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Deviation from the Orthodox

Abstract

Some events that occurred after the Christian movement became the state religion of the Roman Empire can be regarded as one sort of historical revisionism. Theodosius had sanctioned the state persecution of all those who did not uphold the Nicene version of Christianity. This resulted in the loss of many works by those who were deemed unorthodox Christians. For many, the Christian movement bifurcated, then permuted only after the Protestant Reformation. Had it not been for the discovery of some of these so-called unorthodox texts in the twentieth century, we would not have known that alternate views existed even in the distant past. This paper does not argue about Christian doctrines but rather focuses on the deliberate attempt to obliterate some early believers because they had a different interpretation of Christ and his teachings. Perhaps this is comparable to how powerful leaders today use mainstream media to promote their version of the truth and create a diversion from ground reality. Another issue is whether such censorship is justifiable. Had it not been for the unifying endeavours of the early church leaders, there might not have been a Christian community as we know of now. In the same way, if a leader of state does not present a grander-than-life narrative, perhaps there would be more chaos than order. When we weigh in such factors, do they make the effacement of some parts of reality necessary? After all, we are not talking about personal or even social morality, but institutional morality, if there is such a thing. Perhaps promoting a version of truth over another is not condemnable in the larger scheme of things but we need to admit our complicity when this happens.

Keywords: institution, heresies, orthodox, sedition, heteronomy, theonomy, autonomy, fraternity

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Introduction

When the word orthodox is used to describe a theory or practice, it is often meant to suggest that the theory or practice has approval and legitimacy (See Dictionary.com, n.d.). The term orthodox connotes purity and authority (See Encyclopedia.com, n.d.). In contrast, a deviation is a theory or practice that disrupts the status quo (See Merriam-Webster, n.d.). A deviation becomes problematic for orthodoxy. If the orthodox side is a powerful institution or affiliated with one, then a methodical elimination of the deviants can be pursued and has been done so in history. However, the institutional mechanism operates on consent which can be intentional or unintentional. Intentional consent can be described as the support given to an institution by a person who knows the goals of and/or methods used by that institution. Intentional consent could be due to a sense of helplessness or enthusiasm. An unintentional consent could happen when people unreflectively engage themselves with activities that seem mundane, yet are formative to the larger purposes of an institution. It could also occur, due to mistaken beliefs about what the majority might be thinking, as in the case of pluralistic ignorance.

This paper argues that individuals are responsible for the course that an institution takes because the purposes for any institution are established by human agents, who further hold the power to either refine or abolish the original purposes. There is no separate institutional morality apart from the moral agents who make the rules. Even though institutions can become the means for coercion, an institution by itself cannot be morally faulted in case of a trial. An institution refers to “human-made, nonphysical elements – norms, beliefs, organisations and rules” (Greif and Laitin, 2004: 635) that regulate behaviour to achieve pre-determined purposes. To condemn an institution or a few people who run the institution is to miss the point in the same way as when someone wrongly thinks that “esprit de corps” is a type of action that one person can perform alone (Baggini and Fosl, 2010: 80). The existence and function of an institution depend on an interdependent network of individuals.

The analysis starts with two examples of deviation, one from religion and the other from politics. These are heresy and sedition. People charged with heresy and sedition pose a threat to orthodoxy. Heresy was a punishable crime in the middle century in Europe. Sedition is illegal even now in many countries. The misuse of sedition law in India will be mentioned here.

The other half of this paper talks about reconciliatory approaches. Here again, examples are taken from religion and politics, namely theonomy and *bandhuta* respectively. Theonomy stands for the rule of God within the inner being of a person. This is in contrast with theocracy, which is a rule that is exercised by the repre-

sentatives of God (See Random Screenful, 2021). *Bandhuta* means affinity among fellow beings (See Mander, 2019). Its English equivalent is the political ideal of fraternity, without the gendered etymology of the latter.

A Welter of Individuals

“Philip had no sympathy with the individualism that had fostered the art and intellect of Greece but had at the same time disintegrated her social order; ... This said Philip was not a nation but only *a welter of individuals* (emphasis mine) - geniuses and slaves; he would bring the hand of order down upon this turmoil, and make all Greece stand up united and strong as the political centre and basis of the world” (Durant, 2006: 66).

Will Durant goes on to tell us that King Philip knew exactly how to remedy the absence of regulating authority. He would subdue the different factions using military might and deindividuate the population by bringing them under common laws (Durant, 2006). This has been more or less the same strategy employed by ambitious people seeking power and control. They cannot allow criticism, so they will resort to threats.

Below are two ways in which the nonconformists have been harassed.

Heresy

“There is the sin, whereby they deserve not only to be separated from the church by ex-communication, but also to be shut off from the world by death” (See New Advent, n.d.).

When Thomas Aquinas made this statement, being a Christian carried social and political value. The Roman society had become a Christian society, so the state’s judicial system facilitated the judgments of the church. Anyone posing a threat to the cohesion of the Christian community could be awarded the death penalty (See Kramer and Sprenger, 1971).

Before Aquinas, Augustine had eloquently argued how human sins necessitated the existence of an external authority. He believed that some people could only be saved by harsh methods and that even the saved ones required constant discipline. While earlier Christians, like Justin, condemned the Roman Empire as having been sanctioned by fallen angels (Pagels, 1988: 39), Augustine portrayed the same as having been appointed by God (Pagels, 1988: 100). But three centuries before all of this, Christianity did not even exist.

In the first century, Judaea was already under Roman rule. The Roman authorities allowed all religious practices as long as they did not disrupt civil order (See Disney-Hotstar, n.d.). The Jews worshipped at the Jerusalem temple and the Jewish

priests regulated matters of faith (Disney-Hotstar, n.d.). Jesus of Nazareth was a Jew who was unhappy about how his ancestral God was being worshipped. He was vocal about his disapproval. At one time, he even overturned the money changer's table and lashed out at the profit-making business happening within the temple premises. Jesus had also made some claims about himself that were considered outrageous by many Jewish priests. The Jewish authorities made a case against Jesus that he was disrespecting their religious order and disrupting civil peace. They managed to persuade the Roman authorities to crucify him as a state criminal. In this period of history, Jesus was the heretic, and the Jewish priests were orthodox.

Since Jesus did not leave behind any writings of his own, all that is known of Jesus's life mainly comes from the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The significance of selecting these gospels was defended by Irenaeus, and they later gained canonical status in the fourth century (See Hoover, 1992). But in the early Christian communities, there were more than just four of these books on Jesus. These other gospels that did not make it to the official canon were no longer allowed to be printed or circulated.

To have unity, it was felt that all Christians must share common revelatory texts, a single interpretation of those texts, similar rituals, and central leadership. In 312 CE, Constantine embraced Christianity and became the first Christian Roman emperor. Under his supervision, the Nicaea Council was called in 325 CE to settle the differences among Christians. Despite persisting disagreements, a creed was drawn. The Nicene Creed now determined which practice of Christianity was orthodox and which was not (Pagels, 1996 and 2006).

Later under Theodosius, the Nicene version of Christianity was legally declared the state religion of the Roman Empire (Bettenson, 1967: 22). Unorthodox Christians were harassed as heretics and non-Christians were derogatorily labelled as pagans (Anand and Trivedi, 2009: 729). Once the dichotomy of 'us versus them' was created, oppression of heretics and pagans followed (See *The American Ecclesiastical Review*, n.d.). Their civil rights were withdrawn. They were not allowed to hold certain public offices. Some of them had their properties confiscated. No one was legally allowed to form a different church. There was only one true church, namely, the Roman Catholic Church (henceforth RCC). All religious assemblies that were not sanctioned by the RCC were banned. This went on for over a thousand years. More regulations came under the heretical laws such as the prohibition of vernacular translations of the Bible (See *British Library*, n.d.). Anyone who deviated from the orthodox line was first given a chance to recant and whoever was unwilling to do so was punished severely (*British Library*, n.d.).

There was growing dissatisfaction with the abuse of power by the Church and in the sixteenth century a counter-movement, the Protestant Reformation began (See Britannica, n.d.). A large number of Christians left the RCC and formed separate churches. The earliest Protestant churches were named after the founders such as the Lutheran Church or the Calvinist Church. However, intolerance could also be found in the newer churches. The reformers continued to hold that some beliefs were so offensive that force was necessary to deal with them. Two such beliefs that called for capital punishment were the repudiation of the trinity of God and the rejection of infant baptism (Early, 2019: 19; Estep, 1996: 43, 47). Although churches in present times no longer possess much power to get away with violence, doctrinal intolerance is still persistent (See Hindson and Dobson, 1983).

Sedition

“Whoever, by words, either spoken or written, or by signs, or by visible representation, or otherwise, brings or attempts to bring into hatred or contempt, or excites or attempts to excite disaffection towards, the Government established by law in [India], shall be punished with [imprisonment for life], to which fine may be added, or with imprisonment which may extend to three years, to which fine may be added, or with fine” (See Indian Kanon, n.d.).

Section 124-A of the Indian Penal Code (quoted above) is known as the sedition law. It was introduced in India by the British to fortify their domination over the sub-continent. Before Indian independence, this law had been used to arrest prominent figures like Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Mahatma Gandhi. Their crime had been the publication of articles that were critical of the British Raj. Gandhi had called the sedition law “the prince among the political sections of the Indian Penal Code designed to suppress the liberty of a citizen” (See Ramachandran, 2021).

However, post-independence, subsequent Indian governments have still not permanently abolished this law. This is despite the fact that, the political party that both Tilak and Gandhi belonged to, namely the Congress Party, dominated free India for the first fifty years. Many petitions have been filed to revoke the sedition law. On May 11, 2022, the Supreme Court of India directed the Central Government to re-examine the law and disallowed its use until a report was submitted (See Live-law News Network, 2022). But this has not pacified the petitioners who want the law to be abolished and not just paused.

Before its abeyance, the sedition law was an expedient stratagem for Indian political leaders to frustrate dissent. When a political party wins an election, it takes up the mantle of being the representative of the state. This is not unbecoming. But new power-holders forget that they won the election as representatives of the

people. It is not surprising though how identification with the state starts to take precedence over the citizens. Any criticism against the party can now be counted as an unpatriotic act that is punishable by law. The distinction between a government and a state becomes distorted. The sedition law, along with the National Security Act and the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, was instituted in India to curb activities detrimental to the integrity of the nation and its democratic system, but they have been frequently abused by political leaders to silence their critics (See Razvii, 2021). To prevent misuse, the Supreme Court of India had earlier laid down a guideline stating that any-and-all criticism of the government is not sedition (See Sinha, 2021). To count as sedition, the dissenter must also be actively inciting violence and takeover. This guideline has been called the 1962 Kedar Nath ruling. This ruling brought down conviction rates, but unfortunately not the number of arrests. The authorities were well aware that the process is the punishment. An allegation alone became the arrest warrant in many cases. The accused ended up in prison for months without getting any trial and it was also very difficult to get bail (See Razvii, 2021).

Some sedition cases are outright unreasonable. In one instance, around 9000 villagers in Tamil Nadu were charged with sedition for peacefully protesting against the Kudankulam Nuclear Power (See Ramachandran, 2021). Reports show that the use of sedition law had increased since 2014 which also happens to be the year that the Bhartiya Janata Party (henceforth BJP) came to power in many of the federated states (See Hari, 2022). It has been suggested that the BJP wants to portray an indomitable image within India and abroad (See Rej and Sagar, 2019). For this reason, it does not take criticism lightly. Six senior journalists and a member of Parliament were booked under sedition law for tweeting about the death of a farmer during the farmer's protests in 2021 (See Ramachandran, 2021). Several journalists and activists have been ill-treated for reporting on the mismanagement of the Covid pandemic and the mistreatment of Muslims and Dalits in India (See Vijayan and Recchia, 2021; Vice News, 2021).

While in power, the Congress Party, which is also the main opposition of the BJP, was fond of putting the Gandhi surname in front of various government initiatives. There are hundreds of institutes, schemes, stadiums, and awards named after the three key figures of the Gandhi dynasty, namely, Mahatma Gandhi, Indira Gandhi, and Rajiv Gandhi (See Upmanyu, 2016). So, when the BJP government decided to rechristen the Rajiv Gandhi Khel Ratna Award as the Dhyhan Chand Award, it was seen as a progressive move by many because it made more sense to have a sports-person's name in a sports-related affair. However, critics of the government have noted that a similar sound reasoning was overlooked by naming a cricket stadium after

Narendra Modi, despite him not having a career in sports (See Bhatnagar, 2021). They also point out that since there already exists an award named after the eminent hockey player, there must have been other motivations for the rebranding, such as to gradually remove the Gandhi trace from history (Bhatnagar, 2021). The BJP had also neglected Indira Gandhi during the golden anniversary celebration of Bangladesh's independence. Even the President of India, who officially visited Dhaka on that occasion, did not find it necessary to mention that to then Prime Minister of India who had played a crucial role in the creation of Bangladesh (See Hiteshi, 2022).

According to analysts, the BJP is expected to dominate Indian politics for at least another three decades (See The Print, 2022). One observer, Shekhar Gupta credits this optimism to five factors that the BJP is doing right (ibid). These are: ideological cohesion among the members, few defections in the ranks, accountability within the party, meritocracy, and good HR policy.

The first of these factors sits uneasily with quite a several Indians. The BJP could be viewed as a rebranding of an older party called Bhartiya Jan Sangh (henceforth BJS) which was created in 1951. BJS was instituted as a political division of a Hindu cultural body called Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (henceforth RSS). BJS merged with other parties in 1977 to form the Janata Party to counter the policies of Indira Gandhi (ibid). However, this merger was not successful due to the enduring allegiance of the former BJS members toward the RSS. Janata Party was dissolved in 1980 but RSS has continued to maintain political influence through the inception of the BJP in that very year (ibid). The ideology of the RSS has been described as Hindu nationalism, also known as Hindutva.

The RSS has been accused of interpreting Indian history as the struggle of the Hindu rulers against foreign invaders. They aim to remove the footprints of invasion and decolonize the minds of people (See Sharma, 2017). There have been cases of renaming and remodelling of sites that have been suspected by many to be driven by revisionist motivations. To give a few examples, Allahabad has been renamed Prayagraj (See Trivedi, 2018), the practice of officially gifting Taj Mahal replicas was discontinued because it did not 'reflect Indian culture' (See Dhillon, n.d.), the Jallianwala Bagh massacre location was given a 'makeover' (See Shireen, 2021) and statues of two British kings have been replaced with that of an Indian nationalist, Subhash Chandra Bose (See Chaudhury, 2022).

Individual Responsibility

“Every other is an irreducible and unique locus of need and desire. Paradoxically, being attentive to that singularity in every case creates the need to compare them, weigh their needs in relation to one another, and calculate the possibilities of distributing response across them” (Young, 2014: 162).

Marion Iris Young believes that collective action does not diffuse responsibility because each person is a causal agent. She is an advocate for a shared model of responsibility which compels an individual to think of complicity beyond social relations and physical proximity (See Brown and Tomitova, 2004). According to Young, it is a mistake for consumers to disconnect themselves from the workers who produce their needs on the grounds that they are neither related to them nor live near them. This disconnect will have the consequence that, if it was found that the workers had been exploited, the blame will be transferred only to the immediate social conditions and/or to the greedy brand owners who took advantage of it (*ibid*). However, it was also the consumer’s demands that created/sustained the exploitative market. Young’s ethic is essentially global. She would have agreed with Heather Widdows who, in her introduction to global ethics, had written that “In any ethical analysis, it is the globe that constitutes the sphere of concern and thus the needs and perspectives of all global actors are relevant” (Widdows, 2011: 7).

Below are two approaches that emphasize individual responsibility within a larger context.

Theonomy

“A basic duality exists in the human condition of detachment versus saturation, of cynical suspicion versus engagement” (Zimbardo, 2002: 447).

It seems as if it is individuals who desire to establish orthodoxy but once established, orthodoxy becomes an enemy of individuality. According to Paul Tillich, our conscious existence begins within a heteronomy (See Tillich, 1973). We grow up dependent on others. We look at others for guidance, validation, and reproach. But heteronomy can become domineering when the ones who make the laws demand complete obedience. People who are at the top tier of authority claim to have a special insight or privilege. Over time people become dissatisfied with them and begin to assert their individuality. This is the beginning of autonomy.

The autonomous self is untethered. It is self-centred and all its decisions are informed by self-interest. Although independent, the autonomous self fails to appreciate the social dimension of existence. It alienates itself from the larger community and even when it does associate with others, it views others only as means to its selfish ends. The autonomous person may even become the oppressor (See Random

Screenful, 2021). However, there is still a third way in which the individual element and the social element can be harmonised together. This is theonomy.

Theonomy should not be understood as theocracy which is simply heteronomy in the name of God (ibid). Theonomy is the state of being ruled by inner truth and authenticity. God is the law that governs the innermost self and pervades the society from inside out. God desires both personal and universal healing. Theonomy is emulating God who is ultimate compassion. But theonomy needs to be constantly tended by the individual. Otherwise, it could degenerate to heteronomy (ibid).

How can we stay vigilant? While describing our malleability to external influences, social psychologist, Philip Zimbardo believes that we can adopt some habits to live more consciously (Zimbardo, 2008: 451-456). These habits are as follows -

1. Acknowledging genuine mistakes. There could be some past decisions or associations that cause us embarrassment and even remorse in light of more experience. We need to analyse them and try to understand why we made those judgments when we made them and who was affected by our actions.
2. Being mindful all the time. We need to learn to be in the moment and appreciate the novelty of every new moment. We have to be willing to test the validity of our inherent belief systems. We should also constantly evaluate the intentions of others. Our worldviews need to be dynamic.
3. Taking back control over self. We need to be honest and accept that no matter the circumstance, we reserve the freedom to either give in to pressure or to choose otherwise. This will increase our sense of accountability and we will make more responsible choices.
4. Celebrating individuality. We should not define ourselves or others solely in terms of institutional membership. Too much emphasis on institutional roles can make an individual invisible and expendable. We should not let this happen to ourselves or others.
5. Having a discerning attitude. A position of power does not guarantee infallibility. We should be prepared to contest those who abuse power. Any declaration of authority must necessarily undergo review.
6. Weighing the price of acceptance. Whenever conformity leads to inner conflict, we should have the courage to step out of it. Different groups will demand different loyalties. We need to stay resolved about our moral priorities.
7. Watching out for manipulative settings. We are constantly surrounded by images, sounds, and texts. These have been thoughtfully designed to achieve a purpose which is to orient us, the audience in a certain way. We need to check our impulsive behaviours.

8. Preserving our identity through time. We need to honour our past commitments and provide explanations when we fail to do so. Since commitments entail liability, we need to think through every alliance we enter at the present moment and view it from a future perspective.
9. We should always retain our basic rights. Our basic rights ensure our dignity. Any ruler who demands their suspension as a necessary sacrifice will not give it back voluntarily. We may be led to believe that our safety lies in the constant observance of our movements and the movements of others. But we have to also think about how the same data can be used against us.
10. Embracing heroism. We cannot always expect others to save us from unjust systems. So, we must take the initiative to reduce the influence of an undesirable system upon our lives. We should also not wait on others to do something about unjust systems but do something ourselves.

Bandhuta

“*Bandhuta* is a beautiful, iridescent word derived from Sanskrit, reflecting the idea that we are all bound to and with each other” (See Mander, 2019).

Harsh Mander is a human rights activist who initiated the “*Karwan e Mohabbat*” or Caravan of Love journeys (ibid). Together with other activists and volunteers, Mander visits the family of hate crime victims. His actions are inspired by the journeys that Gandhi took during the tumultuous times surrounding the partition of India. Gandhi believed that he could appeal to the senses of the people to stop their communal fights. He was successful at halting the Hindu-Muslim riots in Bengal in 1947. He then went on to make the same effort in Delhi where Muslims had been targeted by the fleeing Sikhs and Hindu families from the recently created Pakistan.

Mander also testifies to the foresight of the First Minister of Law and Justice of India, B. R. Ambedkar, for having made provisions for the principle of *Bandhuta* in the Indian Constitution (ibid). *Bandhuta* is a prerequisite for the pursuit of all social and political ideals. Recalling one of his visits, Mander says that in the aftermath of the Gujarat riots of 2002, many Muslims complained how their Dalit and Adivasi neighbours could suddenly turn on them. Mander observed that such a situation had occurred because both groups did not share a sense of solidarity in times of peace. Dalits and Adivasis belong to the lower strata of Hindu society. They are even prohibited to draw water from a common well that higher Hindu castes use. The Muslims had been witness to this discrimination all those years, but they chose to remain distant. Being a former civil servant, Mander admitted that he used to think that all socio-economic and political problems could be solved by the mech-

anism of the state. But now, he was convinced that no amount of legislation could create a sense of mutual concern. *Bandhuta* has to arise from within, and it can only be implemented by collective and recurring practice.

Conclusion

We need influential institutions. They address specific concerns conducive to our well-being. For instance, while political institutions administer our tangible needs, religious institutions aim to provide the intangible ones. But institutional corruption can happen and can get worse if individual members are not morally alert. Institutional mechanisms can override our moral sensibilities and make us do terrible things if we adopt a narrow sense of responsibility that only cares about the near and dear ones. This mindset can be exploited by power-seeking people to keep us antagonised towards some groups or detached from the sufferings of certain sections.

But we can become more accountable by examining how our decisions can affect the balance of global justice and injustice. On the world stage, we unavoidably participate either as beneficiaries or as victims. For this reason, we must be willing to deviate from the orthodox when necessary.

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Odstupanje od pravovjerja

Sažetak

Neki događaji koji su se dogodili nakon što je kršćanski pokret postao državna religija Rimskog Carstva mogu se smatrati jednom vrstom povijesnog revizionizma. Teodozije je sankcionirao državni progon svih onih koji nisu podržavali nicejsku verziju kršćanstva. To je rezultiralo gubitkom mnogih djela od strane onih koji su se smatrali neortodoksnim kršćanima. Za mnoge, kršćanski pokret se razdvaja, zatim se mijenja tek nakon protestantske reformacije. Da nije bilo otkrića tih takozvanih neortodoksnih tekstova u dvadesetom stoljeću, ne bismo znali da postoje alternativni pogledi čak i u dalekoj prošlosti. Ovaj rad ne raspravlja o kršćanskim doktrinama, već se usredotočuje na namjerni pokušaj da se se bace u zaborav rani vjernici jer su imali drugačije tumačenje Krista i njegova učenja. Možda je to usporedivo s tim kako moćni vođe danas koriste glavne medije za promicanje svoje verzije istine i stvaranje odvratanja pozornosti od stvarnosti. Drugo je pitanje je li takva cenzura opravdana. Da nije bilo ujedinjenih nastojanja ranih crkvenih vođa, možda ne bi bilo kršćanske zajednice kakvu poznajemo sada. Isto tako, ako vođa države ne predstavi narativ veći od života, bude više kaosa nego reda. Kada odvagnemo takve čimbenike, opravdavaju li oni eliminaciju nekih dijelova stvarnosti? Uostalom, ne govorimo o osobnom ili čak društvenom moralu, već o institucionalnom moralu, ako takvo što postoji. Možda promicanje jedne verzije istine nad drugom nije osuđujuće u većoj shemi stvari, ali moramo priznati svoje sudioništvo kada se to dogodi.

Ključne riječi: institucija, hereze, pravovjerje, pobuna, heteronomija, teonomija, autonomija, bratstvo