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William of Ockham on Ecclesiastical Censorship

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Disciple *What if someone were to defend a heresy before the pope and were to say that he thinks that it is consistent with catholic faith?*

Master *They say that if he were to defend unknowingly a heresy a thousand times, even before the pope, with an explicit or tacit declaration that he is ready to be corrected when he learns that his opinion conflicts with catholic faith, he should not be judged a heretic unless he were proved to be a heretic by other legitimate proofs because, just as it is licit for him to defend an erroneous opinion unknowingly in this way the first time, so it is licit a second time and a third, and always until it has been clearly proved to him that his opinion should be reckoned among the heresies.¹*

William of Ockham (c.1285–1347), a Franciscan theologian and philosopher, is widely known as one of the giants of late medieval scholasticism. His academic career at Oxford was aborted in 1324 when he was summoned by the papacy in Avignon, southern France. He was to be subjected to an investigation into the alleged heresy of his academic writings. The Roman Church's theological investigation into academics was nothing new. Since Stephen Tempier, the bishop of Paris, condemned 219 propositions in philosophy and theology on 7 March 1277, the Church's suppression of false teachings in the universities had been widespread in Paris and Oxford. After four years of investigation, Ockham escaped from condemnation. During his sojourn in Avignon, Ockham was requested by Michael of Cesena, the Minister General of the Franciscan Order, to examine Pope John XXII's bulls, which denounced the Franciscan ideals of evangelical poverty. After scrutinizing the bulls, Ockham came to a realization that in rejecting the orthodoxy of Franciscan poverty, the Pope had

fallen into heresy. The Franciscan doctrine of evangelical poverty had been officially declared to be orthodox by Pope Nicholas III in 1279; therefore, Pope John XXII effectively revoked his predecessor's doctrinal decision, which was to Ockham nothing but a heretical error. In 1328 Ockham departed from Avignon along with a few Franciscan comrades in order to seek protection from Ludwig of Bavaria, the claimant of the imperial throne who was in a political conflict with the papacy. Based in Munich in the following two decades until his death in 1347, Ockham abandoned his academic career and devoted himself to writing a number of anti-papal polemical writings, in which students of medieval intellectual history find his political thought.

Ockham's polemical activities after 1328 were therefore motivated by the question of papal heresy. What if the pope falls into heresy? What action can – and indeed should – a Christian believer who knows that the pope is a heretic take? What if a heretical pope demands that Christians who are convinced of their orthodoxy renounce their faith and subscribe to a heretical belief? Is it justifiable for an orthodox believer to dissent from a heretical pope and if so how? Papal heresy had previously been a hypothetical problem for medieval theologians and canonists. Such an ecclesiastical nightmare, however, was Ockham's reality. In response to this question Ockham wrote *The Dialogue* (*Dialogus*), a gigantic polemical work on the problems of heresy with special reference to papal heresy.

The work, which was left unfinished by the author, takes the form of a hypothetical conversation between the 'Master' and his 'Disciple'. One of its characteristics is that the 'Master', in response to the questions posed by the 'Disciple', presents a wide range of views without identifying their sources or showing which view should be the final word on the issue in question; thus, Ockham deliberately concealed the authors of all the views, including his own, because he wished the readers to derive their own conclusion without being influenced by knowledge of the authorship of each opinion.

This preference for 'blind refereeing' has echoes in Ockham's theory of heresy itself. For him, heresy was the deliberate contradiction of the correct definition of Catholic truth. This notion may appear a truism; however, Ockham maintained that the act of defining Catholic truths is twofold. One way could be labelled authoritative definition, which is the assertion concerning Catholic truths made by the official authority of popes and councils. The other may be described as cognitive definition, which is an assertion made through academic deliberation. Ockham did not think that an assertion concerning Catholic truth was true simply because it was so declared by official authority; its truth must be

established 'cognitively' by means of theological scrutiny. Likewise, heresy is for Ockham not what ecclesiastical authority declares to be heretical. A proposition should be judged heretical only insofar as it is so defined cognitively through theological investigation and deliberation. Ockham defined heresy not in terms of who declared it to be heresy but in terms of what it is (I, i, 1; I, ii, 5).

This reconceptualization of heresy also led to a redefinition of heretics. In the medieval theological and canonist tradition, the hallmark of heretics had long been considered to be pertinacity: heretics were not those who simply made a doctrinal error but rather those who erred against Catholic truths pertinaciously. How was one judged pertinacious? It was by repeated refusal to submit oneself to ecclesiastical correction. Hence, heretics had traditionally been defined as those who repeatedly refused to accept the official teaching of ecclesiastical authority.² Effectively, then, pertinacity was persistent disobedience to ecclesiastical authority.

Ockham questioned the tacit assumption that doctrinal correction by ecclesiastical authority was theologically correct; if ecclesiastical correction was cognitively wrong, disobedience to such correction may be grounded in orthodox faith. Ockham therefore redefined heretics as those who failed deliberately or knowingly to assent to a theologically correct understanding of doctrinal texts.³ The idea of cognitive, not authoritative, definition replaced, as the central characteristic of heretics, disobedience from ecclesiastical authority with the idea of deliberate dissent from theologically true propositions concerning Catholic truths.

The quotation in the opening of this chapter should be understood in light of Ockham's reconceptualization of heresy. In the quotation he vindicates the legitimacy of resistance to papal correction on the grounds of the corrected individual's conviction that he or she is faithful to the orthodox faith. Such a position would have been impossible without rejecting the 'mere' official authority of doctrinal definitions, which may not be theologically informed. However, Ockham's justification of radical dissent has often invited the objection of modern commentators: the conviction that an individual's position is orthodox does not necessarily warrant that he or she is *really* orthodox theologically. How is it possible to ascertain that a believer's conviction is actually anchored in orthodox faith rather than mere confusion, ignorance or self-deception? Is it not that Ockham has simply fallen into 'a morass of total subjectivity'?⁴ Ockham's cognitive perspective to orthodoxy and heresy raises an epistemological question about the certitude of doctrinal knowledge. In order to shed light on this conundrum, the above quotation requires further explication

from three perspectives: (1) the legitimacy of doctrinal demonstration; (2) Ockham's idea of explicit faith; and (3) the authority of individual conscience.

In the situation where a Christian believer is subject to doctrinal correction by a superior such as a pope, the legitimacy of the correction was conventionally not questioned as long as it came from the holder of an ecclesiastical office. This traditional view was predicated on the tacit assumption that doctrinal correction by an ecclesiastical authority is always theologically correct. Ockham by contrast started from the assumption that doctrinal correction by an ecclesiastical official is not always correctly informed. Thus Ockham attributed the legitimacy of correction not to the corrector's authority but to the correct knowledge that informs the act of correction (I, iv, 13). An important implication of this is that the relationship between the corrector and the corrected is reconfigured. According to the traditional view which assumes the cognitive correctness of official correction, the discourse on doctrinal correction was essentially about the duty of the corrected to obey ecclesiastical authority. Ockham's cognitive perspective by contrast attributed to the corrector the duty of demonstrating that his correction is correctly informed theologically. Thus doctrinal censorship cannot claim to be binding simply because it is official; it must be based on an evident demonstration that it is theologically correct. Hence Ockham insisted that the corrected is not obliged to submit to correction unless it is manifestly demonstrated that he or she is in error.

This argument, however, was not so anarchic as to allow ordinary believers to believe whatever they wanted to believe. Ockham's other important assumption is that the members of the Christian community share a cognitive commonality in the understanding of Catholic truths, which constitutes orthodox faith. Hence, every believer, regardless of educational or social background, must believe some propositions that are manifestly true for each and every Christian. One cannot, for example, deny the proposition that 'Christ was crucified' without becoming a heretic because everyone knows the proposition and its correct meaning. Ockham called the Catholic truths which a Christian believer must know 'explicit faith'. The content of Ockham's 'explicit faith' is not the same for every member of the Christian community, however. The number of the propositions that constitute 'explicit faith' is commensurate with the status one occupies within the ecclesiastical order. Hence, the higher the position one occupies in the hierarchy, the greater number of Catholic truths one must know. So ordinary believers are only obliged to know a few basic facts, whereas popes and bishops must know minute details included in the Bible (I, vii, 18).⁵

This idea of 'explicit faith' is crucial for understanding Ockham's theory of heresy. I explained earlier that Ockham defined heresy as deliberate failure to assent to the true understanding of doctrinal texts. The criterion by which to ascertain heresy is for Ockham the deliberateness of rejecting a true proposition of Christian faith. The content of 'explicit faith' determines the amount of knowledge one is required and therefore assumed to have, and rejecting a proposition that is included in the explicit faith for the individual concerned would be judged deliberate because the rejected proposition is presumed to be known to him or her. The pope, who is assumed to have a full knowledge of doctrinal sources, therefore can hardly reject true doctrinal propositions without being deliberate, while ordinary believers, who only need to know a few things about Christian faith, may be likely to do so unknowingly. This argument replaces the traditional hierarchy of authority with a new hierarchy of duty of knowing explicit faith. Ockham was thereby cautioning high ecclesiastics against pronouncing doctrinal decisions hastily without careful theological deliberation.

The idea of 'explicit faith' helps Ockham to vindicate a believer who insists on an error without realizing it is an error if that error does not concern 'explicit faith'; thus he or she is insisting on the error unknowingly. Then, are Christian believers bound to know errors that are condemned explicitly as heresies? For example, if Christian believers commit an error that is condemned explicitly as heresy, are they bound to withdraw the error immediately regardless of the legitimacy of the correction they are subject to? Ockham's response to this question is unequivocal: even heretical errors that are condemned explicitly do not need to be withdrawn immediately until it is manifestly shown to the holder of the errors that they are explicitly condemned (I, iv, 15). In response to this issue, Ockham also appealed to the idea of conscience: as long as individuals do not know that they are committing an error they do not have to revoke the error lest they should tell a lie contrary to their conscience.⁶ Here Ockham did not claim that following the dictate of conscience was always right. Rather he maintained that acting contrary to conscience was always wrong. This idea of the negative authority of conscience can be found in the work of Thomas Aquinas; however, Aquinas did not extrapolate it to the ecclesiological discourse on an inferior's dissent from a superior. Ockham's application of that ethical principle to ecclesiology meant that the decision to obey the command of a superior must not bypass conscience; that is, obedience contrary to conscience is never virtuous. But Ockham did not say that dissent dictated by conscience was always right. So what is the moral justification of dissent?

Once again Ockham addressed the issue of deliberateness in ignorance. He did not expect that ordinary believers have a full knowledge of heresies condemned explicitly by the Roman Church. That is why Ockham's account of ignorance about condemned heresies revolves around the cases where a believer refuses to revoke his or her (real) heresy *unknowingly*. When Ockham vindicated the dissent of an erroneously informed believer, he had in mind specifically the case of 'invincibly' erroneous conscience: conscience the dictate of which was erroneous in the matters that are beyond the presumed capacity of the person in question. Precisely because the heretical proposition in question was not included in what that person was obliged – and therefore presumed – to know, he or she is merely following the dictate of conscience, without realizing it is in error. Coupled with Ockham's idea of the legitimacy of doctrinal correction, which asserts that the burden of proof lies with the corrector, therefore, he could conclude that it was morally justifiable for a Christian 'to defend unknowingly a heresy a thousand times' (I, iv, 20).

In writing about ecclesiastical censorship Ockham was seriously concerned about the preservation of orthodox faith, which was the common good of medieval Latin Christendom, especially in relation to the potential danger that high ecclesiastics such as popes and bishops might fall into heresy. Ockham's theory of heresy entails a number of ideas that safeguard individual orthodox believers from the official imposition of heretical beliefs. But he did not reject the possibility that Christendom might be dominated by heretics under the sway of a heretical pope. The 'true' Church as the congregation of orthodox believers, Ockham famously said, might reduce to a few or even to one individual, possibly a woman or an infant (I, v, 1–3, 7, 11, 25, 32, 34). In stating this, presumably Ockham was writing about himself and his fellow Franciscans who disobeyed the pope. Admittedly the defenders of true faith (as the Franciscans considered themselves to be) were isolated and marginalized.

Ockham problematized this situation by addressing the issue of the duties of other Christians who witnessed the dispute between ecclesiastical authority and dissident individuals. One such duty, Ockham wrote, is entailed by the fact that those who knew that some Christians of orthodox faith were attacked by a heretical pope and said nothing would be the pope's 'accomplice in crime':

he who does not defend, when he can, those who oppose the pope for his heretical wickedness, provides an opportunity for persecution or disturbance or harm, because if he offered defence, as he could, persecution or disturbance or harm done or to be done would be excluded. Therefore this person in failing to defend

papal opponents appears or is known to have inflicted the damage described. But no one must inflict persecution or disturbance or harm on opponents of the pope who impute heretical wickedness to the latter before it shall have been established that they acted with malice. Therefore everyone who can is obligated to defend them. (I, vi, 50)

Ockham argued thus in light of the Ciceronian idea of negative injustice: 'The man who does not defend someone, or obstruct the injustice when he can, is at fault just as if he had abandoned his parents or his friends or his country'.⁷ Ockham and his fellow Franciscans in Munich hardly found any Christians who stood against the pope in their defence.

In the lamentable dearth of support from other Christians, Ockham discerned another theoretical point: dissenting voices must be heard. Ockham wrote in later years to his Christian audience:

The anguish I feel is the greater because you do not take the trouble to inquire with careful attention how much such tyranny wickedly usurped over you is contrary to God's honour, dangerous to the Catholic faith, and opposed to the rights and liberties given to you by God and nature; *and worse, you reject, hinder, and condemn those who wish to inform you of the truth.*⁸

In the *Dialogue* he had already contended that one of the duties of other Christians who witnessed believers dissenting from papal authority was to listen to the dissenting believers, especially if they were prudent and reputable individuals and their claims concerned the common good such as the preservation of orthodox faith (I, vii, 9). Thus Christian believers bear the duty not only to profess their correctly understood faith publicly but also to listen to dissenting voices.

In arguing so, Ockham conceptualized the Christian community as a public forum in which individuals write, speak, read and listen to one another, thus sharing the common correct understanding of Christian faith and discussing and scrutinizing the ambiguous meaning of doctrinal sources. Does this vision of the Christian community entail any defence of freedom of speech? The freedom Ockham envisaged was enshrined in an environment where individuals are able to subscribe to and defend true Christian faith voluntarily, thereby realizing a virtuous life. Volitional freedom was the *sine qua non* for an individual's pursuit of the moral life. Meanwhile, Ockham also assumed a cognitive commonality of understanding for basic elements of the Christian faith: any rational individuals with the capability of understanding doctrinal sources should be able to grasp the correct meaning of plain biblical propositions such as 'Christ was crucified'.

To be sure, an ordinary believer's duty of knowing 'explicit faith' is minimal; however, the fact remains that a believer must know some things about the Christian faith in a way that everyone else in the Christian community does; otherwise, he or she will be judged heretical. Hence if anything may deserve to be categorized as 'freedom of speech' in Ockham's theory of heresy, it is his vindication of free deliberation concerning Catholic truths which do *not* belong to 'explicit faith'. The papal declaration of an understanding of ambiguous doctrinal texts without solid theological foundations would, despite the 'official' nature of such a doctrinal pronouncement, force Christians to accept that understanding blindly, thereby depriving them of freedom that enables them to pursue a moral life. Ockham's vindication of freedom of speech was thus anchored in his desire to defend every Christian's possibility of realizing a virtuous life.