

9-13-08 - The Audacity of Claiming the Last Word on This Word

By PETER STEINFELS, Beliefs, The New York Times

When it comes to religion, “orthodoxy” is a fighting word. That is why it is peculiar, to say the least, when the news media make themselves the arbiter of who is, say, an orthodox Roman Catholic or an orthodox Buddhist and who is not.

A recent New Yorker article on religion and the presidential race, for example, counterposed Catholics who welcomed the changes in the church initiated by the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s with Catholics “who hewed to orthodoxy.”

Pope John Paul II, the article said, reinterpreted Vatican II “along orthodox lines” and found allies in a group of Catholic bishops who were “fiercely orthodox” and determined “to steer the American church more toward orthodoxy.”

Does this mean that the Catholics who rallied enthusiastically around Vatican II, and the popes who preceded John Paul II in interpreting it, and a majority of bishops who had been steering the American church for two decades, were not orthodox? Were they all, knowingly or unknowingly, unorthodox — or even heretical?

That would be a pretty sweeping judgment, but it is one held, explicitly or implicitly, by many conservative Catholics. (Of course, there are ultraconservative Catholics who think John Paul II was also a heretic.) The real question is, Why should The New Yorker decide?

To be fair, the New Yorker article by no means stands alone. This matter-of-fact assignment of the label “orthodox” to one faction among others has occurred frequently in the press, occasionally in this paper.

One obvious reason is the confusion between uppercase Orthodox and lowercase orthodox. Among Jews, it has become conventional to use the word “Orthodox” to designate one segment of the Jewish community adhering to a certain interpretation of what Jewish belief and observance require. The Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist movements within Judaism may joust with the Orthodox over many things, but use of that word has become a settled matter.

Likewise, among Christians it has long been conventional to use uppercase Orthodox as a term distinguishing the Christianity that shared forms of liturgy and theology rooted in the Byzantine, or Greek-speaking, part of the Roman Empire from those who took a separate path in the West. Again, Roman Catholics and Protestants may argue that they are as orthodox as the Orthodox (or more so), but they do not fight about the label.

Lowercase orthodoxy is quite another matter.

In many religious groups, the word, from the Greek for “correct doctrine” or “right belief,” designates not one side in theological controversies but precisely what is at issue: What constitutes correct or true teaching within that particular tradition?

In the rough-and-tumble of these controversies, it is not unusual for some believers to put themselves forward as orthodox Catholics or orthodox Presbyterians, just as it is not unusual for some partisans in political battles to put themselves forward as true or patriotic Americans.

Such audacity can be entirely sincere, although it can also be highly manipulative. Not every difference over public policy is a matter of patriotism, and not every difference over liturgical practice or pastoral priorities is a matter of orthodoxy. Raising the stakes rhetorically does not necessarily help resolve these questions practically.

But whether the matter under debate is central or peripheral, making a claim to the label obviously does not settle the question of what is true doctrine, or true patriotism. And the news media should be as careful not to echo the partisan language of adversaries in the religious case as in the political arena.

A moment can arrive when some participants in these debates conclude that a given label is beyond rescuing. There are some left-wing Americans who have given up on the claim to be patriotic, either because they think the word has been irreversibly seized by conservatives or even because they think it denotes a false ideal.

Likewise, in the particularly contentious ranks of theologically minded Catholics, or perhaps in the polemic-weary ranks of mainline Protestantism, there are those who have surrendered the label of orthodoxy to conservatives, either because they no longer have the energy to protest or because they have concluded that the whole idea of orthodoxy — correct doctrine or right belief — is too encrusted with questionable notions to be worth defending.

But the existence of such minorities hardly justifies the automatic assignment of patriotism or orthodoxy to whoever is first and loudest in claiming it.

Instead of simply describing Joe Churchman as an orthodox believer, journalism would do well to follow its established forms and describe Joe Churchman as a man who calls himself an orthodox believer.

When it comes to nomenclature, writing about religion is of course a minefield. Terms like “conservative” and “liberal,” “traditionalist” and “progressive” are almost unavoidable shorthand, though they suffer from their origins in political categories and almost inevitably oversimplify and dichotomize religious realities that are multifaceted.

But “orthodox” is a special case, because it suggests a sharp boundary between those who properly belong and those who are properly excluded, the way that “patriotic” can suggest a boundary between loyal citizens and something verging on traitors. Religious leaders have a hard enough time wrestling with such matters. Journalists should not get in their way.