and carried. And there is, in my view, sufficient pulsating through the New Testament of the transforming and demanding life of Jesus that helps us understand why the early Christians believe that they were in the presence of God.

It is the act of worshipping Jesus that created the process that inevitably had to culminate in the doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation. The act of worshipping a life meant that the life must be God Incarnate; and if God is present in a life, then God must be also – at the same time – operating in different ways elsewhere (God was also sustaining the universe at the same time as God was in Christ dying on the cross). The doctrines of the Incarnation and Trinity are part of the logic of the worship of Jesus.

Naturally, the discovery of these doctrines took centuries. One would worry if they arrived at these complex formulations in haste. Although it is true that political and social factors also played their part (the Emperor Constantine did have an interest in a

⁴ Larry W. Hurtado, Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2003), p.55
peaceful empire), this does not exclude the possibility that truth is being discovered. Political and social factors are part of the story of science, but science is still true.

So why do we trust that the revelation of God is in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus? We do so because we trust the witness of Scripture that the person of Jesus was worthy of worship. And for me, there are sufficient reasons in Scripture to see how those close to Jesus could see that this life was worthy of worship. In addition, for reasons that we will touch on later, we believe that this life is resurrected and still available to us through the Church and in the Sacrament. So we are all being invited to fall in love with Jesus and acknowledge that he is worthy of worship.

Stage two: how can a life be a revelation of God?
The challenge for the Early Church was to explain how a life could be a revelation of God. Muslims and Jews understand entirely how a text can be the ‘Word of God’, but a life is more puzzling. However, Jewish theology and Islamic theology did face the same question as Christians. What precisely is the relationship of the Word of God in the text with the Creator of the World? And the dominant answer in both traditions recognizes that the Word of God must be eternal and must have pre-existed creation. They both argue that anything that is part of God (and surely God’s words must be part of God) cannot be changing and contingent, but must in some sense be part of God’s own eternal existence.
Christians found themselves thinking in a similar way. We inherit from Judaism a conviction that God is the Father of everything that is. The image of Father captures the transcendent source of all being – the creatorial aspect of God. Yet in the life of Jesus, these monotheist Jews found themselves wanting to bow the knee. They saw in the life a complete and definitive disclosure of what God is like.

It was the author of John’s Gospel who saw what was going on. In the powerful prologue, the author explains:

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. … And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father. (John 1: 1, 2, 14)

Where the Father is an image for the aspect of God which creators, the Son is the image for the Eternal Word. Words are the expression of thoughts – they reveal us to others. So the author of John 1 is claiming that Jesus is the very expression of God – the revelation of God to humanity. The Eternal Word (the divine Wisdom – to pick up on another important image from Proverbs) made flesh.

So Christians found themselves talking about the Creator God (the Father) and the Eternal Word made flesh (the Son – Jesus). The next stage is this: how do these past events (Creation and Incarnation) relate to the present? The answer was found in Acts 2 – God sent the Holy Spirit (the aspect of God that makes God continually present) to be
with us. The logic of worshipping a life had forced the Church to talk about the activity of God in three distinct ways. So the doctrine of the Trinity had been discovered.

Each member of the Trinity is involved in the work of the other two. Christians talked of the Son also being involved in creation – because through creation we can discern something of the nature of God. And in so far as creation shows us something about God (i.e. it is revelatory), then the Son is at work in creation. Given that we can see in the present God at work in the miracles of creation, then the Holy Spirit is also at work in creation. So the work of the Father involves both the Son and the Holy Spirit.

So then to the question: how do we know what God is like? The Christian answer is that the Eternal Word of God completely interpenetrated the human life of Jesus so that when we look at the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we can see what God is like. The Word of God for Christians is a life.

Stage three: what does the revelation of God in Christ teach us?

It is precisely because the Word of God, in Christianity, is not a text but a life that we find ourselves handling an adaptable Word. Of course there is an important connection between the Word and the text of Scripture. For after all, it is the Bible that tells us about the Word, which is Jesus. Karl Barth is very helpful at this point. In Volume 1, Part 2, he explores at some length precisely what it means to call the Bible the Word of God. Barth explains:
God is not an attribute of something else, even if this something else is the Bible. God is the Subject, God is Lord. He is Lord even over the Bible and in the Bible. The statement that the Bible is the Word of God cannot therefore say that the Word of God is tied to the Bible. On the contrary, what it must say is that Bible is tied to the Word of God. … If the Church lives by the Bible because it is the Word of God, that means that it lives by the fact that Christ is revealed in the Bible by the work of the Holy Spirit.⁵

For Karl Barth, the primary disclosure of God is the Word of God which is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. For Barth, the Bible becomes the Word as it witnesses to the Word which is Jesus. And the manner in which this occurs is also determined by the Word of God Himself, Barth writes:

‘As to when, where and how the Bible shows itself to us in this event as the Word of God, we do not decide, but the Word of God Himself decides, at different times in the Church and with different men confirming and renewing the event of instituting and inspiring the prophets and apostles to be His witnesses and servants, so that in their written word they again live before us, not as men who once spoke in Jerusalem and Samaria, to the Romans and Corinthians, but as men who in all the concreteness of their own situation and action speak to us here and now.’⁶

For Barth, there is a Trinitarian dynamic at work between the Word of God, which is Jesus, and the Bible, as the Word of God. The Bible through the agency of the Holy Spirit can become an immediate text, confronting a particular moment, with the

⁶ Ibid, p.530-1
disclosure of God, which is the Eternal Word. With this emphasis on the primary Word is the Eternal Word which completely interpenetrates the life of Jesus of Nazareth, we can see that our primary obligation is to read a life – a life, which was very enigmatic.

So what does this mean? It means that our definitive disclosure of what God is like is a poor young man from Nazareth, who took enormous risks as he reached out to include the marginalized – especially women, the poor, and the reviled. He found himself a victim of power – finally dying as a common criminal at the hands of the occupying power. Yet remarkably, the movement he birthed believed that death was not able to hold him. Reports of his resurrection started to circulate and so the church was born.

So what do we know about God? From the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus we know that God is on the side of those who are least fortunate. We know that the love of God is willing to go to any length for the sake of humanity. We know that in our moments of despair, God promises to create hope. We know that we should treat this life as authoritative. We should imitate the ‘words and deeds’ of Jesus of Nazareth.7

Now our obligation as Christians is to recognize the authority of this life in guiding our witness today. This obligation extends to our interpretation of the rest of the Bible. If the Bible is interpreted in such a way to contradict what we ‘read’ from the life, death, and resurrection of the Eternal Word, then we have an obligation to revisit the text of the Bible. Although slavery is instituted in Leviticus and condoned in 1 Timothy, the

7 This is the theme of Richard Burridge’s extremely important forthcoming book Imitating Jesus (Eerdmans 2008).
legitimacy of slavery is clearly incompatible with the disclosure of God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Reading the Qur’an can be difficult, but reading a life is harder. So Christians are, right from the outset, bound to have to live with a pluralism of positions. Although the slave traders are outside the zone of acceptable pluralism, there are a multitude of positions with which the life of Jesus might be compatible. The areas of debate include the following: gratuitous war is clearly unacceptable, but the use of force to create a just peace might be acceptable; exploitative capitalism is clearly wrong, but the use of the profit motive to create an effective system of resource allocation might be acceptable; and life should not be created to be destroyed, but the cultivation of stem cells for the advancement of medical techniques that heal genetic diseases might be appropriate.

Reading a life does have a major advantage over a text. It permits significant flexibility over time. We are imitating the ‘words and deeds’ of Jesus. This exercise starts in the New Testament and we can see how the Church struggles to arrive at the appropriate inclusive position over the Gentiles and the Jewish Law. And so it continues with Augustine and Aquinas.

The movement for Christian thought is to constantly move, to and fro, from the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth (as it flows through the sacraments and life of the Church) to the particularities of each situation. With the Spirit of God constantly making the Eternal Word present to each situation, we can and should allow our faith to

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8 I do of course recognize that reading the Qur’an is difficult. And I am very interested in the various ways in which the Qur’an is interpreted, particularly with the emphasis on those verses which have local significance and those which have more universal significance.
engage with each situation making use of all the resources available to us. The resources flow from our conviction of the three-fold nature of God: a creator who creates every single life and loves each particular life and seeks to disclose truth to those lives; a revealer and redeemer who discloses the nature of God (thereby providing a definitive norm) and also redeems all people; and a Spirit who is constantly making God present and allowing us to see God in new and different ways.

These core convictions are responsible for a theology which is constantly engaging and changing. It might be ironic: but to be orthodox one should be open.

Conclusion

So at the end of this journey where do we end up? First, I am suggesting we define orthodoxy in the way that the Councils did: it is a commitment to the historic creeds. The Fathers were wise in not committing to a particular theory of the atonement or a particular theory of Biblical inspiration. The Fathers wanted to recognize and affirm a legitimate pluralism over these issues. It is for the same reason that there is nowhere in the historic creeds any commitments around sexuality.

Second, our orthodox commitments entail a belief in a disclosure of God in a light which is clear on certain fundamentals, but more opaque on other questions. In addition, what we learn of God in Christ is a certain process around discernment – a process, I shall suggest in the next lecture, which embraces conversation and disagreement.
This, then, sets the stage for the second lecture next week. We shall be reflecting on how and in what ways can the Christian tradition change.

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