The Dynamics of Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy.  
Dealing with Divergence in Muslim Discourses and  
Islamic Studies

Robert Langer & Udo Simon (guest editors)  
Heidelberg

It is easy to argue against the use of the notion of orthodoxy when it is applied to Islam. There is no equivalent expression in Arabic except a loanword which is associated with a Christian context.\(^1\) There are no generally accepted religious authority, no hierarchy, or ecclesiastical office that would decide for all Muslims what is the right belief. Decision-making is quite different from what one finds in Eastern Christendom, from whence the notion is borrowed. The term “orthodoxy” seems to be out of place in Islamic studies.\(^2\) Moreover, the “orthodoxy” versus “heresy” scheme is denounced as a dichotomy of Eurocentric interpretive categories that fails to grasp the pluralism and complexity characteristic of Muslim religious life. Instead, it is argued, one should let Islamic tradition speak for itself.\(^3\) Where a timeless and a-historical notion of orthodoxy prevails, Western Islamicists even in our day would continue to describe heterodoxy as its corrupted surrogate.\(^4\)

---


\(^2\) For Watt and others who suggest to avoid it, see Alexander Knysh, “‘Orthodoxy’ and ‘Heresy’ in Medieval Islam: An Essay in Reassessment”, in: *Muslim World* 83, 1 (1993), pp. 46-67. Interestingly, although he argues against the term orthodoxy Knysh inflates its use by speaking of a “zero orthodoxy” which means the *bi-lā kayf* doctrine, an “orthodoxy-in-the-making”, and a “spontaneous orthodoxy”.

\(^3\) See Knysh, *Orthodoxy*, p. 62.

\(^4\) Knysh, *Orthodoxy*, pp. 49 and 65.
Apart from the fact that it is rather difficult to find a contemporary scholar who would be ready to emphasize the opposition of “genuine” vs. “corrupted”, there is an increasing tendency to acknowledge local or temporary standards of “right belief”. Be that as it may, the usage of “orthodoxy” is so ubiquitous that it does not need documentation. Even those who find the term problematic, or declare its use inappropriate continue to apply it. Sometimes orthodoxy is avoided but tacitly implied while heterodoxy is openly addressed. As an indication of its somewhat questionable status in an Islamic context it is a common practice to put it in quotation marks.

“Orthodoxy” is usually juxtaposed in an implicit or explicit opposition to a number of disparate notions, such as orthopraxy, folk religion, minority view, heresy, or heterodoxy. Tellingly, anthropologists who focus on emic perspectives do not hesitate to use it in contrast to something like folk Islam. In addition to general equivalents, such as ecclesiastical authority or prerogative of interpretation, in the case of Islam there is a variety of concepts which are closely connected with the notion of orthodoxy.

In one usage, orthodoxy is paralleled with Sunnism. This meets with the Islamic topos that right belief and right behaviour would

5) Lewis, *Observations*, p. 47, for instance, speaks of “the orthodox faith”. Some decades ago authors were less reluctant than today’s scholars, e.g. Schacht in: *EI II*, 887b s. v. fiqh; Gustav Edmund von Grunebaum, *Studien zum Kulturbild und Selbstverständnis des Islams*, Zürich: Artemis (1969), pp. 164 and passim.


8) See H.A.R. Gibb, “Interpretation of Islamic history”, in: *Cahiers d’histoire mondiale*, I (1953/54), p. 40. “The whole of medieval Islamic history is dominated by the effort on the part of the Sunni or ‘orthodox’ religious institution, firstly, to maintain its universalism against internal and external challenges, and secondly, to realize the widest possible measure of religious, social and cultural unity throughout the Islamic world.” For the role of traditionalists in the formation of Sunni Islam see also Christoph Melchert, “Sectaries in the Six Books: Evidence for Their Exclusion from the Sunni Community”, in: *The Muslim