

## Orthodoxy vs. Conformity<sup>1</sup> by Gabriel Marcel

It's not without serious apprehension that I've agreed to express myself here, very briefly, on a theme that certainly has a central importance for me, but which a person can't treat without having the feeling of walking on a thin ridge between precipices. For one thing, there are affirmations that are singularly intimidating to the one who formulates them, because they force him to distinctly recognize how unworthy he is to make them. For another, it's almost impossible, in a few pages, not to stir up rather serious misunderstandings, and especially not to risk scandalizing one reader or another, without having any way to furnish them, later on, with the appeasements they have a right to.

“When we say, about any problem whatsoever, ‘We Catholics,’ we're very close to going beyond the borders of Catholicism; we've almost ceased to think Catholically.” The remarks that follow will revolve around this assertion, perhaps a bit paradoxical, which figures in one of my own books. Perhaps I will make myself better understood by saying that, for me, it's about dissociating, as far as possible, two notions that we all run the risk of mixing up—I mean orthodoxy on one hand and conformity on the other.

It seems to me that we lose sight of [*nous laissons échapper*] the essential thing about orthodoxy when we don't see anything in it other than the fact of maintaining correct opinions about matters of dogma. Orthodoxy is an absolute fidelity, in the order of affirmation, to the Word made flesh; it's the fidelity of an adhesion or a response; it's incarnated in the *Credo* that is said every hour of the day in every place by the voice of the Universal Church, in every man of faith to the degree that he participates in this living body. “Nothing more strangely indicates an enormous and silent evil of modern society,” wrote Chesterton,

than the extraordinary use which is made nowadays of the word “orthodox.” In former days the heretic was proud of not being a heretic. It was the kingdoms of the world and the police and the judges who were heretics. He was orthodox. He had no pride in having rebelled against them; they had rebelled against him. . . . The man was proud of being orthodox, was proud of being right. . . . He was the centre of the universe; it was round him that the stars swung. . . . But a few modern phrases have made him boast of it. He says, with a conscious laugh, “I suppose I am very heretical,” and looks round for applause. The word “heresy” not only means no longer being wrong; it practically means being clear-

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<sup>1</sup> Translated by Michial Farmer.

headed and courageous. The word "orthodoxy" not only no longer means being right; it practically means being wrong.<sup>2</sup>

This remark of Chesterton's is even more appropriate today than it was some twenty years ago. It would be easy to show that some religious philosophies, even some Christian philosophies, of our time have come to treat heterodoxy as a positive value. This is possible only through a fundamental error that—we must say it aloud—lets go of [*laisse échapper*] the essential thing about Christianity, extinguishes, in fact, that revealed content without which it ceases to be a religion and degenerates, not even into a philosophy, but into a bloodless and inconsistent ethics.

Orthodoxy is fidelity to the word of God. But this amounts to saying that this word loses its meaning and its power of application as soon as we move away from the supernatural order that is the plane of incarnation. Certainly, we hear talk about, for example, Marxist orthodoxy, but only insofar as Marx is, if I may say so, made superhuman [*surhumanisé*] and his thought is treated not as doctrine but as absolute Message or as Revelation—which is obviously absurd and even contradictory, since the very idea of such a Message or Revelation is incompatible with the materialist content that Marxism promotes. And the further we get from the zone of prophecy, real or usurped, to ensconce ourselves in the domain of impersonal science, the more rigorously impossible it becomes to talk about orthodoxy, and also, of course, about heresy.

A conformity, whatever it is—intellectual, aesthetic, political—is a submission to a certain slogan [*mot d'ordre*] emanating not from a person but from a group that presents itself as incarnating what *must be* thought, what *must be* appreciated, in a particular country, at a precise moment in history, but which refrains, of course, from recognizing the indication of relativity that affects every historical modality of knowledge or taste.

Contrary to what was claimed by a sophisticated philosophy of essence which grafted itself, over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, onto positive science—to which it is, to tell the truth, nothing but a parasite—it's absurd to see moral conformity in the exercise of virtue, because a virtue worthy of the name, whether it's practiced by a believer or not, is not the mechanical execution of an order, but the proper act of liberty.

Moral conformity is found in those who practice some virtue only because it—or, more often, its simulacrum—is in vogue in the milieu they belong to, and more particularly in those who set the tone for it. Nowadays, when we talk about "right-thinkers," when that phrase is used in the ironic and pejorative way we're familiar with, it's assuredly this moral conformity we're aiming at. Two important thoughts present themselves to reflection.

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<sup>2</sup> Chesterton, *Heretics*, chapter 1.

In the first place, nothing ever ultimately permits us to make pronouncements about the reasons for which such and such a person practices such and such a virtue, since these reasons are usually indiscernible even to himself; we cannot know if, behind what seems to us a simple submission to trends [*usages*], there doesn't hide a moral spontaneity where the soul expresses itself.

For another thing—and this seems *essential* to me—from the moment I denounce “right-thinking” in another person, I’m basically installing myself as his judge, thus infringing on one of the major precepts of the Gospel: I am going forth as a Pharisee, since I’m implicitly claiming to be a “better thinker,” free from the mediocre constraints that, as I would have it, shackle the other person’s conduct. Let’s not remain in the arid spheres of abstraction any longer than we have to: It seems to me very clear that in many left-wing Catholics who don’t shy away from taunting right-wing Catholics, treating them like “right-thinkers” and whitewashed sepulchers, we see a reverse-conformity which strongly risks very quickly degenerating into conformity, full stop. Because of the terrible Spanish conflict that’s been convulsing the world and our consciences for more than two years, we see two opposite theses squaring off against each other, both of them categorically formulated: “We Catholics have to put our hope in [*former des vœux pour*] General Franco and in those who want to liberate Spain from Marxist control”—“We Catholics have to take the side of those who refuse to deliver their country over to a dictator supported by Moroccan mercenaries and the fascist powers.” We must never admit that, from the Catholic or Christian point of view, a temporal cause retains an absolute value abstracted from the means used to serve it. Even if we admit that this distinction of means from ends can be accepted in the political order—and even in this domain, there are still things that profoundly wound the conscience—it is, on the contrary, the essence of Christianity to absolutely refuse it. I’ll go so far as to claim that when right-wing and left-wing Catholics face off about the Spanish conflict, it is in reality two conformities that are clashing, each of them extending a slogan emanating from some publication that, day after day, fuels and reinforces the preconceived opinions of its readers. But a drama like the one playing out in the Iberian peninsula has a complexity that goes beyond any of the schematic ideas formed of it by poorly informed readers who are in every case fed by tendentious news, so much so that a seriously motivated stance—that is, a stance not built on emotion [*non passionnelle*], can be regarded as practically impossible. How not to conclude, as paradoxical as it may seem, that if Catholicism is above all a *demand for universality*, our duties as Catholics is to understand first that there is doubtless no sense here of wanting to think *as Catholics*; but that it is simply, in the presence of a question that mobilizes the best and the worst in us, about using, as much as possible, a critical mind [*un esprit critique*—often discredited these days in the name of a erroneous and

simplistic conception of intuition--and secondly, of not divesting ourselves of either justice or charity, outside of which there is nothing but partisan violence.

I know by experience that an attitude like this is ungrateful and contrary to the very slope of our nature. What's more, the temptation is almost invincible, it seems to me, for a Catholic more than for anyone else, to organize his convictions into a seemingly coherent whole, the elements of which support one another. There are two reasons for this fact: on the one hand, it's a means of conferring some solidity to the parts that are, of themselves, the weakest of all; on the other, this need to systematize responds to the concern of presenting a compact and unified front to the adversary—a unified front that we believe is susceptible to intimidation. And thus it's totally natural that conformity in every domain is presented as the pure and simple prolonging of orthodoxy. Nevertheless, it's just a simple optical illusion; the effective consequences always risk being disastrous. A contamination cannot fail to occur, in virtue of which orthodoxy itself is treated as religious conformity, thus seemingly becoming vulnerable [*passible*] to all the criticisms to which any submission to a slogan is exposed. It would be easy to show that this is true in every domain, for example, in the scientific order. Saying that a Catholic as such is obligated to take a position against the law of evolution or against Einstein's conceptions is to dangerously forget the absolute incommensurability that exists between the transcendent order—by relationship to which he is situated in his quality of fidelity—and the zone, narrow to be sure, but autonomous—where positive knowledge is developed. Nothing can be more fallacious than the idea of a continuity of right and fact between the invariables of Faith and such and such a conception (essentially relative and revisable in itself) in which positive science is incarnated at a given moment; and nothing would be more imprudent, I'd add, than some attempt to exploit a physical or biological subject, isolated from its context, by unduly extrapolating its results for the purpose of apologetics.

But in so doing, aren't we led to dig a ditch [*creuser un hiatus*] between the order of Faith on the one side and thought, and even life itself, on the other? It's here especially, I think, that we must try to dissipate every equivocation.

How many times have we heard unbelievers declare, not without disdain, "You Christians, you begin with a truth that's entirely given, and you don't stand on your own two feet [*vous n'avancez pas sans lisières*]; that amounts to saying that, in the game of knowledge and life, you're playing with loaded dice." This accusation wouldn't be justified [*motivée*] unless we began by admitting that orthodoxy inevitably gives way to conformity. That's precisely what I, for my part, contest without hesitation. A certain discontinuity is thus required for us to be able to manifest the freedom that makes us men. Still, we must clarify the nature of that discontinuity.

Everyone knows the profound distinction that M. Bergson has proposed, in *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, between closed and open morality. The former, closed morality, belongs to a being who is one with the society he belongs to; he and it are absorbed together in the same task of individual and social conservation. It is therefore supposed to be immutable. The other one is a push, a demand to move [*une exigence de mouvement*]. The morality of the Gospel is essentially that of the open soul: “The act by which the soul opens out broadens and raises to pure spirituality a morality enclosed and materialized in ready-made rules.”<sup>3</sup> Open morality is expressed [*se traduit*] by an ensemble of calls thrown at our consciences by the people who represent what’s best in humanity. I believe that Bergson’s philosophy must be here stretched beyond the boundaries of ethics: not only is authentic Christian thought the open thought *par excellence*—we can say that it denies itself as such insofar as it is closed—but we can also believe that orthodoxy, understood in its truth, roots the conditions in the supernatural, which allows it to unfold the vastest and most unlimited horizons in the face of human knowledge and action.

If it is thus, what I said a moment ago about the discontinuity between the order of faith and that of experience demands to be completed, or more exactly, counterbalanced. Certainly, there can be no question of freeing, in any way whatsoever, some revealed content from corollaries which would participate, to the same degree of certainty and which would concern, for example, science or politics, taken in their temporal expressions. But on the other hand, what is true is that the one who lives in the light of Christ and his Promise finds himself, by that very fact, oriented in such a way as to better seize, not abstractly and theoretically but *hic et nunc*, the conditions of truth and of just action. But this remains exact only inasmuch as his fidelity does not degenerate into that self-complacency, that self-sufficiency, that self-satisfaction that belong to the Pharisee—to that Pharisee whose presence each of us will, with a bit of attention, recognize at the depths of his being.

What ends up distorting everything in the unbeliever or the heretic—at least in the one who is proud of his heresy [*qui s’enorgueillit de son hérésie*—is the idea that an open mind owes it to itself to remain in suspense about the ultimate facts [*les instances dernières*] of human existence. Indecision about the essential thus appears as the mark and the privilege of an enlightened mind; sometimes they go even further and admit, more or less expressly, that negation alone can satisfy the deepest longing [*le vœu profond*] of a free being, and that affirmation is a prison. These postulates, which seem puzzling, at the very least, when reflection reveals them, are in reality implicated in so-called free-thinking; and long analysis would be

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<sup>3</sup> Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, translated by R. Ashley Audra and Cloudesley Brereton, chapter 1.

necessary to show how they've been able not so much to impose themselves on the clear conscience as to insidiously impregnate the very mental tissue of so many of our contemporaries; but what is obvious is that orthodoxy, thought and willed in its truth, creates the spiritual climate thanks to which affirmation can spread itself out most freely. "If we want reform," declares Chesterton, "we must adhere to orthodoxy." For, he adds, "Men who begin to fight the Church for the sake of freedom and humanity end by flinging away freedom and humanity if only they may fight the Church."<sup>4</sup> Recent events project a clarifying light on the connection that links orthodoxy truly understood to the safeguard of what I'd gladly call the *positive* in humanity—that positive element against which the new masters of our drawn-and-quartered Europe all incite violence. And it is fair and even necessary to add that if, in Germany, a fraction of Protestantism furnishes a heroic resistance worthy of all our admiration to an official church infected by neo-paganism, it's to the very extent that it has remained faithful to the Word of Christ—that is, the extent to which it has remained, despite everything, connected by its living roots to the orthodoxy that it appears to have repudiated.

Perhaps, moreover—and it's this point that I'd like to insist on in conclusion—perhaps it's in what concerns interdenominational relations that we must most carefully protect ourselves from that latent Pharisaism to which we're susceptible in a permanent way whenever we interpret orthodoxy not as a fidelity but as a superior conformity.

I don't know any controversies vainer and, in the final analysis, more irritating for the spirit [*l'esprit*] than those that periodically set against each other Catholics and Protestants who are endowed with equal good will and an equal desire for mutual comprehension, and who are trying to take stock of their agreements and disagreements. From the moment the Catholic declares to the Protestant that he, the Catholic (or more exactly, the Church) is in possession of the global truth that the Protestant has only in fragments infected with error—from the moment, briefly, that he radically denies being on the same level as his opponent—the conditions of any debate whatsoever are found to be broken, and it's almost impossible for an encounter that is often engaged under apparently favorable auspices not to end on a bitter, disheartening impression, an irremediable misunderstanding. To be sure, this is not absolutely inevitable, in theory or in fact; but at the same time, this impossibility of Christians understanding one another has something so scandalous about it in regard to the Gospel that we're obligated to oppose it with the irreducible, ultimate refusal that evil in all its forms demands from us. In fully drawing out the distinction that I've tried to establish between orthodoxy and conformity, it seems to me that we can catch a glimpse of the path down which we must walk.

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<sup>4</sup> Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, chapter 8.

In R.P. Congar's book on *Ecumenism*, so admirable in so many ways, we find this intrepid sentence, marked with a heroic evangelism: "When we go against someone, even when we go against error, we do not do it quite Catholically." As it is, this affirmation can be offensive [*peut heurter*], and I see perfectly well the objections that it might stir up. But what seems incontestable to me is that, in this register, it's not merely permitted for the Catholic—to tell the truth, it's required of him—to categorically take a position against *claims* [*prétentions*]. It's to the extent that a heresy claims to be a truth that it becomes condemnable. Only—and this is the whole problem—it's still necessary to oppose a claim with something other than an inverse claim or an affirmation that can be assimilated by the other into an opposing claim. And it seems to me that it's Charity, and Charity alone, that transcends and refutes; and that this is precisely the fundamental lesson of the New Testament on every plane. If this is how it is, Orthodoxy can't be recognized as such by this Other, by this Stranger [*Étranger*] we're looking at with anguish, without the light of the plenary Charity that Orthodoxy is obligated to radiate, without which it would not be the Absolute Fidelity that is its very essence. Couldn't we say, then, that every breach of Charity on the part, I won't say of the Church, but of those who have the formidable task of acting in its name, constitutes an attack on orthodoxy itself, in this very precise sense that such a breach tends to make orthodoxy appear, in the eyes of the other, as a claim, instead of a continued witness [*témoignage*]? That in this measure it is a betrayal of her and of the Christ to whom she attests? In this way, I can see a condemnation, in the very name of Catholicism, of the kind of sighing and disdainful condescension that so many among us show [*témoignent*] to our separated brothers, which also expresses itself by a "we Catholics" that is opposed to a "you poor blind others." The dialectic that I tried to identify in right-thinkers a moment ago turns up again here. Election, in the Christian sense of that word, is measured, above all else, in the extra responsibilities that the person who is its object incurs. This seems terribly applicable to the Catholic as such. If it's true that he's given to think about the heretic quite differently than the heretic is given to think about the Catholic, it's on the condition of his despoiling himself of everything that could resemble the feeling of superiority, of privilege, of a possession—on the contrary, he must hone in himself the awareness of his personal deficiency and his obligations toward this heretic; he must take on himself the weight of his errors, quite far from imputing a crime to him and congratulating himself in a Pharisaical way for being marvelously exempt from it. How can we not remember that our Christian condition makes witnesses [*des témoins*] of us? We only testify [*témoignerons*] to orthodoxy—that is, to Christ—by that humility that must not be an attitude but the recognition of a real and ineluctable situation; but let's also not forget that it's not in our power not to testify at all; we can, on the other hand, testify against our Master and

increase the number of those who, each day, repeat his Crucifixion. The error of every conformity is believing that one can insert a median term between these two testimonies, between this Yes and this No in which every spiritual destiny is crystallized, outside of which there is room for nothing except the inconsistent clouds of opinion. But these vapors are lost in the night, when the sun doesn't absorb them.