AOSIS

A heretical tale about heresy or when words do matter

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What came first, heresy or orthodoxy? Walter Bauer's book *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, published in 1934, seems to have unleashed the demons of scholars of early Christianity. Partisanship has, however, starkly coloured the still ongoing discussion. Denominational and scholarly belonging, as the work of Bart Ehrman and of his opponents like Andreas Köstenberger and Darrell Bock has widely shown, has so taken the upwind and signed this discussion that a full investigation into the meaning and the history of the concepts at hand has been 'forgotten'. The customary and common understanding of the concepts of orthodoxy and, in particular, heresy, are, however, completely inadequate for this discussion. Ignoring the enormous cultural heritage of the concept of heresy (αἵρεσις) – which we intend to unveil in this article – has made for the word-bullets in this historical battle to turn out to be little more than blanks in a sham-war. Time has come to end this battle, which is the scope of this article.

Introduction

There are a number of moments and events over the centuries that have changed the course of history. These are too many to list. Rare, on the contrary, are the occasions that have had the capacity to even change our language. One of these events was the French Revolution. Not only did the sociopolitical upheavals of the end of the 18th century in France change the course of history in the Occident, it also changed the meaning of one particular word, namely, 'revolution'. Tracking the whole history of the concept of 'revolution' is obviously not within the scope of this text. Furthermore, this has already been done brilliantly by the German historian Reinhart Koselleck, one of the main protagonists of the academic (interdisciplinary) discipline of *Begriffsgeschichte*, the history of concepts, which originated in German academia almost a century ago. It thus suffices to closely follow Koselleck's research on this topic and quickly sketch the overturning of the original meaning of this concept to make our point.

In, for example, his *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (2004), Koselleck elaborates on the comments made by the 19th century French scholar Jean-Barthélemy Haréau who claimed that, following the French Revolution, the concept of revolution 'has lost its original sense' (Koselleck 2004:49). Its original usage and understanding, going back to ancient Greek and Latin, of 'circulation' had, in a rather short period, been completely overturned (cf. Koselleck 2004:45). For Koselleck, as he reassumes the changes the concept underwent following the eventful Parisian years at the end of the 18th century (cf. Koselleck 2004:49–57), the original naturalistic signification of the word 'revolution' gave way to a transcendental/meta-historical meaning. The inclusive understanding of a return – present in the syllable 're' of the Latin word *revolutio* – in the circular revolving movement of a revolution yielded to the new directional implications as it was present and presented on the streets of Paris. No return was possible after Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette's execution. Furthermore, the physico-political implications of the ancient understanding of revolution turned into a socio-emancipatorial politicality. Basically, in a very short period of time, everything the word revolution had stood for had relished and fundamentally changed.

But why begin this text on the concept of heresy – at least this seems/seemed to be the case upon reading the title – with a reflection on the fundamental change(s) a word underwent in the first years of what will later become known as the period of the Enlightenment/Modernity? For as much as it is important to remember that some words change their meaning during the course of human history, this is obviously not the main point. In fact, the main lesson to be drawn from Koselleck's discussion of the concept of revolution is that 'words and their usage are more important than any other weapon' (Koselleck 2004:57). At times, however, these weapons, and this is where we intended to arrive in these opening paragraphs, are only loaded with blanks.

And this will be the case with the discussion, a discussion regarding the concept of heresy that started almost a century ago and is still continuing, that is going to be at the centre of this text.

The discussion in question regards the one around the highly contested thesis, first phrased by Walter Bauer in his by now classic *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (Bauer 1996) – *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum* – of 1934, that heresy is more original than orthodoxy in the earliest forms of Christianity. In what follows, we will trace the unfolding of this historical discussion and ponder why, up until now, none of the participants in this discussion have dealt with the full meaning and the history of the concepts at hand, particularly with the concept of heresy. The provocative thesis that we will put forth in conclusion is that this whole ongoing discussion is a theological non-discussion. This very loaded discussion (loaded with blanks, however) is, in fact, to be considered as some sort of a diversion (most probably, however, an unconscious one), a magician's trick, that leads the attention away from a much more ambivalent situation. Our thesis thus is that there simply was no opposition between orthodoxy and heresy in the earliest forms of Christianity because the first concept (orthodoxy) had not yet come into being and the second one (heresy) was still loaded with an incredibly heavy cultural heritage that first had to be stripped away before it could enter the game. Only with Justin Martyr (i.e. mid-second century) will the orthodoxy-heresy opposition begin to make sense in Christianity because the concept of heresy will have started to take on its new understanding of heterodoxy. In the following sections, we thus propose a quest for conceptual accuracy with particular attention to the concept of heresy.

In the first section, we will briefly delineate the discussion that began with Walter Bauer's book on heresy and orthodoxy. The brief resume of this volume and its reception will lead us directly to the highly polarised, and almost strictly American,[1] ongoing contemporary debate on the originality or not of heresy in early Christianity. This debate has become very public in the US. We are, in fact, dealing with bestselling volumes that are combatted by other bestsellers and public appearances on national television. The main antagonists in the debate are, on one side, Bart D. Ehrman (some also put Elaine Pagels on this side of the battle) and, on the other, his (their) detractors like Timothy Paul Jones, Andreas J. Köstenberger or Darrell L. Bock.[2] In the second section, we will investigate how these scholars have defined the concepts at stake. Particular attention will be given to their treatment of the concept of heresy. We will then confront these definitions, which will turn out to be very meek, in the third section with the conceptual history of the word heresy. In the fourth and last section, we will then demonstrate how this conceptual history was of importance in the world in which Christianity rose, and how it was of importance for the

1. Although the discussion on the precedence of orthodoxy on heresy has become almost strictly American, it is, obviously, not just geographically much broader, but it is also fundamentally intertwined with an innumerable series of other fundamental historical and theological questions and problems. Considering this much larger context, many more scholars and works could have been mentioned (and for some probably also *should* have been mentioned) along the road that this article walks, but the readability of this text would have been sacrificed on the altar of unnecessary erudition and the bibliography would have taken on monstrous proportions.

2. Again, we are aware that many others have taken part in this 'battle'. We will, however, limit ourselves to these protagonists and will treat their work, something which we obviously think is possible, as paradigmatic of it.

earliest forms of Christianity as well, remaining even present well into the 2nd century, when the understanding of the concept of heresy slowly started to change. We will end with some conclusive remarks.

The Bauer-thesis and its appropriation

In 1934, Walter Bauer's *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum* was published. The main thesis of this path-breaking book was that 'certain manifestations of Christian life' that were later to be recorded as heresies had 'originally not been such at all' (Bauer 1996:xxii).[3] In certain places, as Bauer continues to very cautiously phrase his thesis – a double perhaps, in fact, anticipates the phrasing (cf. Bauer 1996:xxii) – they were probably also the 'only form of the new religion, that is, for those regions they were simply "Christianity"' (Bauer 1996:xxii). Not only, however, were, at certain places, the manifestations of Christianity that would later become heretical the only form present, but at (other?) places the earliest manifestations of Christianity cannot be clearly defined in the terminology of heresy and orthodoxy: heretical Christianity and orthodoxy have not always been clearly distinguishable from one another (cf. Bauer 1996:58–59).

Said simply, Bauer claims that, in certain places in the earliest times of Christianity, the forms that this Christian life had taken on were originally not what would later become known as the orthodox version of Roman Christianity, if these distinctions could even be made at all in the earliest Christian times. These dominating manifestations of Christianity were, in fact, (very?) different from what would later be the 'official' form of Christianity, and they themselves will later be (dis-) qualified as heretical, as heterodoxic. Only later in time, especially with the growth of power of Roman Christianity and its policy of imperialism, would these 'heretical' forms of Christianity be combatted and overthrown. And once Roman Christianity had overcome these different and, at times, even earlier forms of Christianity, it simply rewrote Christianity's history imposing itself there where it hadn't been present as the most original form of Christianity. It is because of this rewritten history, as the Bauer-thesis continues, that up until not so long ago we had the understanding that Christianity originated in Christ's doctrine, which had been unequivocally understood and spread by all his disciples in an identical and pure way throughout the known world. This 'unequivocal doctrine' that spread throughout the Mediterranean world was, as the classical view on the origin of Christianity continued, what is called orthodoxy, that is, the 'right opinion', which faithfully reproduced Jesus's teachings. Only later, by means of treacherous 'teachers' who attempted to include foreign material (either Jewish or pagan) into Christianity, did heresies rise. Basically, Bauer thus overturned the almost universally held so-called classical view that orthodoxy preceded heresy and that the latter was thus necessarily a deviation. He, on the contrary, claimed that 'here and there', heresy preceded orthodoxy.

3. Although Bauer was the first to write this thesis down, he was not the first to challenge the more traditional history of Christianity (cf. Ehrman 2003:167–170).

Notwithstanding the very unfavourable political situation in Germany (which would grow to become even much worse) and other parts of Europe, Bauer's book did receive numerous reviews in the years directly following its publication.[4] And even though some harsher critiques were formulated, especially from the Roman Catholic camp, it was generally well received in these academic circles. The volume, furthermore, also exercised quite some influence on the next generation of German biblical scholars, not in the least on figures that would rise to fame like Rudolf Bultmann and Helmut Koester.

However, Bauer's book would probably have remained in the highly secluded world of academic scholarship, were it not for (1) the translation of his book into English in 1971 and (2) for some of the more recent and rather radical and very popularly disseminating re-appropriations of Bauer's thesis in the US. These almost literal re-appropriations are surprising, especially since Bauer's thesis, by now, has been generally considered as rather inaccurate, and his exaggerated, and at times, incorrect insistence on the argument from silence has further downgraded it even more. True, it has been acknowledged by most scholars of antiquity that the 'classical' view on the birth and development of Christianity is no longer tenable but also Bauer's thesis, which, together with the discovery of a series of ancient documents (e.g. the Gnostic scrolls found near Nag Hammadi), was partially responsible in the coming about of this latter awareness and understanding, has, however, gone down the same road.

As we already stated, according to some, Elain Pagels is the first to have popularised Bauer's thesis in the US, almost giving origin to what would become a serious battle between pro- and contra-Bauerians.[5] Pagels, a professor of religion at Princeton, studied the just mentioned Nag Hammadi documents for her PhD and was a student of the above-mentioned Helmut Koester. She became famous when her book *The Gnostic Gospels* (1989) turned into a bestseller and won the National Book Award as well as the National Book Critics Circle Award. Considering her discipleship of Koester, she will have been very familiar with the Bauer-thesis. However, it seems to us that her goal in *The Gnostic Gospels* was not particularly inclined to promoting the Bauer-thesis. If anything, it seems that she found it interesting to discover that even before the Nag Hammadi documents had been found, Bauer had already intuited that Christianity was far more diverse than was generally accepted and taught (which has become the new 'classical' understanding of the rise of Christianity). She, in fact, mentions Bauer only a few times in this volume. The first time it is to explicitly state that Bauer was one of the few exceptions who had understood that 'early Christianity [was] far more diverse than nearly anyone expected before the Nag Hammadi discoveries'

(Pagels 1989:xxii).[6] Nowhere in this, nor, at least for as much as we are aware of, in any other volume, has she ever appropriated the radicalised Bauer-thesis that heresy preceded orthodoxy.

If Pagels thus seems to represent nothing more than the new 'classical' understanding of early Christianity, this is not the case with Bart D. Ehrman who not only has taken up Bauer's thesis – for Ehrman, Bauer's book *Orthodoxy & Heresy* was 'arguably the most important book on the history of early Christianity to appear in the twentieth century' (Ehrman 2003:173) – but has even radicalised it – '[*I*]f anything, early Christianity was even less tidy and more diversified than he [*Bauer*] realized' (Ehrman 2003:176). We can thus read, for example, that according to Ehrman 'virtually all forms of modern Christianity, …, go back to *one* form of Christianity that emerged as victorious from the conflicts of the second and third centuries' (Ehrman 2003, [*italics in the original*]). And, as he continuous some lines further:

> … this victorious party rewrote the history of the controversy, making it appear that there had not been much of a conflict at all, claiming that its own views had always been those of the majority of Christians at all times, back to the times of Jesus and his apostles, that its perspective, in effect, had always been 'orthodox' (…) and that its opponents in the conflict, with their other scriptural texts, had always represented small splinter groups invested in deceiving people into 'heresy' (…). (p. 4)

And even if Ehrman does not say it literally, at times it truly seems that were it not for the proto-orthodox Roman community who bought its influence economically (cf. Ehrman 2003:175)[7], heresy preceded orthodoxy almost everywhere.[8]

Considering, firstly, Pagels', but especially Ehrman's fame and, secondly, his rather radical thesis (which could explain the fame), it should not surprise that he has had a number of detractors. As we already stated, the elements that made up Bauer's thesis have all been confuted. Even the majority of his arguments from silence have been shown as being highly questionable. In most of the works that attempt to counter Ehrman, these refutations are thus repeated almost *ad infinitum*. Both Bock (2006:46ff.) and Köstenberger and Kruger (2010:41ff.), for example, disprove the Bauerian and Ehrmanian claims that from the very beginning there were heresies that were dominant in some regions, and that orthodoxy developed because of Rome's squashing power of heresies. Also, the topic of diversity present in the earliest forms of Christianity has become a hotly debated topic. And for as much as the 'anti-Bauerian/Ehrmanian' camp

4. For a full account of the reception of Bauer's book, see Bauer (1996:286–316).

5. Andreas J. Köstenberger and Michael J. Kruger claim this in *The Heresy of Orthodoxy* (Köstenberger & Kruger 2010:30–31).

6. Bauer is mentioned only once more in this volume to quote his 'thesis' (with the two perhaps included), only to be criticised for the inaccurate picture of Gnosticism that he had painted. He is, justly, applauded for having 'opened up new ways of thinking about Gnosticism' (Pagels 1989:xxxi).

7. It has to be acknowledged that Ehrman is here merely repeating, although slightly emphasising, Bauer. For Bauer: 'Rome viewed it as altogether legitimate practice in religious controversy to tip the scales with golden weights' (Bauer 1996:123).

8. Ehrman does not seem to be a big fan of the early form of Christianity that would eventually win the battle for orthodoxy – he calls this form of Christianity 'proto-orthodoxy' –. If anything, his scales tip in favour of the highly exclusivist and elitarian Gnosticism (cf. Ehrman 2003:128–131).

(and Pagels can be listed here as well) acknowledges the great diversity in early Christianity (e.g. Bock 2006:12–13), they stress, and we think correctly, the much more surprising 'early agreement' (Köstenberger & Kruger 2010:160) between various communities on a number of very important and highly distinctive topics (the figure and divinity of Christ, the majority of 'canonical' books, etc.). Furthermore, also the peculiarly Ehrmanian claim of the New Testament scribes as consisting mainly of corrupters of Christ's original message, a claim which is supposed to give greater weight to the claim of heresy's priority over orthodoxy which he developed in his *Misquoting Jesus* (Ehrman 2005), has been very accurately refuted by Timothy Paul Jones in his *Misquoting Truth* (Jones 2007). As can be seen, the discussion is a highly loaded one, and both camps don't seem to be prone to accept the reasoning from their opponents.

A question of words

Discussions like the one we have just followed in its development are very tricky ones. The basic tendency to extreme polarisation makes one almost not notice that in this ongoing discussion no attention at all has been given to any clear definition of the concepts that stand at the centre of the contention. As such, we now begin this second section, which will exactly confront the definitions of the main concepts of contention, namely, heresy and orthodoxy, as it was offered by the scholars we have just encountered. Surprisingly, however, we can be very quick. As high rising the discussion has been, as low is the attention that has been dedicated to the exact understanding of the two concepts at hand.

Starting with the primary initiator of this discussion, Walter Bauer, it cannot but be stressed that this scholar who has written a book which contains in its main title the two words orthodoxy and heresy, and that intends to back the very provocative and, for its time, the very original claim that heresy, at certain times and certain places, precedes orthodoxy, has so very little interest in the main concepts he uses. As he, in fact, writes in the introduction, 'even in this book, "orthodoxy" and "heresy" will refer to what one customarily and usually understands them [orthodoxy and heresy] to mean' (Bauer 1996:xxii-xxiii). Even if Bauer did claim some reservations about the meaning of the two concepts (especially regarding their being, respectively, designators of the majority and the minority) he, as we just discovered, simply used the terms in their common and customary understanding. That 'Bauer objected to the very terms of the debate between orthodoxy and heresy, …. For him, historians cannot use the words *orthodoxy* to mean right belief and *heresy* to mean wrong belief' (Ehrman 2003:173 – emphasis in the original), as Ehrman has claimed, is stretching his reservations way too far. Bauer is simply reluctant to retell history through the sole voice of those that claim to be in the right, 'by the one party'. He simply wants to tell it by what he considers to be the voice of history (cf. Bauer 1996:xxiii). If anything, it is Strecker and Kraft, who (re-) wrote the second appendix to Bauer's volume, who have

phrased the reservations Ehrman assigned to Bauer. They, in fact, write:

> How much less confusing the whole discussion would be in the future if, for the historical task, such traditional, theologically loaded slogans as 'orthodoxy' and 'heresy' could be eliminated from treatments of the early period except where they are used by the participants under discussion – and thus are actual elements within the historical reconstruction. (Bauer 1996:314)

However, for as much as this could be of help at times, it would probably be the worst a-historical mistake historians could make. The problem is not the usage of the word(s), but its/their meaning. As we will, in fact, shortly discover, the concept of heresy was very often used in that epoch. It is just that it was used in a highly different way.

Before we venture in our discovery of the usages of the word heresy, let us, however, continue with the definitions of our two concepts. We have seen how for Bauer heresy and orthodoxy are considered in their usual understanding, and very little changes for Ehrman. Also, for Ehrman, heresy and orthodoxy are defined in the typical way: orthodoxy is simply considered as 'the "right belief"' and '"heresy," he writes, (literally mean[*s*] "choice;" a heretic is someone who willfully chooses not to believe the right things)' (Ehrman 2003:4). This latter definition of heresy is almost verbatim repeated later in the volume as well:

> Heresy, from the Greek word for 'choice', refers to intentional decision to depart from the right belief; it implies a corruption of faith, found only among a minority of people. (p. 164)

A somewhat more elaborated definition of both terms is offered near the end of the volume – orthodoxy is 'a unified group advocating an apostolic doctrine' that is 'accepted by the majority of Christians everywhere' and heresy was secondary teaching that was 'derived from an original teaching through an infusion of Jewish ideas or pagan philosophy' (Ehrman 2003:173). However, and for as much as these descriptions are somewhat more substantial, in the end they add little to the discussion and we remain within the ranges of the customary understanding of both concepts.[9]

If we now turn to the contenders of Ehrman and the Bauer-thesis, we can be even more concise than before. If we take as example Köstenberger and Kruger and their volume *The Heresy of Orthodoxy* (just like Bauer, this volume has both concepts in its main title), then we find even less interest in the exact meaning of the two concepts. Although we find entire sections dedicated to, for example, 'The Concept of Orthodoxy' (Köstenberger & Kruger 2010:70–71), the only understanding of orthodoxy that is discussed is the one proposed by Bauer and Ehrman. Any independent research regarding the meaning of the concepts in question outside of the debate between them and Bauer and Ehrman seems not even optional. The basic question, whether Bauer or Ehrman could have misunderstood or inaccurately defined

9.Pagels (1989) does not even make an attempt to define both terms and they are customarily used in their traditional understanding.

orthodoxy or, more importantly, heresy is never asked. It is the degree of the 'rightness', of the correctness, of the belief that is questioned regarding orthodoxy – a less narrow understanding of the correctness will obviously allow them to place orthodoxy before heresy (cf. Köstenberger & Kruger 2010:70–71) – and no attempt is ever made to define heresy (Köstenberger and Kruger often write 'heresy' in between brackets, as if they disagree with the usage of the term by their opponents, but they never render this explicit).

As we have already stated, it is thoroughly surprising that in this discussion none of the participants has felt the need to investigate the full meaning and the history of the concepts at stake. In a discussion that centres around the question whether 'heresy' preceded 'orthodoxy' or whether it was 'orthodoxy' that preceded 'heresy', that no one asked what both terms fully meant – not just accept what was and has become the usual or customary understanding – does leave much to wonder. If Reinhart Koselleck, whom we encountered in the beginning of this text, was correct to claim that 'words and their usage are more important than any other weapon', then it seems that this battle is being fought with blanks. Or maybe they just like to keep this battle alive as it is too profitable – in a myriad of ways, not just economically – for all parties to keep it going.

The meaning of heresy

If we now turn – in our attempt to achieve conceptual accuracy – to try and uncover the full and historical understanding of our two concepts, we can start by stating that regarding the concept of orthodoxy, both groups of antagonists of the contemporary battle are (at least partially) correct in their description of the concept. Orthodoxy, indeed, simply means 'right belief'. If one is to delve into the history of the concept, then it needs to be said that Ehrman is spot on when he states that '[S]peaking about orthodoxy in the earlier period, …, is a kind of … anachronism' (Ehrman 2003:174). However, this observation contains only half of the truth. In fact, also Köstenberger and Kruger are correct in countering this claim with their observation that what is most surprising about early Christianity is not the diversity but the 'impressively early agreement' (Köstenberger & Kruger 2010:160) – and this level of agreement not only regards core books of the future canon but is about so much more. Defining the early form of what would later become orthodox Christianity as proto-orthodox Christians, as Ehrman does, is thus not such a bad idea, as long as one, however, considers these Christians more in the way Ehrman's opponents see them than Ehrman himself. Much more is there *not* to be said about orthodoxy in earliest Christian times. That so much ink on disagreements has been spilt on this concept and its 'history' is probably one more sign of how this contemporary battle on heresy's or orthodoxy's precedence in early Christianity is largely a non-battle.

If orthodoxy is a concept that we can quickly deal with, then this is not the case with heresy. In fact, as Michel Desjardins already accurately stated, well before the question could have been asked which came first, heresy or orthodoxy, another question should have been asked first. This other question was what the word 'heresy' meant for the Christians (or broader, for 1st and 2nd century authors within and outside of the Christian tradition) of the period in question (cf. Desjardins 1991:72). If orthodoxy was not a term that one encounters in the earliest Christian sources – maybe with the exception of Paul who in *Galatians* claims he received 'the right hands in partnership' (Gl 2:9), which might seem as some illusion of a seal of approval (of orthodoxy, but the word is never mentioned) that he received from Peter to set out and go teach to the Gentiles – we encounter the word heresy in the earliest Christian sources. What is more, we not only encounter it in the first Christian writings but also in the writings of the cultures that surrounded and directly influenced the earliest form(s) of Christianity. Let me start with the various understandings of the concept of heresy in the Graeco-Roman world after which, in the next section, I will give some evidence of how this was used in Judaism and in the earliest forms of Christianity.

The word heresy has a very long history. As David T. Runia, on whose article *Philo of Alexandria and the Greek hairesis-model* (1999) we will mainly base ourselves here, so clearly reassumes, heresy derives from the Greek αἵρεσις (*hairesis*), which formed as a noun from the verb αἱρεῖν, which meant to take, grasp or seize and which over more than a thousand years was used in a variety of contexts, the following of which were the more common:

a. most concretely, the taking of seizure of something, e.g. a town
b. the selection or choice of something or somebody, e.g. the election of a magistrate
c. the choice of a course of action, a decision
d. a disposition or inclination based on the repeated taking of certain choices or decisions
e. a direction of thought or action, a school of thought in fairly abstract terms
f. a group of people, a party or sect marked by common ideas and aims
g. a party or sect that stands outside established or recognized tradition, a heretical group that propounds false doctrine in the form of a heresy. (Runia 1999:118)

However, if the usage of the concept of *hairesis* was spread over these seven possible understandings, one meaning was much more common, and one only came into existence well after the birth of Christianity. The understanding that came into existence only well into the history of the word that is of concern to us, namely, of early Christianity, it is the last one: (g). Momentarily we will leave our comments regarding this later understanding with this. We will come back to this fact later on in the text. The prevalent usage of *hairesis* in the Graeco-Roman world, on the other hand, was (f). A *hairesis* was commonly understood to be a group of people that was marked by common ideas and aims – we might want to avoid the word 'sect' because of the negative connotations it has

accumulated in its history and still has in our times. This was the prevalent usage of the concept of *hairesis* 'in the Greek intellectual scene from the 2nd cent. BCE to … the 3rd – 4th cent. CE' (Runia 1999:119). As can be easily seen, the birth of Christianity and its earliest developments fall right in the middle of this time span.

Now, another term with which these *hairesis* were familiarly known in the time that is of our interest is, and this is a point of fundamental importance, φιλοσοφία, philosophy. The most common *hairesis* in the Graeco-Roman world in the time of the birth of Christianity were the philosophical schools. These philosophical schools, however, no longer had the characteristics of the great purely Greek philosophical 'schools', like the Academy, the Lyceum or the Stoa, but the 'fluidity' (a fluidity that also regarded the membership of these *hairesis*, as Justin Martyr's or even St. Augustine's tales of passing through various philosophical schools attests) that this non-locality gave them, allowed them also to be more visible throughout the totality of the Roman empire. This greater visibility was also reached through their sharing of a recognised means of their dress: the *tribōn* or *pallium* – even the so-called philosophy-hater that Tertullian was supposed to be, took great pride in his wearing a *pallium*.

Furthermore, these philosophical schools were not only characterised by the transmission of philosophical-doctrinal material. Their sharing was much more than just ideas. The 'heretical philosopher' was, in fact, not primarily interested in the creation of a systematised theoretical or even metaphysical all-embracing philosophical system. His main concern was, as Pierre Hadot has demonstrated so accurately, practical. Each one of the philosophical *hairesis* elaborated the figure of the sage, the *sophos*, as the one who attained the state of perfection and who is, for the philosopher, 'the inaccessible role model' whom he 'strives to imitate, by means of an ever-renewed effort, practiced at each instant' (Hadot 1995:261). The 'heretical philosopher' not only needed to be wise, but, above all, he needed to act wise, and this state could only be reached through the practical training typical of the particular school to which the philosophical adept adhered: the *techne tou biou*, the techniques, the *askesis*, of the good life.

One final characteristic that distinguished these philosophical *hairesis*, especially as we come closer to the birth of Christianity, is that their doctrines and practices were ever more clothed with religious overtones. '[B]y early Christian times', as Christopher Stead accurately notes, 'they [*the philosophers*] had become less bold and experimental, …, and more inclined towards religion' (Stead 2000:175). In fact, we can even state that in this period the only thing that came close to a religion,[10] as we would consider it today, and which Judaism and Christianity were and are, was exactly philosophy.

....
10.The term 'religion' (*religio*), in its origin, did not have the meaning we give it today, neither did it originate from *religare* (that which binds and unites the human and the divine) but from *relegere*: the scrupulous and attentive observation of ritual formula and norms.

The Judaic and Christian appropriation of the *Hairesis*-model

One could, correctly, intervene at this point and remark that the Graeco-Roman philosophical schools were not present in the immediate sociocultural surrounding of earliest Christianity. And for as much as this would be true, it is, however, a consideration that is not detrimental for our argumentation. It was, in fact, not just in the Graeco-Roman pagan world that this understanding of *hairesis* was known or applied. In fact, even in Judaism, it was not only known but a frequently applied apologetical operation.

Philo of Alexandria, for example, was very familiar with the Greek philosophical *hairesis*-model. He was well aware that, for example, the Cynics, the cynical philosophical 'school,' was a *hairesis* (*Plant.* 151). And, very interestingly, Philo also uses the concept *hairesis* to describe the Jewish group of Therapeutae (*Contempl.* 29). More than in Philo's, it is, however, in Flavius Josephus's writings that one finds particularly interesting references to the concept of *hairesis*. For Flavius there are three φιλοσοφίαι or αἱρέσεις (he uses them as synonyms): the Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes. They are 'three forms of philosophy [*that*] are pursued among the Jews' (*BJ* 2.119). But, more importantly, Flavius Josephus portrayed Judaism as the ancestral philosophy, that is, *patrios philosophia* (*C. Ap.* 2.47), and he also affirms that inquiry into the books of Moses is a very philosophical (*lian philosophos*) enterprise (*AJ* 1.25). Flavius thus considered Judaism as in every sense a philosophy, that is, as a heresy.

Considering this historical reconstruction of the meaning and understanding of the concept of heresy in the immediate context and surroundings of the earliest forms of Christianity, it seems rather difficult to believe that the first instances of usage within early Christianity itself of this concept was in relation to something that, as we already indicated, is itself an anachronism in early Christianity, namely, orthodoxy. But, it is not just in Judaism that we find references and appropriations of the *hairesis*-model. In some of the earliest sources of Christianity itself we find references to the concept of αἵρεσις in its 'philosophical' understanding.

It should probably not surprise that it is in the Paulinian tradition that we find the first Christian traces of the usage and appropriation of the *hairesis*-model. Paul, in fact, was a native of Tarsus, the principal town in Cilicia, of which the inhabitants were famous for their dedication to the study of philosophy. And it was during Paul's youth that Tarsus was at the apex of its splendour. It should thus not surprise that Paul was familiar with philosophy's qualification as αἵρεσις and the Jewish appropriation of this *hairesis*-model. That the Sadducees and the Pharisees are defined to be a *hairesis* in *Acts* is a good demonstration of this point (cf. Ac 5:17, 15:5). What is most interesting, however, is that we can see how the depicted Paul not only is aware of the Jewish appropriation of the *hairesis*-model but how this earliest form of Christianity also appropriated this procedure as well. We can thus read,

once more in *Acts*, that Paul, who is being accused of being the ring-leader of the heresy (αἵρεσις) of the Nazoreans, simply responds: 'I do admit to you that according to the Way, which they call a sect (*hairesis*), I worship the God of our ancestors […]' (Ac 24:14). Paul does not say that 'the Way' is not a *hairesis*, if anything he states that he too belongs to a *hairesis*.[11]

As can be seen, the earliest references to the concept of heresy are in no way related to the (by then still non-existent) concept of orthodoxy but to this Graeco-Roman (Hellenistic) *hairesis*-model that was being appropriated by Christianity, just like this had already been the case in Judaism. The change in meaning of the concept of heresy – a change of meaning that will lead heresy to no longer just mean (f) a group of people, a party or sect marked by common ideas and aims, but (g) a party or sect that stands *outside* established or recognised tradition, a heretical group that propounds *false* doctrine in the form of a heresy, and which, as can be seen, requires some sort of understanding of orthodoxy (this type of heresy propounds a 'false' doctrine, one thus that stands against a 'right' or a 'correct' doctrine) – will start to occur, according to Alain Le Boulluec (1985)[12] who has dedicated a magistral study to this topic, only with the apologetical work of Justin Martyr. This is not the place to reassume Le Boulluec's study. It suffices to report the main thesis that is of importance for our topic. 'In the writings previous to Justin's oeuvre', so Le Boulluec very convincingly argues, 'there didn't already exist a coherent and unified representation of error and dissention, and the used terminology for this is still very diversified' (Le Boulluec 1985:21). '*Hairesis*', as he concludes, 'is not the primary term to indicate doctrinal deviations from parties within the Church, nor to mark out elements that were separated from the authority' (Le Boulluec 1985:21). This does not mean that the Church was not able to recognise what it considered deviations or that everything that was claimed about Christ had equal authority. Deviations existed and not all exclamations about Jesus were authoritative, but this exercise of discernment did not simply proceed following the oppositional terminology of orthodoxy-heresy. Only from well into the 2nd century, starting with the work of Justin Martyr, would these two concepts become operational in this context.

Conclusion

We started this article discussing the change of meaning of the word 'revolution'. We saw, following the work of Reinhart Koselleck, how in a rather short period this word adopted a whole new meaning. As we discovered, the word 'revolution', which originally simply meant a circular return and had a naturalistic physico-politician signification, turned, in the years following the French Revolution, into a socio-emancipatorial political term that was no longer concerned with a return but was directed at an unknown future.

11. There are some other references to *hairesis* in the New Testament. The usage of some of these others is dubious, and at times even negative. Paul's appropriation of the term is, however, the most significant one (cf. Desjardins 1991:74–75).

12. Le Boulluec's work has not yet been translated into English, so all translations are mine.

Basically, its meaning and understanding had been completely overturned.

Although a similar discussion might be considered a rather strange approach to discuss heresy, starting with the discovery of a similar mutability of certain concepts enabled us to pave the way for the discovery of the very similar reversal of the concept at the centre of our discussion, namely, heresy. Heresy, in fact, before it slowly started playing the antagonist of orthodoxy (somewhere in the second half of the 2d century) had a very different meaning. The prevalent understanding of *hairesis* in the Graeco-Roman world was that of being a group of people that was marked by common ideas, aims and, in particular, ascetic-religious practices. This was the prevalent usage of the concept of *hairesis* going from the 2nd century BCE to the 3rd - 4th century CE, and its most common manifestation was that of the (neo-)Hellenistic philosophical schools. A *hairesis*, in fact, was for the majority of ancient citizens synonymous with φιλοσοφία, philosophy. As such, this understanding of heresy was also familiar to the Judaic community as well as to some of the earlier forms of Christianity as we discovered in *Acts*.

With this in mind we can now, in conclusion, return once more to the discussion inaugurated by Walter Bauer and which has recently become a very fecund ground for heavy-loaded polemics between scholars of ancient Christianity. However, if we consider the contention – of whether in early Christianity 'heresy' preceded 'orthodoxy' or whether it was 'orthodoxy' that preceded 'heresy', even if it was easy or not to distinguish between 'heresy' and 'orthodoxy' – in the context of what we have just unveiled about the meaning and understanding of heresy/*hairesis* in this same period, then one is left with a rather bitter aftertaste. If, as we already claimed referring ourselves to Reinhart Koselleck, words and their usage are more important than any other weapon in a (historical) battle, then the battle we assist in this orthodoxy/heresy discussion is nothing more than a sham battle. One could speculate about the reasons of its duration – we are only a little bit more than a decennium away from it turning into a battle that is lasting a century (!) – but this is not the moment to indulge ourselves in this type of speculation. If anything, we could really take Koselleck's statement seriously and use the word 'heresy' not to win this futile battle but to end it once and for all. What came first, orthodoxy or heresy, is a non-question. Why was the concept used in its positive/neutral sense in the first place? How was it related to the practice of voluntary associations in the Roman world? What made the term heresy change? Why? Was it together with the development of the Jewish concept of *minim* or was it caused by it? And what about similar changes in the pagan world? These are the interesting questions. And we are still far away from having any answers to them.

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27 to 29 September 2015. These Small Circle gatherings are very particular as they not only attempt to uphold the philosophical tradition of friendly, *filein* (of the *filein to sophon*), discussion between scholars from different fields but actually succeed in it time and again. And it was in this peculiar context that I remember disagreeing somewhat with Eben on some aspects of the earliest form(s) of Christianity. This article hopes to continue this friendly disagreement, especially because he will have now all the more time (true σχολή) to dedicate to fully enter into discussion.

Competing interests

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