BETWEEN HERESY AND ORTHODOXY: ALCHEMY AND PIETY IN LATE SIXTEENTH-CENTURY GERMANY

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1. Introduction

When we observe the cultural and religious development in Germany in the second half of the sixteenth century, we find, on the one hand, a plurality of seemingly subversive religious movements and religiously subversive intellectuals, and, on the other hand, the attempts by various Protestant churches to formulate and establish their dogmatic belief system in order to give their church an unmistakable profile. Behind the manifold theological disputes and discussions lies the intention of bringing forth the one and only correct interpretation of Christian faith, doctrine, and life in accordance with the office of the Church. Consequently, only within orthodox ecclesiastical discourse we meet a labyrinth of theological writings which are apologetic, polemic, or dogmatic, while on the contrary, outside of the inner-orthodox discourse we discover a harsh criticism of the Church, its clerical institutions, and its theologians. Both tendencies are closely related to one another and result from what scholars have referred to as the crisis of faith or the crisis of piety in the second half of the sixteenth century.1 One might also speak of a crisis of credibility concerning church officials and theologians, who were often believed to be merely professing a Christian belief, but not practicing it. Due to this situation, the demand for reformation of the Reformation became irresistible and often transcended the opposition between the two categories “heresy” and “orthodoxy”, which themselves are by no means unproblematic. The major difficulty

1 See Sparn, ‘Die Krise der Frömmigkeit und ihr theologischer Reflex im nachreformatorischen Luthertum’, 54–82; Zeller, ‘Die “Alternde Welt” und die “Morgenröte im Aufgang”’, 1–13. However, Johann Anselm Steiger in his book on Johann Gerhard (1582–1637), 60, argues against the existence of any such crisis of piety. Steiger emphasizes that mystical piety must also be seen as part of an ‘inner-orthodox process of interpretation’ (innerorthodoxer Auslegungsprozeß) and self-definition, hence a process that is not necessarily strictly contradictory to orthodox patterns.
here is the fact that these categories were usually polemical constructions deployed within different discourses.\textsuperscript{2} Officials and theologians of the Church were as readily called heretics by “heretics” as opinions and attitudes of seemingly subversive individuals were called heretical by orthodox theologians. While the designation “orthodox” normally referred to agreement with or opposition to a specific doctrine, for instance the \textit{Institutio Christianae Religionis} of Calvin, and concerned the legal status of one’s faith in accordance or disagreement with a specific theology, the designation “heretical” pertained, rather, to the contrast of piety and impiety, which is less formal and appears to be a more spiritual and emotional category.

Apart from this, there were many authors who fundamentally questioned the belief in humanistic education as a value in itself and the belief in specific philosophical and medical written traditions based on the works of Aristotle and Galen, which were considered authoritative. Referring to Paul’s basic opposition of letter and spirit, most critics of the authority of books and of the adherence to scholarship relied more on their own spiritual and natural experience than on written words or philological studies. Scientific investigation was understood in a similar fashion: nature was considered a book whose spirit must be investigated by experiment and by one’s own reading experience rather than by books reflecting traditional theories of natural philosophy. Based on experience and experiment alone, scientific investigation can lead, but need not lead, to the separation of science and religion. Paracelsians, for instance, saw scientific investigation as an important part of religion, i.e. a part that was considered the magical realm of natural theology.\textsuperscript{3} For them, the Book of Nature and Holy Scripture corresponded to

\textsuperscript{2} Cf. the different definitions of heresy that were current in the second half of the sixteenth century, for instance those of Heinrich Bullinger in his \textit{Haußbuch}, of Jean Calvin in his \textit{Defensio orthodoxae fidei de sacra trinitate contra prodigiosos errores Michaelis Servetus}, and of Théodore de Bèze in his \textit{De haereticis a civili magistratu puniendis libellus} [...]. A short summary of the different definitions of heresy is provided by Voogt, \textit{Constraint on Trial}, 146–151. The famous case of the accused, condemned, and executed heretic Michael Servetus (Miguel Servet) as reason for the debate on religious tolerance is discussed in Guggisberg, \textit{Sebastian Castellio}, 80–171.