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**Religious Orthodoxies:
Provocations from the
Jewish and Christian
Margins**

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Ayala Fader and Sonja Luehrmann were
collaborating on this review until Sonja's untimely
death in 2019.

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Abstract

This review represents a dialogic experiment developing the comparative analytical category of religious orthodoxies. To explore the category, we profile scholarship on Jewish and Christian orthodoxies, neither of which fits into the Protestant ideas of religion, secularism, and modernity that still implicitly undergird the anthropology of religion. For religious orthodoxies, the heart of religious experience is correctness and continuity, rather than personal transformation and reform. Furthermore, the imbrication of the political with the theological that is definitive of religious orthodoxies holds promise for new understandings of politics and religion's potential for social action. By including different relationships of scale in a range of social formations and institutional dynamics, religious orthodoxies provide insight into the mutually constitutive relationship between practice and belief; the taken-for-grantedness of material mediation of presence in orthodox traditions; the ethical dimension of practice; and the entanglements of orthodoxies, heterodoxies, and heresies.

1. RELIGIOUS ORTHODOXIES, THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF RELIGION, AND BEYOND

As anthropologists of religion studying Christian (Naumescu) and Jewish (Fader) orthodoxies, we have been inspired by recent scholarship in the anthropology of Islam and of Christianity (Fadil 2019, Robbins 2014), especially regarding mediation, ethical cultivation, and religious doubt and failure. However, we have simultaneously struggled with the lingering legacy of Protestantism that shapes anthropological approaches to these important topics. Even the terms that have been used to describe the communities in which we work (e.g., nonliberal, pietist, conservative, or fundamentalist), based as they are on particular religious and political histories, implicitly frame certain communities as more or less modern and orientalize those less modern as clinging to material attachments, political structures, and external practice.

Instead, we offer the term religious orthodoxies, with a small o and in the plural, as an experimental, analytical category for communities that share a commitment to correct action and correct belief rooted in an authoritative tradition that directs practice in the present and into the future (Asad 1993, Mahmood 2011). Claims to correctness or incorrectness should be understood as what ethnomethodologists have designated a “social achievement” (Schegloff 1986). That is, what gets interpreted as correct or incorrect, especially in traditions that are hierarchically structured as orthodoxies are, is always negotiated, contested, and contingent—in short, ethical and political. The category of Orthodoxy as both (normatively) emic and analytic (Boustani et al. 2011, Wilson 2007) simultaneously foregrounds competing ethnographic and epistemological histories. Our conceptualizing acknowledges the Jewish–Christian genealogies of the term and the influence that has had on the modern conception of religion. Nevertheless, we consider religious orthodoxies “good to think with” because the concept pushes against modernity’s commitment to purify the mental from the material, the animate from the inanimate, the religious from the secular (Latour 1993). Specifically, religious orthodoxies as a comparative category allow us to decenter Protestant cultural assumptions, which cast modern religion as a site of rupture with the past, religious authority as located in the nexus between the individual and God, belonging defined as accepting the word or text, and becoming as individual transformation. Our aim is to expand the analytical lens to include how traditions, theological and beyond, and everyday obligations play out in life and social action, including diverse sources of authority, belonging, continuity, and change. Orthodoxies can be denominational claims to correct practice and belief while also used more broadly, as we do here, to multiscale religious communities, which share institutional, aesthetic and material, ethical, and political orientations, even as those may be contested among practitioners.

Twenty-first-century ethnographic scholarship on Jewish and Christian orthodoxies, though not central to the anthropological canon of Abrahamic religions, serves as a provocation from the margins to the wider contemporary field of the anthropology of religion and beyond. On the one hand, ethnographies of Orthodox Christianity, which put orthodoxy at the center of their theology and practice, have challenged the Protestant bias of the anthropology of Christianity and Western modernity (Boylston 2014, Hann 2011). Anthropological studies of Jewish orthodoxies, on the other hand, are rarely considered as a coherent body of research in religion, Jewish studies, or anthropology, entering conversations through area studies if at all. Some anthropologists working on Jewish or Christian orthodoxies have gestured to one another (Bakker Kellogg 2019, Bandak & Boylston 2014, Leon & Shoham 2018, Mayne 2022), but there has been little rigorous comparison to generate theoretical interventions into the study of religion more generally. In contrast and in the spirit of dialogue, we draw on particular historical entanglements, theologies, and politics that are part of contemporary Jewish and Christian orthodoxies to contribute to recent calls in the anthropology of religion for bridging attention to individual ethical cultivation and experience with

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politics (Shohet 2021); renewed attention to institutions (Ammerman 2016, Handman & Opas 2019); recognition of the diversity of members according to age, gender, sexuality, and generation who have quite different orientations to and ethical investments in the heterodoxies they define themselves against (Bjork-James 2021); and acknowledgment that, alongside aspirations for individual piety and study of religious texts, we should attend to less transcendent desires, dreams, uncertainties, and rejection altogether (Mittermaier 2012, Schielke 2009).

In this review, we develop a comparative framework we call religious orthodoxies, while also arguing for bringing Jewish and Christian orthodoxies into the anthropological canon. We use religious orthodoxies less orthodoxically (cf. Asad 1986) to provide new insight into the mutually constitutive relationship between practice and belief; the taken-for-grantedness of material mediation of presence in orthodox traditions, including the diversity of authoritative relationships between humans and God/other nonhuman beings; the lived experience of obligation and aspiration across contexts and the ethical dimension of practice; and the entanglement of orthodoxy, heterodoxy, and heresy. We conclude by suggesting that, beyond the anthropology of religion, the category of orthodoxy can help us consider how communally sanctioned practices and ideological commitments come together in politics and social action.

2. HISTORIES OF CORRECTNESS

Jewish and Christian orthodoxies, defined as they are by their preoccupation with correctness, can straddle what have been methodological and epistemological divides in the anthropology of religion by recuperating belief and interiority into the productive approaches to tradition that Asad (1993) and others have inspired since the 1990s. Depending on how we render the Greek *doxía*, orthodoxy can refer to a person who holds the right opinion but also to one who praises God in the proper way (Schmemmann 1966), with the implication that belief and practice are not in opposition but rather constitute each other. Correct belief and practice in religious orthodoxies work together in a way that bridges two strands of anthropological studies of religion that have historically been pitted against each other: one that emphasizes belief, meaning, and private interior states and the more recent approach that focuses on materiality, sensory, discipline, and embodied practice. Following Asad's (1993, p. 77) insight that "embodied practices (including language in use) form a precondition for varieties of religious experience," becoming orthodox Christian or Jewish is a condition of skilled practice. However, we can recuperate belief into this formulation by drawing on C.S. Peirce's conception that "belief is a habit of mind" (cited in Rutherford 2009), which takes belief out of the private, invisible interiors of individuals and instead roots it in experience, produced intersubjectively with others—be they human, material, technological, or divine (Luhmann 2012).

Religious orthodoxies' emphasis on correctness bridges differences of scale, from private, individual practices and beliefs (or doubters' refusal) to public, political dynamics of nation, empire, and world building. These entangled histories point to orthodoxies as a set of "family resemblances" (Wittgenstein, cited in Zion-Waldoks 2022) that share a commitment to textual traditions, practices, and aesthetic formations, recognizable across time and space. We question accounts by adherents, critics, and analysts that frame Judaism and Christianity (and Islam; Wilson 2007) as exclusively religions of practice and law because they are often contrasted to the interiority and reason of Protestant Christianity (Haeri 2017, Hann 2011). We emphasize that Jewish Orthodox practice includes the centrality of belief, philosophical ethics, and the critical role of discursive interpretation of law (Buckser 2008) and that Orthodox Christian practice includes virtue ethics, theology, and community (Naumescu 2018, Shevzov 2003). The competing, partial, and perhaps idiosyncratic histories of Jewish and Christian orthodoxies we

present below track shifting and competing histories of correctness, with Jewish Orthodoxy traditionally traced to eighteenth/nineteenth-century Western Europe and Orthodox Christianity to fourth/fifth-century ecumenical councils that started to formulate the Christian faith. Despite their differences, these histories reveal orthodoxies' ongoing engagement with politics of race, ethnicity, empire, and nation that shape communities' relationships to the divine, other adherents, and those outside the boundaries of correctness.

2.1. Jewish Orthodoxies

Judaism has never definitively fit into political or disciplinary categories of race, religion, ethnicity, culture, or nationality. This analytical fluidity is useful for highlighting shifting narratives about the constitution of orthodoxy's claims to correctness by expanding definitions of religion and how we study it. The hegemonic narrative of European (Ashkenazic) Jewish Orthodoxy as a religion was a "modern invention" (Batnitzky 2011, p. 34) that emerged in the late eighteenth century, when Jews were granted citizenship rights in Western and Central Europe. Previously, Jews had lived apart from non-Jews in their own political, theological, and legal corporate units (p. 111). However, with opportunities for greater participation, Jews began to debate navigating tradition with citizenship, drawing on German Lutherans' and Enlightenment reformers' terms to pit correct belief (German "*Orthodox*") or *gesetzentreu* (German for "true to law/law-abiding") against Enlightenment-inspired Jewish reformers. The Jewish Orthodox claimed a "conscious commitment to Jewish law (*Halacha*) divinely revealed and tradition (*mesora*)," as interpreted by male rabbinic leadership (Blutinger 2007, pp. 310–12). This new formation of Judaism as a religion effectively separated privatized belief, an "interiorized essence and a rational set of beliefs," and practice from the political category of Jews as European citizens, even as it marked a dramatic change from the racialized others Jews had been in Europe for hundreds of years prior (Satlow 2006, p. 4).

Different histories of Jewish orthodoxies, however, include competing claims to correct belief and practice among observant Jews and between Jews and non-Jews, constituting Judaism as a discursive tradition. For example, from the nineteenth century onward, Western European Jews framed Eastern European Jews as less modern and less correctly Orthodox. With fewer opportunities for citizenship, many Eastern European Jews rejected traditional rabbinic authorities and embraced political movements, such as communism, socialism, and Zionism, or new spiritual and philosophical movements, such as Hasidism or the Mussar (ethics) movement (Biale et al. 2018). Simultaneously, the expanding European colonial empires were encountering non-Ashkenazic Jews (Sephardim and Mizrachim) in the Iberian Peninsula, North Africa, and the Middle East (Katz et al. 2017). If, as Anidjar (2008) suggests, Jews were the "theological enemy" of European Christians and Arabs were their "political enemy," then Sephardic and Mizrachi Jews were racialized by both European Ashkenazic Jews and non-Jewish European colonizers (Boum 2015). Contemporary Sephardic and Mizrachi Jews define themselves and are defined by social scientists not as Orthodox but rather as *Masorti* (Hebrew for "traditionalists") (Yadgar 2013), occupying a liminal space on the margins of an emergent continuum of religiosity defined by Ashkenazic practices and beliefs.

Ashkenazic Jewish Orthodoxy today has been shaped by migrations and dislocations before and after the Holocaust from Europe to the United States, Israel, Canada, Latin America, and other transnational points. In these new contexts, adherents and analysts delineate a continuum of Ashkenazic religious correctness based on Jewish law and tradition that spans the most religious to the secular, the traditional to the modern (Corwin Berman 2009). Those who self-identify in the United States as ultra-Orthodox or in Israel and increasingly elsewhere as *Haredi* (Hebrew

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for “those who tremble”), for example, claim that their practice is the most authentic. The past two decades have seen dramatic changes among a range of Orthodox Jews (Ashkenazic and Mizrahi/Sephardic) in the United States, Israel, and Canada. These changes include a breakdown in rabbinic leadership (Heilman 2017, Shuman 2021) and the emergence of a professionalized class of intermediaries (Yogev 2022); the rise of the powerful Mizrahi/Sephardic political party, Shas, in Israel (Leon 2011); and legal conflicts with non-Jews and the state (Stolzenberg & Myers 2022).

2.2. Christian Orthodoxies

The historical dynamics of Christian orthodoxies are similar to the Jewish case, pivoting around competing claims to correct belief and practice both among Christians and between Christians and religious others. In the history of Christianity, the label “Orthodox” is more often used as a self-designation, but it is also tied to imperial and national legacies. Technically, churches in East and West consider themselves to be both “orthodox” (professing right teachings) and “catholic” (encompassing teachings and communities from many times and places). However, since the Great Schism in 1054, it has become customary to refer to the Eastern branches of Christianity as “Orthodox,” while the Church of Rome acquired the label “Catholic.” Yet this designation elides an earlier schism between Eastern Orthodoxy and Oriental Orthodoxy that emerged in 451 after the Council of Chalcedon. A matter of “right belief” about the nature of Christ, this debate saw the development of an imperial Byzantine Church that became dominant in the Orthodox world (Johnson 2014). The other, Oriental Orthodox churches remained in the shadow for centuries, and their attempts to articulate an Oriental theology and identity as an alternative to Western and Eastern Christian church politics have not yet succeeded in challenging this dominant narrative (Lukasik 2020, Naumescu 2020).

The nineteenth century saw the nationalization of orthodoxies, with the Eastern Orthodox churches becoming national churches, territorially bounded and tied to political authority (Leustean 2014). Despite their modern history, these churches were portrayed as premodern through the orientaling lens of Western historiography and as “caesaropapist,” subservient to state power (Hann 2014, Papadakis 1988). These stereotypes have begun to break up through recent histories of modern Russia (Kenworthy 2010, Kizenko 2021, Shevzov 2004), as well as a school of anthropological study that began at Oxford in the 1980s (Herzfeld 1990, Stewart 1991), and has steadily expanded since the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe (Köllner 2013, Tateo 2020, Tocheva 2017). This scholarship shows that Orthodox Christianity has its own modern history, propelled in formative ways by encounters with Catholic dogmatic developments as well as with neighbors of different faiths (Frick 2013, Pasięka 2015). Such encounters were a determining factor in the establishment of orthodoxies because they “galvanized,” to use Boylston’s (2018, p. 172) term, Orthodox Christians to affirm their faith in doctrinal terms and “right” practice.

Today, Orthodox Christianity represents a global community of local churches united by a shared conception of orthodoxy while remaining rooted in specific localities. For this reason, it is helpful to think about it in terms of a unity of style rather than organizational structure as in the Catholic Church (Halemba 2015, p. 146). The commitment to common forms of worship and a body of authoritative works provides connections between Orthodox Christians who belong to different national churches and diaspora communities. Particular musical, visual, and gestural forms are recognizable across national contexts, engaging members of diverse Orthodox churches in transnational imaginaries (Engelhardt 2014). While this aesthetic dimension has historically been associated with sociopolitical stagnation (Scheffel 1991, p. 206), its persuasive power has successfully been harnessed by many, including contemporary far-right movements and populist regimes, to create alternative publics and justify neocolonial claims in the name of a “Russian world” (V. Fomina, forthcoming article; Riccardi-Swartz 2021).

3. MEDIATING AUTHORITY

Religious orthodoxies' claims to correctness have a distinctive relationship to mediation in contrast to specifically Protestant concerns with individual experience of presence. While immanence may always be a product of mediation, for religious orthodoxies mediation foregrounds authority rather than presence (for a discussion of presence beyond the Protestant experience, see Orsi 2016). In religious orthodoxies, authorized intercessors or mediators work together to "organize relations between human groups, between the genders, between humans and God, and between bodies and the environment" (Boylston 2018, p. 9). Media, then, are less explicitly about a relationship with or experience of the divine than the means by which adherents come to accept or question that certain "sensational forms" rooted in shared semiotic ideologies (Meyer 2011) correctly fulfill God's will as interpreted by human (mostly male) hierarchies of authority. This position on mediation has implications for notions of ethical personhood as well as structures of authority, in that the correct practice of religiously orthodox individuals occurs through consultation with human, nonhuman, and material mediators. In religious orthodoxies, mediation does not preclude human agency and social change, because when mediators cease to be perceived as having access to correctness, new mediators gain authority. For religious orthodoxies, then, the question of mediation foregrounds hierarchical authority as part of the interpretive work of divine revelation, which stakes out tradition as gendered, political, theological, and material negotiation. Mediation, in short, is not a problem to be overcome in religious orthodoxies; rather, mediation forms the substance of orthodox aesthetics in appeals to the senses and as world making, which then becomes the grounds for claims to correctness.

Because of the central role of authorized media in the constitution of correct belief and practice, language, material culture, and embodiment can all become sites for authorities' claims to correctness, to differentiate correctness from incorrectness, who belongs and who does not. Studies of mediation in religious orthodoxies uniquely navigate a tension that Eisenlohr (2011) has identified in contemporary anthropological thinking about media and the circulation of culture. He states that a medium may be thought of as any material object that stands between humans and their worlds, including the divine. At the same time, a medium and its material properties may also creatively shape worlds for humans, influencing communication, social, and political arrangements. For religious orthodoxies the question becomes how a medium ratifies or challenges specific authoritative interpretations of God's will, linking the divine, the human, and the material into ethical hierarchies. Methodologically, scholarship on Jewish and Christian orthodoxies and media includes attention to texts/prayer and embodied ritual, and reaches further afield to what Zion-Waldoks (2022), building on lived religion approaches, calls "lived orthodoxies" (see also Werth 2011). Lived orthodoxies show how the theological, human (embodied, linguistic, sonic), and material get experienced as the correct way to live and, simultaneously, where the material properties of media shape religious worlds.

3.1. Jewish Orthodoxies

A theological project (e.g., the Lurianic Kabbalah) for Jewish Orthodoxy is uplifting the material world, "gathering holy sparks" of the divine that have scattered throughout the world and lodged randomly in all kinds of material vessels (Jacobs 1995). This theological project shapes a semiotic ideology (Keane 2018) whereby the form and content of an object, subject, body, language, or epistemology may be made "kosher" by an authorized rabbi or authorized doctrine. Ultimately, these authoritative rulings have not only theological but also economic, cultural, and political implications in that they mandate a totalizing way of life premised on its distinction from non-Jews and even other Jewish orthodoxies. Scholarship on Orthodox Jews has examined a broad range

of sites where the mediation of non-Jewish or non-Orthodox forms is world making even as it challenges claims to the morality of secular modernity. For example, in his study of the ArtScroll publishing empire, Stolorow (2010) shows how technologies of printing in a global capitalist market mediate traditional Jewish religious texts as both accessible (with English translations and instructions) and authentic. ArtScroll also publishes self-help literature, where neoliberal notions of the person are framed in the language of Jewish ethics. For research on similar processes of making non-Jewish media and epistemologies “kosher,” see the pioneering studies by El-Or (1994, 2002) on Hasidic women’s religious literacy in Israel and on Mizrahi women, Finkelman (2011) on popular ultra-Orthodox fiction, Kahn (2000) on assisted reproductive technologies in Israel, and Kasstan (2019) on how Haredi Jews make health care decisions in England. Even participation in non-Jewish religious practices, such as Buddhist meditation for Breslov Hasidim, can discipline the cultivation of desires to participate in Jewish authorized practices (Mautner 2022).

A growing body of research is expanding from Jewish studies’ focus on Ashkenazic male religious textual literacy practice to include material and expressive culture as sites for contesting authority. This literature has the potential to broaden discussions of race/ethnicity and religion in Europe and the United States, where Jewish difference is less often included. For example, Arkin (2014) writes about French Sephardic Jewish youth, liminal as both “Arabs” and “Jews,” who use *chal* fashion (clothing and jewelry) to distinguish themselves from “Arab Muslims,” racializing Jewishness and the bases for French citizenship in the process. Other forms of expressive culture can similarly be sites for negotiating competing forms of belonging. Roda & Schwartz (2020), for example, analyze how the music of a popular Sephardic French singer navigates Arabness and Jewishness, the religious and the secular. In contrast, Munro (2020) shows how Israeli Haredi all-women theater and dance groups’ strict modesty standards give them the authority to critique Haredi social problems, such as domestic abuse and poverty. Dale (2022) analyzes debates between Orthodox Ashkenazic and Mizrahi Jews in New York City over which music is “Jewish” and which is not, showing how expressive culture establishes ethnic/racial and religious boundaries. Benor (2012) examines a repertoire of semiotic practices that cultivate correct relationships to authority in her study of Jewish adult returnees to Orthodoxy, who are socialized to behave, dress, and speak in ways that perform and live their acceptance of Orthodox Judaism.

The materiality of language across media and through its portability (Gershon & Manning 2014) makes multilingual Jewish practices central to authorizing correctness. Religious texts can be mediating objects that authorize gendered practice, ranging from Boyarin’s (2020) study of men learning the Torah in ways that reclaim a more tolerant Orthodoxy to uses of Yiddish or Hebrew to lay claim to a particular form of Jewishness (Avineri 2015, Avni & Mencken 2021). Over the past decade, digital and new media, particularly on smartphones, have been central to debates around ultra-Orthodox/Haredi rabbinic leadership’s waning authority to dictate correctness. Communications studies scholarship has examined the emergence of the “kosher” cell phone, which Israeli rabbis have been able to mandate because of their control over the market for phone companies (Campbell & Golan 2011, Neriya-Ben Shazar 2016, Rosenberg et al. 2019). At the same time, social media’s affordances have created opportunities for new publics and counterpublics to form, challenging existing structures of authority (Fader 2017) or furthering messianic hopes (Bilu 2020, Golan & Stadler 2015).

3.2. Christian Orthodoxies

In both Jewish and Christian orthodoxies, texts, sacred languages, and textual practices have reassured believers that they remain in the right faith while providing a canonical space where improvisation and change can occur. Despite its textual tradition, Orthodox Christianity has usually been

associated with icons that best illustrate its conception of mediation, founded on the premise of Christ becoming human (incarnation) and his presence in the sacraments (Hann & Goltz 2010). The image/icon affords an iconic relationship in which the devotional image is employed as a straight, unmediated connector between the beholder and the deity (Hanganu 2010). Long justified by the church fathers in the eighth-century iconoclastic debates (see Section 5), material mediation is the “right” way to know God because God can be known through material form. Therefore, Orthodox Christians surround themselves with things and let those things act upon them while paying close attention to particular hierarchies of mediation. The tension between mediation as the material actualization of this relationship with God and mediation as the maintenance of hierarchical distance pervades the pursuit of orthodoxy.

If many observers have noticed the continuities between the theological and the everyday, this is due to an Orthodox aesthetics that carries the theological into practice, language, and materiality. Orthodox Christians approach media as a form of world making and attunement to an orthodox sensorium, as Engelhardt (2018, p. 62) observes in his ethnography of Greek Orthodox engagements with media technologies. The mediatic nature of Orthodox Christianity is visible everywhere: in the icons and their reproductions, the burning of incense, the sacred language and chanting, and the intercessory power of saints, as well as in new media forms mobilized by religious institutions and believers. These media technologies are tied to ideas about orthodoxy and embody histories of debates about what constitutes the right means to approach God (Heo 2017, Luehrmann 2010). Aesthetics, in this sense, function as a marker of distinction in two ways: demarcating communities but also providing criteria by which the orthodoxy or nonorthodoxy of a practice can be discussed and debated. It allows for particular traditions to be recognized as Orthodox and gives people the sense of belonging to the right faith and worshiping the right way at the same time.

The different forms of material mediation are hierarchically arranged and sanctioned. “Traditional” media such as voice, incense, and icon efface themselves as media being preauthorized and sanctified. New media technologies like recordings, broadcasts, and online content are marked as media requiring spiritual discernment and formal sanction but also the “right” intention to be recognized as such (Engelhardt 2018). Here enter blessings, an everyday practice of giving and receiving in a spiritual economy imbued with but not overdetermined by institutional authority (Luehrmann 2018a, p. 12; Shevzov 2004). Depending on the context, a blessing can be an act of sanctification (of an icon, water, or oil) or permission, a demand, deference, or a spiritual gift. This is part of the huge work Orthodox Christians do to make matter holy (Boylston 2018, Carroll 2018), starting from their own bodies and extending to homes, cloth, images, objects, and places animated with prayer (*namolene mistse*), which are charged with spiritual power by the repeated mediations and accumulation of spiritual relations over time (Wanner 2020). They also take it upon themselves to make others holy, becoming mediators or intercessors for the living and the dead. Delegating prayer (Luehrmann 2018b) and praying through mediators by using the akathists of saints are forms of mediation in themselves that allow Orthodox Christians to harness the power of holy figures and religious specialists for specific ends. If they lack time or confidence in their skill or the correct media, people appeal to “authorized” mediators with a greater claim to expertise for reasons of ordained status, gender, or age (Kormina & Luehrmann 2017, Malara 2018). These forms of mediation enlarge and thicken spiritual networks sustaining a relational Orthodox ethics and world making. They combine deference and deferral to institutional authority with more horizontal, mutual relations of guidance, care, and support, remaining anchored in a broader ethical pursuit of “correct worship” that underpins an Orthodox aesthetic. As Carroll (2017, p. 370) asserts, drawing attention to the embrace of materiality as an ethical practice, “aesthetics are the everyday localised expressions of ethics.”

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4. ETHICAL PRACTICE BETWEEN OBLIGATION AND JUDGMENT

The gap between orthodoxy as an aspiration toward correctness and the diversity of various ways of practicing provides the foundation for the ethical dimension of religious orthodoxies. In Jewish and Christian orthodoxies, ethics emerge from practice (Lambek 2010), doing the right thing, in the right way, at the right time, a way of becoming by pursuing correctness. While many of the recent anthropological studies of morality and ethics have focused on the individual cultivation of virtue, studying religious orthodoxies requires more attention to moral collectivities, including the family, religious institutions, the state, and transnational communities. Feminist perspectives on ethics and morality in particular have encouraged this shift because families, as Das (2010) shows, are sites where different relationships of scale meet, from the institutional to the individual and from the public to the private, especially around issues of gender. Religious orthodoxies are grounded in relatedness, often expressed in the language of kinship rather than in the individual believer or moral institutions alone.

In a related vein, Fassin (2012) critiques the implicit opposition in recent scholarship on ethics and morality between obligation in a Durkheimian sense and ethical conduct, between the moral order and ethical freedom. Instead, he points to a third mode, an ethics of responsibility, which requires consideration of the consequences of one's actions in relation to how subjects are positioned in their communities. This brings politics back into the study of ethics and decenters the anthropological focus on "proper" intention, as in Protestant sincerity talk (Keane 2002, p. 73). Instead, religious orthodoxies focus on how intentions become manifest through authorized actions, the propitious moment that reveals and thus realizes moral pursuits (Luehrmann 2017a). Jewish and Christian orthodoxies share this focus on processes of becoming through correct practice, where ethical agency is embedded in relations with others, navigating between freedom and obligation within a relational, affective, multiscale frame.

4.1. Jewish Orthodoxies

Recent research on ethics in Jewish Orthodox contexts focuses on gendered relationships, rather than the individual, in a range of social formations ranging from families to nation-states to transnational communities. Jewish studies scholar Mara Benjamin (2018) explores the implications of shifting the ethical subject from the rational, normatively male self of both Western Enlightenment philosophers and Jewish ethical/religious texts to that of parent-child relationships, exploring the affective ties of obligation (see Boyarin 2013 on Jewish families). Ethics in families include the often-overlooked experiences of children and teens, as well as the gendered life cycle in consideration of autonomy and freedom. Fader (2009), for example, examines Hasidic girls' gendered religious agency, for whom maturing means learning to harness their individual autonomy in order to fit in with adult expectations. In contrast, Stadler (2009) shows contested notions of Israeli Haredi masculinity among yeshiva students over competing obligations to family, community, or nation. New age/neo-orthodoxies may draw on kinship metaphors in order to challenge the authenticity of (male) rabbinic Judaism. Rock-Singer (2020) studied Jewish "priestesses," who describe lactating mothers as "milk sisters" rather than rely on Jewish kinship reckoned by blood. Connecting families and individuals to the state, Kravel-Tóvi (2017) describes the moral national mission of the Israeli state, which draws on Orthodox tools of Jewish law to grant deserving citizens recognition as Jews. Beyond the nation, the ongoing failure of Orthodox leadership has opened space for activism, with Israeli Orthodox Jews building a transnational feminist movement to expose sexual abuse by rabbis (Kravel-Tóvi 2020).

Studies of Jews that engage with current anthropological debates in ethics and morality investigate the ongoing tensions between religious authority and ethical freedom. Despite the centrality

of authority and hierarchy to Jewish Orthodoxy, Taragin-Zeller (2021) shows how married couples in Israel make judgments about rabbinic rulings, often “shopping around” until they receive the answer they want. Ivry & Tieman (2019) study Israeli Orthodox Jews’ consultations with rabbis and medical specialists around prenatal diagnoses of fetal anomalies. They argue that these Orthodox Jews may be seeking liberation from freedom of choice rather than submitting to rabbinic or biomedical authority. Drawing on Jewish ethics, religious studies scholar Michal Raucher (2020) shows that Orthodox Jewish women in Israel feel legitimized by God and their embodied expertise to make their own decisions regarding prenatal care, which may include disregarding their husbands’ and rabbis’ directives. Similarly, Mayne (2019) shows how Orthodox Jewish women’s prayers at the Western Wall (where women are not allowed) in Jerusalem are “aimed at the divine,” even as they are debating gendered access to space in the public sphere. Politics and religious ethics are inextricable because women’s prayers are public performances about the ongoing interpretation of Jewish law, rather than the laws themselves. In another public space, Seeman (2015) analyzes the morality of Ethiopian Jews and formerly Jewish Pentecostals in Israel drinking coffee together. The mundane decision to drink coffee with others or to refrain becomes part of the quest for “an elusive moral freedom.”

4.2. Christian Orthodoxies

Anthropological research on Orthodox ethics takes as a starting point its conception of human flourishing as the realization of God’s likeness within each person (Hann & Goltz 2010, Naumescu 2018). Orthodoxy is regarded here more as an aspiration rather than an obligation or achieved state, with people striving to live an Orthodox life in conversation with the ethical models of tradition (Bandak 2015, Pop 2017). This translates in practice into increased attention toward doing things “the right way,” but it also encompasses doubts or uncertainties about present or past decisions and the righteousness of one’s faith in light of them, as Luehrmann (2017b) shows in her research on reproductive politics in post-Soviet Russia. With abortion turning from right to sin, many Russian women had to reconsider their reproductive choices and expiate for their abortions through individual and collective rites such as confession, pilgrimage, and public commemoration. Here, as in other cases, religion provided the means to work on oneself and society as a way of coming to grips with social changes as well as personal and historical burdens (Steinberg & Wanner 2008, Zigon 2012).

When tradition does not offer clear guidance for individual behavior or collective norms, people can “defer forward in time to a future moment when an answer may be revealed” (Bandak & Boylston 2014, p. 34), creating space for improvisation and situated judgment. Doing so is encouraged by the fact that Orthodox Christians tend to evaluate intentions by the results of their actions (Luehrmann 2017a) and engage in ritualized actions and interactions that subdue their intentionality. Rather than being the main source of ethical action, the individual becomes part of a broader ethical field shaped by the pursuit of orthodoxy across centuries of religious practice. Orthodox Christians render this field in terms of spiritual kinship that is enhanced by practices of mediation, delegation, and intercession. This spiritual kinship is prompted by a gendered and generational sense of responsibility and care toward significant others and intersecting forms of relatedness historically associated with Orthodox Christianity or Soviet socialism (Luehrmann 2019). As Rogers (2009) shows in his historical ethnography of Russian Old Believers in the Urals, these Orthodox Christians managed to balance socialist practices of social reproduction with the moral-spiritual economy of their faith by creating distinct moral expectations for adults who went out into the secular world and elders who maintained the orthodoxy of faith through an ascetic regime.

Such examples show how family and ritual community are intertwined with other moral communities such as nations and ethnic groups. “Being Suryoyo is about family,” Syriac Orthodox

Christians in the Netherlands explained to Bakker Kellogg (2019, p. 485), showing the difficulty of breaking the intrinsic relatedness of religion and ethnicity into parts. What may seem inconceivable to such tightly knit diasporic communities is more equivocal in nationalized Orthodoxies, where state, nation, and religion are intertwined to various degrees. One can talk here about degrees of relatedness rather than separation or perforation, from “nominally Orthodox” Ukrainians (Wanner 2020, p. 75) to Orthodox atheists (Ładykowska 2016) and contemporary “urban ascetics” whose secular life and family rhythms are discreetly interspersed with personal ascetic practices (Dubovka 2018). An “orthodox” ethical project becomes more confused in people’s biographies, which often combine Christian virtues with secular (Soviet) values and spiritual (self-)development programs, blurring the distinction between religious and neoliberal subjectivities (Zigon 2010). But even in its most individualist forms, Orthodoxy remains exposed to the salient role of authorized mediators and to the push back to ritual, as a form of charismatization of tradition (Pop 2018). Nowadays this revivalist trend is leading to the formation of new Orthodox publics but also to conservative moral projects with affinities to a global Christian alliance centered on family values and nationalist politics (Luehrmann 2019, Stoeckl 2020).

5. HETERODOXIES, HERESIES, AND DISAFFECTIONS

Religious orthodoxies, heresies, and heterodoxies are mutually constitutive, with correctness established, in part, by distinguishing incorrect belief and practice. Heterodoxies and heresies by default engage the same grammars as orthodoxies to be legible, even as they challenge their moral authority. Furthermore, while heresies emerge in the process of reinstating doxas, heterodoxies are always implicated in other political histories of racialized, ethnic, or class-based difference. We think about religious orthodoxies as boundary-making practices, where correct belief and practice stake out membership and belonging. Recent research on Jewish and Christian orthodoxies has productively focused on the borders where this work happens, the intersections of the orthodox with the heterodox and the heretical. Related to the study of ethics (see Section 4), individuals, families, religious institutions, and the state make moral judgments in their lived experience about who belongs and who does not, who is practicing correctly and who is wrong, and what to do about those not practicing at all or those whose practice has changed dramatically.

Attention to heterodoxies and heresies emphasizes change and conflict as definitive of religious orthodoxies despite their adherents’ claims to immutability. Heterodoxies and heresies also expand our object of study in the anthropology of religion and beyond by contributing to recent research that (a) theorizes doubt, failure, and questioning (Pelkmans 2013) and (b) calls for a revised understanding of (modern) politics as secular and separated from religion (Köllner 2021, McAllister & Napolitano 2020). Foregrounding the political nature of orthodoxies not only troubles the categories of the religious and the secular but also further expands the scope of orthodoxies beyond religious theologies. Inspired by recent research on theopolitics, we can approach religious orthodoxies as theological–political formations to account for the historical entanglement of political and religious orders and their persistence in forms of sovereignty today, as well as their iconoclastic and revolutionary potential (Humphrey 2014, Lefort 2006, Martin 2019).

5.1. Jewish Orthodoxies

The past two decades of anthropological scholarship on Jewish orthodoxies have increasingly investigated Jewish heterodoxies in order to problematize emic claims to correctness, blur boundaries of belonging, and move beyond the local to include the diasporic and transnational. Calls to question what constitutes Jewish orthodoxy and Judaism itself are a provocation to the analytical category of religion and to the provincialism of Jewish studies (see **Supplemental Material**).

Supplemental Material >

For example, research on Jews of color shows competing interpretations for inclusion in normative (white) Ashkenazic Orthodoxy, such as Ethiopian Jews (Seeman 2009), Black Hebrews in Israel (Markowitz et al. 2008), transnational African Hebrew Israelites (Jackson 2013), or Jews in Turkey (Brink-Danan 2011). There are efforts to go beyond the static “enclave” model of Jewish Orthodoxy to focus on how religion intersects with race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and citizenship, both locally and transnationally. These efforts include scholarship on outreach efforts by Orthodox Ashkenazic Jews to non-Ashkenazic Jews in Europe, Latin America, and Israel (Cooper 2012, Dean-Olmsted 2020, Everett 2022, Jacobson 2006, Klein 2012); religious, political, and economic relationships between Orthodox Jews and non-Jews in shared New York City spaces (Deutsch & Caspar 2021, Goldschmidt 2006); and struggles over Orthodox LGBT persons’ demands for inclusion that have turned into a battle over definitional boundaries in Israel (Avishai 2020).

Boundary crossing extends to scholarship on orthodoxies’ alliances of many kinds in conflicts among science, religion, and the state. Kasstan (2021), for example, has written about COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy among Haredim as a religious minority in England. Other research investigates relationships between Orthodox Jews and Evangelicals that are part of the emergence of new “Judaizing” religions transnationally with bases in messianic Zionism, troubling the very categories of Judaism and Christianity. These include Filipino “Noahides,” discussed by Feldman (2018): former Evangelicals tutored online by Orthodox rabbis in Israel to inhabit a limited orthodoxy for Gentiles. Similarly, Messianic Jews in the United States form new religious movements that complicate the boundaries of Orthodox Judaism and Christianity (Kaell 2014).

The hierarchical, mediated nature of Jewish Orthodox authority shapes how those who doubt, question, or refuse dominant claims to correctness have the potential to change the boundaries of what constitutes orthodoxies. Fader (2020), for example, delineates a continuum of doubt that may or may not include rejection that the Torah is divinely inspired, doubt in particular rabbinic leaders’ legitimacy to interpret Jewish tradition correctly, or loss of belief in God. Jewish heretics, specifically those Orthodox Jews who reject divine revelation, often leave their communities and “go OTD” (off the *derech*, or path) (Cappell & Lang 2020, Winston 2005). Those who renounce Jewish Orthodoxy do not embrace the secular, as Newfield (2020) shows in his study of Orthodox “exiters.” Instead, leaving is a drawn-out process that is never quite complete, something Davidman (2014) also shows through the embodied and material attachments that may remain despite a rejection of Orthodoxy’s theology and culture.

5.2. Christian Orthodoxies

Christian orthodoxies have developed from debates on the correctness of faith and practice whose history is still preserved in the “polemical liturgies” that reiterate with every celebration the apologetic roots of an established Orthodoxy (Luehrmann 2010, p. 60). For example, the restoration of icon veneration following the eighth- to ninth-century iconoclastic debates has proclaimed the status of icon as mediator of divine presence and, at the same time, condemned for heresy both the iconoclasts, who refused to recognize images of God, and the “idolaters,” who worshiped them as divine beings. The new doctrine was articulated in liturgical hymns and a liturgy commemorating this event on the Feast of the Triumph of Orthodoxy, which condemns both old and new heresies. However, the iconoclastic controversy was not only about the “right” mediation of divine authority. It was also a crisis of iconicity between competing orders of holiness: between the sacred and the holy (Mondzain 2005). In her research on the politics of sacredness in Egypt, Heo (2018, pp. 192–94) shows how miraculous icons imbued with holiness by virtue of popular devotion were brought under the church’s hierarchical order of holiness sustained through prohibition from the profane/human, a move that ultimately served the state’s attempt to sectarianize the public. This

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case illustrates the theological–political nature of religious orthodoxies and their historical persistence, ranging from the eighth-century crisis of iconoclasm to the nineteenth-century iconoclastic debates triggered by the Protestant-led modernization of the Coptic Church (Sedra 2011) and the sectarian politics Heo describes in contemporary Egypt.

Compared with the imperial and national histories of Orthodoxy, today we are witnessing a shift from territorialized ethno-religious identities to diasporic, transnational communities that challenge the theological–political arrangements that have governed the Orthodox world for centuries. New orthodoxies are created, legitimized, and contested through politics of communion and territoriality that articulate conflicting sovereignties and an institutional dynamic centered on continuity and correctness rather than reform (Kormina & Naumescu 2020, Martin 2019). The diversity within Orthodox Christianity becomes more visible, with new boundaries emerging between those who inherit their Orthodoxy as part of an ethno-religious identity and those who seek it by returning to church, “*votserkovlenie*” (Benovska 2020, Kormina 2018). Conversions to “continuity” rather than “rupture” as in the Protestant model are also present among new converts in non-Orthodox countries and Orthodox diasporas entrenched in religiously pluralistic environments (Winchester 2015). Though arguably sustaining orthodoxy, conversions among African Americans in the United States and their appeal to icon veneration and Black saints aim to reverse racial hierarchies in the United States and in Christianity more broadly. These new configurations raise questions about the ways Orthodoxy becomes tied to racialization, nationalism, and moral conservatism (Bakker Kellogg 2021, Kravchenko 2020, Riccardi-Swartz 2022) and challenge distinctions between religion and secular politics.

6. CONCLUSION

Our dialogic experiment with the category of religious orthodoxies points to promising new directions beyond Jewish studies and the anthropology of Christianity. Religious orthodoxies can make significant contributions to key ideas in the anthropology of religion and the secular, by expanding on the categories of belief and practice, mediation and/as aesthetics, ethics and morality, and heterodoxies and heresies. Here, we have considered orthodoxies within different relationships of scale in a range of social formations and institutional dynamics. At the same time, each of us pulled together literatures that have too often been in enclaves themselves, cordoned off for not quite fitting into Protestant ideas of religion, secularism, and modernity that have undergirded much of the anthropology of religion. Instead, we are motivated by a grounded comparative approach, one that does not assume, for example, that the heart of religious experience is personal transformation and reform but rather can emphasize continuity and correctness as Jewish and Christian orthodoxies do. Furthermore, the imbrication of the political with the theological that is definitive of religious orthodoxies holds promise for a new understanding of “politics” and religion’s potential for social action.

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