

## Orthodoxy: Aversions and Conversions

Todd Cronan and Charles Palermo

There is of course wide consensus not only that tolerance is something worth pursuing in a democratic society but that it may be the point of a democratic society. Orthodoxy, whatever it is, is intolerant towards difference. Why? Because orthodoxy is not just being correct or right about something but also accepting the *consequences that must follow* from that rightness. It is to follow through on the implications of something being right. And it is not just an implication, but part of the meaning of orthodoxy, that others who disagree are wrong. Does it follow, then, that those in the wrong be corrected and shown the right way? Is that one of the basic consequences of orthodoxy?

Orthodoxy, from the Greek ὀρθοδοξία (*orthodoxia*) means “correct belief,” or “right opinion.” Even the definition is at odds with widespread values. How can a belief be correct? Isn’t it in the nature of opinions to be different, not right? Consider, for example, the role orthodoxy plays in art. Does it even make sense to speak of orthodoxy when it comes to making or understanding of artworks? Isn’t it precisely the case that artworks, by their nature, defeat the kinds of claims made on behalf of political, social, aesthetic orthodoxy? That the rules—the demands, necessities, orders, canons, academic norms—that bear on our lives and artistic production, typically without our consent, are frequently altered and sometimes challenged by the work of art. Isn’t that art’s strongest, its political, dimension?

Consider Kant’s basic claim in the *Critique of Judgment* that judgments of beauty are “not mediated by concepts.” All of the lawful conceptualizing that happens in our rational and practical lives gets bracketed, at least momentarily, when we come to the work of art. And yet the *Critique of Judgment* is anything but a study in the appreciation of difference. The lack of conceptual foundation for an aesthetic judgment is in fact the precondition for the orthodoxy of claims about the beautiful. Kant’s intolerance of difference is the theme of the final section of part I of the *Critique of Judgment* (§22). The section is about the “necessity of the universal assent that is thought in a judgment of taste.”<sup>1</sup> It is, Kant insists, a “subjective” necessity but one that is nonetheless “represented as objective.” Aesthetic judgment is what Kant inimitably describes as a “subjective universal.” The phrase is meant to sound and feel paradoxical. This is not a law handed to one from outside, rather it is a law that the perceiver makes—based in experience. And once it is made it has consequences for the perceiver.

Kant opens §22 as follows: “In all judgments by which we describe anything as beautiful, we tolerate no one else being of a different opinion, and in taking up this position we do not rest our judgment upon concepts, but only on our feeling.” The idea is meant to stop readers short. Kant seems to be saying this: One has a feeling about the world (here provoked by a work of art), and this feeling is not only right for me but right for others, as well. He said as much in passing in §7 where he defined the difference between the agreeable and the beautiful. As for the agreeable—what one likes or does not like—“no one cares about that.”<sup>2</sup> But for the beautiful, it “demands” others agree with one’s

judgment. “He blames them if they judge differently, and denies them taste, which he still requires of them as something they ought to have.”<sup>3</sup> Kant contends, we expect that everyone “*ought* to agree with” our judgment of the beautiful, but “not that every one *will* fall in with our judgment.” And it is this distinction, between should and will, that raises a crucial question for the problem of orthodoxy. What does one do about others who either don’t agree or have not yet had a chance to agree with you because they are unaware of the truth? What follows from our intolerance toward those “of a different opinion”? Must one *convert* them to the truth? What does it mean, exactly, to convert someone? Obviously the stakes of conversion in art and in life (or, say, in religion) are wildly different, but perhaps there is a common bond between aesthetic and religious conversion?

Conversion does appear to be the stakes of orthodoxy, where orthodoxy turns into praxis. If you are committed to orthodoxy you are committed to the necessity of something like conversion. Undoubtedly, this is both the least fashionable and most essential problem of being orthodox. If you do not accept difference of opinion on a matter, then you must regard such difference as untenable. That is, there is the unmistakable suggestion (if not demand) that you will insist that the other alter his or her view of the world. Again, everything comes down to *how* you alter someone else’s view of the world. Violence is the most obvious and most obviously wrong mode of conversion. Typically, violence can only change what others profess and leave what they believe untouched—because it doesn’t address itself to the belief at all; only to the professing.

Orthodoxy seems at once a defining problem of the day and totally irrelevant. Defining, because we presume Al-Qaeda, Al Shabaab, Boko Haram, Islamic State to be exemplary of authoritarian applications of orthodoxy. Some, of course, would add reactionary Israeli communities or Christian “fundamentalists” in the U.S. to this mix. Such groups define in the minds of many what orthodoxy entails. One supposes that religion, as a way of life, inevitably leads to violence and hatred toward unbelievers. Liberal, democratic, tolerant, Western, *anti*-orthodox societies seem, if not the solution to the problem, the right alternative. In other words, for any secular society, orthodoxy feels not only foreign but wrong, if only in the haziest terms. (Just ask an undergraduate at our academic institutions what they think of orthodoxy—answer: blank stare.)

But what if both sides have this wrong? That is, what if the “terrorist” groups are as *unorthodox* as their “democratic” enemies, because they coerce professions of orthodoxy rather than shared belief, whereas pluralist societies vitiate the idea of orthodoxy by reducing disagreements (about doctrine or anything else) to differences (of identity, especially)? One might argue, further still, that the shared failure of “permissive” liberal democracy and “fundamentalist” terrorists is that, by their actions, they fail in symmetrical ways to inhabit their beliefs—the false leftists by insisting that the people with whom they claim to disagree must be treated as if they were right, after all; the fundamentalists by revealing, in the very fact of their campaigns against those who disagree with them, that being right isn’t *enough* for them. Aggressive fundamentalists, on such a critique, feel compelled to defeat those who do not agree with them because they need to eradicate a point of view that is ultimately more compelling for them than the one they espouse.

Some of these issues have been dealt with recently by Slavoj Žižek. Žižek distinguishes between what he calls “authentic fundamentalists” and the “perverted Moral Majority fundamentalists”—he includes Muslim terrorists here along with Christian

“fundamentalists”—in terms of their relation to the Other. An authentic fundamentalist is defined by his or her “indifference” toward unbelievers, those who are “centered on their own world and not bothered by what goes on out there among ‘them.’” The Moral Majority fundamentalist, on the other hand, “is always haunted by the ambiguous attitude of horror/envy with regard to the unspeakable pleasures in which the sinners engage.”<sup>4</sup> According to Žižek, “authentic fundamentalists DO NOT ENVY their neighbors their different *jouissance*.”<sup>5</sup> From this Žižek draws a “radical” conclusion:

Moral Majority fundamentalists and tolerant multiculturalists are two sides of the same coin: they both share a fascination with the Other. In the Moral Majority, this fascination displays the envious hatred of the Other’s excessive *jouissance*, while the multiculturalist tolerance of the Other’s Otherness is...sustained by a secret desire for the Other to remain “other,” not to become too much like us. In contrast to both these positions, the only truly tolerant attitude towards the Other is that of the authentic radical fundamentalist.<sup>6</sup>

Žižek affirms the Amish and Tibetan Buddhists as instances of the “authentic” pursuit of orthodoxy by virtue of their indifference to the Other. Utterly gripped by their own beliefs, for the true believer, unbelievers are as though invisible. Žižek boldly asks whether “terrorist fundamentalists, be it Christian or Muslim, [are] truly fundamentalists?” The defining feature of someone grounded in belief, according to Žižek, is the “absence of resentment and envy, the deep indifference towards the non-believers’ way of life. Since they really believe they found their way to Truth, why should they feel threatened by non-believers, why should they envy them?”<sup>7</sup>

But even if we are persuaded by the critique of false orthodoxy, can we accept the vision of indifference that defines its alternative. Recall that for Kant, once a judgment of beauty has been rendered, one would “tolerate no one else being of a different opinion.” Recall too that he is talking about art, not religion. On Žižek’s terms (if we shift them toward art), art-believers would separate themselves into camps—modernist, postmodernist, antimodernist—and remain indifferent to those unbelievers who admire other tendencies (not a counterfactual proposal, of course). But maybe orthodox notions of art and religion share something in their attitude toward conversion, one defined neither by violence, tolerance nor indifference.

In the most obvious way, a true believer may be expected to seek to convert others to his or her beliefs, just because he or she sincerely takes them to be true, or (like Žižek’s Moral Majority) one may demonstrate the inadequacy of one’s conviction by seeking to suppress violently a way of life whose attractions one finds too compelling to tolerate. Similarly, one might live one’s conviction by demonstrating one’s indifference to others’ beliefs and ways of life (Žižek’s Amish and Tibetan Buddhist), or one might demonstrate one’s lack of conviction by one’s permissive defense of what others do and believe (Žižek’s liberal pseudo-leftist). That is, it is hard to tell by the alleged believer’s position on conversion and tolerance whether the believer’s conviction is full.

Another way to put this might be to ask what has happened, between Kant and Žižek, to the normative dimension—the *ought*—of judgment? Which is to say: one might ask upon reaching this impasse, how is one to approach conversion? How and whether the sincere holder of a belief might actually and rightly undertake to convince someone else to

change his or her beliefs? Again, the problem is similar, whether we're talking about aesthetic judgments or religious convictions. Reasons and evidence work well for some things. Presumably, enough evidence will eventually wash ashore to convince even the most committed climate-change denier. But reasons and evidence will never bear directly on aesthetic judgment unless we radically change (do away with) our sense of what aesthetic judgment is. The same goes for religious faith: if it were based on evidence and reasons, it would cease to answer to our idea of faith. It is not an accident that miracles, to take one example of a phenomenon that calls on faith, need a space beyond the reach of reasons. The irrelevance of coercion in either matter should be obvious. No one seriously accepts a profession of faith made in the face of an auto-da-fé or social pressure or a testament of aesthetic appreciation made in the effort to win approval, join a consensus, or bolster one's claim to distinction. (Doubtless all of these things happen, but if you believe that's all there is to religious or aesthetic conviction, you don't believe in religious or aesthetic conviction. In which case, we hope you'll spare us your judgments in these matters.)

Let's say, then, that our judgments, our convictions, our conversions, in matters of art and religion—regions where both reasons and coercion are irrelevant—must be underwritten by something else. The ancient name for that other thing—that force which is neither reason nor coercion—is authority. So what is authority? What does it look like now?

In a recent book, one of us addressed precisely this problem. Charles Palermo's *Modernism and Authority: Picasso and His Milieu around 1900* considers the predicament of the modern artist in a world that has lost the power to support orthodoxy in aesthetic judgment. Further, it advances the thesis that the modern undermining of religious orthodoxy offered itself to at least some *fin-de-siècle* artists and writers as a way of thinking about the difficulty of establishing the kind of authority in a work of art that aesthetic judgment (on an account like Kant's) requires. Another way to put that would be to ask, what does it mean, under modernism, for a work of art to compel conviction? What kinds of conditions and limits determine its power to convince us, to compel our belief in its rightness and our acceptance of the consequences it implies?

If these don't sound like relevant questions, that is largely because the crisis of authority, and therefore of orthodoxy, that faced Pablo Picasso, Guillaume Apollinaire, and their friends has progressed still further. In our day, "question authority" is more than a bumper-sticker. It's orthodoxy itself. In our pluralistic moment, in which strength of mind is almost synonymous with the refusal of authority, conviction—true conviction, strong enough to compel consequences—seems remote.

And yet, one finds oneself reluctant to dismiss all assertions of authority so easily. Consider an example—a short quotation from a little piece of journalistic writing on the occasion of Nelson Mandela's death. We hold it up here to give a sense of a current, vernacular use of the concept of authority, which nevertheless manages to put it in relation to the issues we have been considering:

Much has been written of the "Madiba magic" that brought peace to South Africa, while others have described him as a secular saint. But this is too facile an explanation and one which could fatally undermine his legacy. By definition, magic and sainthood defy imitation and so excuse his successors from even trying to

learn from his example. And they restrain the people who both mourned his death and celebrated his life from demanding that their present leaders prove themselves worthy of the office he graced and showed something of the quality which was the true key to his greatness: moral authority. It was this which powered his remarkable capacity to forgive his oppressors, his refusal ever to play the race card as a means to garner popular support or excuse failure, and his commitment to reach out to all—even the most intractable of his former enemies—in his quest to reconcile South Africans to each other.<sup>8</sup>

Will we be richer—intellectually, politically, morally—for dismissing authority like Mandela’s (on the account of it given here by de Villiers)? It would be difficult to imagine we could be. Doubtless Mandela had flaws. Very possibly, his critics and opponents were not all inhuman monsters. Perhaps, in the course of time or debate, we will cease to admire him so much. But that would not mean that authority is a mystification; only, that we would have declared him unworthy of it or worthy of a decreased share in it. And what would such a verdict amount to but an affirmation of authority’s importance and value?

Suppose we do ascribe to Nelson Mandela the moral authority of which de Villiers writes—what does that mean? It means that we hold ourselves implicitly bound to his example, feel compelled to suffer judgment of our own lives and acts in light of the standard established by his. If de Villiers dismisses saints as exemplars (not very good Church history, but interesting in itself), it says something about our attempt to articulate for ourselves the nature of authority in modernity. The specter of religious authority appears to orient us toward the roots and history of authority, before being excused as unsuitable for our contemporary culture.

It further means that we cannot allow others a low opinion of Mandela’s authority and that we judge others accordingly. This is the point of stressing Mandela’s invitation to his opponents to join in and share his authority and of claiming that South Africans may legitimately demand that their leaders respect and seek to emulate his example so they may be worthy to succeed him. Which is just to say that we expect a considerable degree of orthodoxy in the matter of Nelson Mandela’s moral authority.

Something similar goes on in aesthetic judgment. If I respect your sensibility where art is concerned (a large topic in itself, one we cannot address here but suffice to say it is not a matter of institutional authorization—of a priesthood of critics), I will entertain your judgments with a kind of seriousness I withhold from almost everyone else. A disagreement between us will impress itself on me as a challenge to my own discernment. To be won over by your appreciation will feel like a triumph for us both, not like submission, and will increase or at least witness your authority. If this judgment becomes widely shared, it will constitute a kind of orthodoxy, like the orthodoxy surrounding Nelson Mandela’s moral authority, only, say, around the musical achievement of Duke Ellington. That is not to say that there will be no dissenters, only that the dissenters will feel themselves to be in the (as it were morally) uncomfortable (or exhilarating) position of disagreeing with the judgment—indeed, with the sensibility, the feelings, the values—of the public.

Does authority leave room for critical thinking? Can one hold orthodox opinions without losing one’s claim to independence? On the account we have put forth so far, the answer

would be “yes.” But what would that look like? What would it look like to stand at the limit of authority or orthodoxy and see its limits *from within*?

At the end of *Noa Noa*, Paul Gauguin tells a story about fishing. It is a story about the limits of authority, or what it means to join in and share in authority even while doubting the claims that underlie it. Gauguin tells of going to fish with some of the Tahitian men. He catches two fish. Each time, the hook penetrates the fish’s lower jaw. The Tahitian men laugh as Gauguin pulls these fish aboard, but without explaining why. He finally persuades one of the men to explain the laughter. He is told that to catch a fish with the hook through the lower jaw is a sign and that it indicates that one’s woman has been unfaithful during the fishing trip.

Gauguin regards the portent as mere superstition, against which he is immune through skeptical reason. And yet, when he returns home, he questions his Tahitian wife: “And your lover today, was he to your liking?”<sup>9</sup> She denies having taken a lover until Gauguin reveals that he caught two fish with hooks through their lower jaws. She responds without hesitation, demanding that Gauguin beat her as an unfaithful wife. Gauguin is so struck by the power of her conviction in the portent that he drops whatever reservation he may have felt and joins her in a night of what he refers to as “prayer.”<sup>10</sup> In the process of relating the story of his conversion, he calls his Tahitian wife a “masterpiece.”

We see no special reason to believe that this incident is based in fact of any kind. And it might go without saying that we hope no one today would recognize authority that demands wife-beating. But, one might also point out, Gauguin’s acceptance of his wife’s authority does not entail violence, either. It is, and was meant to be, a parable on authority and conversion. What a “masterpiece” can do, by embodying some felt truth, by its authority, is to compel a corresponding conviction even in such a skeptical, modern mind as Gauguin’s. Any response other than the one he made to his wife’s act of faith would have evidenced a lack of feeling. But his conversion—their night of “prayer”—doesn’t exactly amount to accepting the reliability of the fish-portent. Art is not that kind of orthodoxy.

This is of course part of what T. S. Eliot meant in his great 1929 study of Dante.<sup>11</sup> A few years earlier Eliot had himself undergone a conversion, one that famously resulted in doctrinal commitments to being a “classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion” (none of which, it goes without saying, we share, nor does that matter). In the essay on Dante, Eliot pauses to consider the larger question of the “nature of Belief” in poetry, one that of course bears on the nature of Belief in the critic’s judgments. Eliot affirms that one “cannot afford to *ignore*...beliefs” in art (nor those of the critic). Nonetheless, “you are not called upon to believe them yourself.” This is the seemingly crucial distinction between “philosophical *belief* and poetic *assent*.” The reader is not asked to “believe what Dante believed” but, rather, “more and more to understand it.” For Eliot, it is the intentional fallacy—a fallacy of *causation*—to presume to believe what an author believed, to enter into their mental state. By understanding—which is not about causes or effects at all—Eliot means a “state of mind in which one sees certain beliefs...as *possible*, so that we suspend our judgment altogether.” For Eliot this possibility is impressed on the reader by the sheer density of meaning that saturates every layer of the unfolding poem. Eliot describes this feeling of possibility as something like the “humility of a person visiting a new world.”

The essay as a whole is built around the problem of belief and conversion in art. That the *Divine Comedy* is nothing but “scenes of instruction” (as Stanley Cavell says of Wittgenstein),<sup>12</sup> that Eliot is instructing his readers, that Eliot underwent a comparable instruction—that is all directly to the point. The poem, like the criticism, is not only meant to convert the reader; it is about conversion. The act of criticism, for Eliot, is the effort to maintain the presentness of belief, to sustain the sincerity and normativity of orthodoxy against its ossification. One must become orthodox over and over again—it is not the set of beliefs, but the maintenance of them, the continual act of *understanding* them—that makes them true (this is what canonization means for Eliot, even if we reject his canon). This is what Kant meant when he insisted there was “no objective rule” for art, and that the “determining ground of aesthetic judgment is the feeling of the subject.” “We want to get a look at the object with our own eyes,” he affirms in §8.<sup>13</sup> One must be willing to drown out “a hundred voices all lauding [a work] to the skies,” if it conflicts with one’s “inner conviction” about the emptiness of the work (§33).<sup>14</sup> Moreover, one’s conviction about a work’s significance is a continuous process of assent, and it is this process that is exemplified by Eliot’s commitment to reading (the long and perplexing quotations from the works he discusses, often with minimal or no commentary, is not meant to explain the text but are acts of submission to it, and as offering it to others as candidates for further acts of understanding).

Eliot’s account of understanding introduces a crucial moment in the *Purgatorio* (canto XXVII), the moment where “Virgil dismisses Dante” who is left to a “higher guide.” Virgil crowns Dante and tells him “Your Will is free...and not to follow its direction would be sin”; he is king over himself. From poem, to critic, to reader we are meant to be compelled by this fictive world; not to enter into the beliefs of the author but to inhabit their world. What are the consequences of this conversion? We are drawn to witness “extensions of the ordinarily very limited human range.” Bearing witness to the “complete scale of the *depths* and *heights* of human emotion,” we might be compelled to see the world differently: A difference that could only emerge after the conversion to orthodoxy. Needless to say, we don’t have to agree with a single one of Eliot’s judgments—political, social, religious, moral, aesthetic (and we pretty much *don’t* with the exception of the aesthetic)—to see the strength of his argument about assenting to live in another’s world and refusing to tolerate anything less than world-making to sustain our beliefs.

*Todd Cronan is Associate Professor of Art History at Emory University. He is the author of Against Affective Formalism: Matisse, Bergson, Modernism (Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2014) and articles on photographic “previsualization,” Brecht, Adorno, Merleau-Ponty, Santayana, Simmel, Valéry, R.M. Schindler, Richard Neutra and the Eameses. He is currently at work on a study of R. M. Schindler and Richard Neutra; a book on art & politics between the wars, specifically Rodchenko/Eisenstein/Brecht; and a study of the mid-century modernisms of Moholy-Nagy, Neutra, Charles & Ray Eames, George Nelson, Garrett Eckbo, and Julius Shulman.*

*Charles Palermo is Professor of Art History and Director of Film and Media Studies at the College of William and Mary. He has published numerous books and essays, including Modernism and Authority: Picasso and His Milieu around 1900 (2015) and Fixed Ecstasy: Joan Miró in the 1920s (2008). Both are founding editors of nonsite.org, a scholarly peer-reviewed journal of humanities and politics.*

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. James Creed Meredith, rev. and ed. Nicholas Walker (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 70.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>4</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (New York and London: Routledge, 2001), 68.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>7</sup> Slavoj Žižek, “Are the worst really full of passionate intensity?,” *New Statesman* (January 10, 2015), <http://www.newstatesman.com/world-affairs/2015/01/slavoj-i-ek-charlie-hebdo-massacre-are-worst-really-full-passionate-intensity>.

<sup>8</sup> Fleur de Villiers, “Mandela’s Moral Authority,” *Nieman Reports* (Dec. 16, 2013), <http://niemanreports.org/articles/mandelas-moral-authority>.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Gauguin, *Noa Noa: The Tahitian Journal*, trans. O. F. Theis (New York: Dover, 1985), 63.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>11</sup> T. S. Eliot, “Dante,” in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), 237-77.

<sup>12</sup> See Stanley Cavell, “The Argument of the Ordinary: Scenes of Instruction in Wittgenstein and in Kripke,” in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 64-100. Here Cavell considers §217 of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*: “If I have exhausted the justifications, I have reached bedrock and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: ‘This is simply what I do.’” These matters are far beyond the topic at hand, but in the most basic terms, Cavell construes Wittgenstein’s picture as exemplary of how one instructs another in an ongoing process of understanding, rather than—as Saul Kripke famously argued in *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language: An Elementary Exposition* (1982)—a question of rule following.

<sup>13</sup> Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 47.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 113-14.