The title of my contribution is inspired by Marilyn Robinson Waldman’s article “Tradition as a Modality of Change”.1 Waldman shows how Muslims, including traditionalists, use Islamic traditions in contemporary society to bring about and legitimise change—all kinds of change, since both the traditions invoked and the changes desired are very diverse. Her approach corresponds with my overall intention to reformulate some fixed oppositions as dynamic relationships—in particular to highlight the links that connect religion and modernity. I have used the title of her article before, in another contribution, “Religious Insulation as a Mode of Interdependence”, to show how the tendency of religious groups and traditions to retreat into religious bulwarks—sects, religious subcultures, “pillars” (as in the Netherlands before 1960)—is in fact a mode of implicating oneself in society.2 In the same way, I will consider orthodoxy here as a possible and often successful strategy of “adaptation”. Because I am uncomfortable with the term “adaptation”, I have put it between inverted commas. I have to add that orthodoxy is an even more elusive concept.

2. Orthodoxy and Adaptation as Conflicting Religious Identities?

Let me start by describing the relationship between orthodoxy and adaptation as stated in the initial NOSTER-Leuven research programme “Coping with the Changed/Changing Reality”. The subtitle leaves no doubt as to how this relationship should be perceived: “Orthodoxy and Adaptation as Conflicting Religious Identities”. The ensuing commentary contends: “In the past, various processes of adaptation as well as the orthodox refusal to new developments have taken place. The program aims at a better understanding of the relevant societal processes and the theological arguments that played/play a role when religious communities made/make a choice either for adaptation or for orthodoxy”. I wish to challenge this point of view.

Firstly, it starts by assuming an intrinsic opposition between adaptation on the one hand and orthodoxy on the other. Adaptation to modern society is presented as good and the orthodox strategy as one of “refusal to new developments”. This is, of course, a partisan view and the initiator of the programme, Bob Becking, has the merit of having stated it in all clarity and sincerity. It is the view of religious liberals on the fate of religion in modernity. It is the dominant view in academia and perhaps in the West generally. And it is mirrored by the view of religious conservatives who present themselves as unwavering champions of an unchanging religion. Nevertheless, I will argue that the opposition between orthodoxy and adaptation is a false one. On the contrary, orthodoxy is and always has been a major and very successful way to “adapt” a religion to new situations. It has been so in the past, it is the case in the present and it will very probably continue to be so in the future. Orthodoxy should not be seen as an unchanged relic from earlier times, but as an identity-enhancing strategy, aiming at and resulting in religious change.

Secondly, we need to be conscious that, in interpreting orthodoxy and adaptation as an intrinsic opposition, we are giving a particular and modern rendering of the problem. In the NOSTER-Leuven statement, orthodoxy refers primarily to strict, rigid positions and groups. Rigidity is then opposed to perennial change in modern society and associated with an inherent inability to cope with modernity. The problem is that this emphasis cannot do justice to the whole history of orthodoxy in Christianity. It points to situations and challenges that are characteristic for modern societies and particularly for Protestantism: