

## Norris's Razor

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*The Master said: "If the common mob hate it, you must look into it. If the common mob love it, you must look into it." His disciple Zigong asked, "What if my folks back home all love it?" The Master answered, "Not good enough." "Then what if my folks back home all hate it?" "Still not good enough. Not so good as when the excellent folks back home love it, and those not excellent hate it."*

The Analects of Confucius<sup>1</sup>

Richard Norris was an extraordinary teacher, with a gift for stating plainly the heart of an issue and downplaying complex interpretation. Thirty years ago as my patristics tutor he held that most ancient divines—save Nestorius—used ordinary talk that anyone might recognize, even if this habit caused later confusion just where debaters had hoped to make their case self-evident. For example, Cyril read the Nicene Creed as if the *logos* were the presumptive subject of every Greek verb, spelling out a simple story about one divine actor in three paragraphs. Cyril's Procrustean grammar sparked a bonfire of anathemas still smoldering in the late twentieth century, when Chalcedon's "monophysite" and "orthodox" heirs agreed that language, not Christology, divided them. In the Episcopal Church's Teaching Series, Norris made classical doctrines accessible for modern readers, yet never as an *haut vulgarisateur*. On the contrary, he believed ancient authors expected a plain hearing from their contemporaries. He dismissed theological handbooks rich with technical lingo, and in the classroom bluntly labeled Aloys Grillmeier's elaborate taxonomy of patristic arguments "insane!"<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Analects* 15.27 & 13.24. *Zi yue: zhong wuzhi, biqiyang; zhong haozhi, biqiyang. Zigong wenyue: xiangren jie haozhi, heru? Zi yue: weike ye. Yue: xiangren jie wuzhi, heru? Zi yue: weike ye; buru xiangrenzhi shanzhe haozhi, qi bushanzhe wuzhi.* Trans. Harvard Prof. Achilles Fang in class, 1964.

<sup>2</sup> Aloys Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition: From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon (451)*, trans. J. S. Bowden (Oxford: Mowbray, 1965).

His students profited weekly from what I might call Norris's Razor. My colleague Donald Schell recalls Norris's genius for finding a single plausible sentence when a seminar presenter read out chains of garbled clichés. Rather than shame a muddled student, Norris advised: "Your first four points won't lead anywhere; but this one could be interesting. Start over from this beginning." I once read him a long rehearsal of Trinitarian models, and asked jokingly whether the Cappadocian Trinity was simple arithmetic for attributing every divine action in Scripture to one agent. Norris countered: "Your joke is your best idea. The Cappadocians never say, like some modern writers, that the Trinity doctrine 'allows us to look into the inner workings of the godhead.' They teach: 'We don't know *anything about* God; all we know is what God *does*.'" Norris's close-shaven summary gave me my motto for a lifetime's pastoral work. In counseling, sermons, or Bible study I never try telling people what Anglicans know about God. We only search together for signs of God's action: in Scripture, in church, and outside both.

Norris's "Notes" shows how his critical Razor furthers dialogue and even contest, but never polemic. Like Confucius in the *Analects*, he regarded polemic as cause to investigate deeper. Upon once hearing a popular Episcopal author humiliate an old-fashioned Eastern Orthodox bishop, Norris reacted with disgust. Yet likewise criticizing easy agreements, he complained to his students that in interfaith dialog "the Christians never show up." Instead, Buddhists and Christian enthusiasts for Buddhism explore how Buddhist and Christian values match. Norris objected that such happy unison makes true engagement impossible.

During today's revisionist era—biblical, liturgical, theological—Norris's Razor might help us more than we have allowed. Thirty years ago liturgical armies began clashing by night over gender-corrected language: a campaign of attrition enjoying very modest encouragement from linguistic science. (Many corrections attack the English core vocabulary, which changes least in any language and typically bounces back, just as "breast" of turkey has returned replacing the Victorian Bowdlerism "white meat.") In a 1986 essay for Associated Parishes' Council at San Francisco, Norris turned our focus toward a deeper issue. What wants reforming is not that women have been *excluded* from public worship, Norris wrote, but that women have been *silenced*. Giving women their public voice matters more than purging the words we use to talk about them. He acknowledged with the

Cappadocians that all images of God are inadequate idols, and urged us to enrich our God-language, not impoverish it, by adding "Mother" alongside "Father," and "Healer" alongside "Warrior," and so on. Over three decades since, the Episcopal Church has given women voice in ways making greater impact on our common life than all the idiomatic surgeries to which we have become sensitized or anesthetized. If language history proves a guide, the reforms Norris encouraged will last longer too.

Richard Norris volunteered to write this last essay—the first time in years that he wrote without a petition from editors or publishers. At press time, some worldwide Anglican leaders demand a settled doctrinal covenant that provinces must affirm to secure unity. Provinces not agreeing may lose the title "Anglican" and their voice in Anglican conversations. Today's presenting issue is human sexuality, but covenant proponents claim a broader conservative defense of orthodox biblical faith against liberal revisionism. In rebuttal some writers explore biblical hermeneutic, focusing on sexual questions in light of modern textual criticism. Norris's essay examines more intensively the sources of Christian ethics in Hellenistic philosophy, which gives both debating sides their terms. While his research may support liberal argument, I believe Norris's method boasts a better claim to orthodoxy than his conservative opponents have, and serves our union better than any settled covenant could do.

Norris's own favorite theologian was Gregory Nyssen (his preferred name for the fourth-century bishop of Nyssa) whose works he gathered students to translate by summer and study by winter. Norris explained that when pondering how evil could arise in a good universe, Origen infers from Plato's description of desire that finite souls might have fallen from satiety: they had absorbed all the divine goodness they could hold, like exhausted diners falling back from a banquet table. To the dark likelihood that redeemed souls must eventually fall again, Origen answers that new universes may work differently. By contrast, Gregory Nyssen holds firmly to the priestly text of Genesis 1, insisting that all that exists is good and created amid good. Gregory reverses Origen's logic: because God is infinite, finite human souls grow forever, expanding and absorbing endlessly the goodness and beauty they desire, and purging and abandoning lesser attainments. So far from dooming us, infinite desire is our most God-like human characteristic. Hence our constant progress and purgation are not only right but essential, not only for this life but for the next,

not only for this universe but for any finite universe an infinitely good God creates, because all finite creatures—even fallen angels—are drawn upward by their desire for God, which can never be satisfied.

Most crucially, Gregory Nyssen argues that to cease progress for a moment is already to fall away, effectively choosing evil even though evil does not exist as something we might choose; rather, the simple choice not to progress is evil enough. Gregory's logic has broad implications for Christian ethics and theological method, bearing on the sexual issues Norris addresses here, on our delineation of orthodox tradition, and on Norris's place in it. Parish pastoral experience bears Gregory out, offering few occasions for exclusive moral judgment. By definition, progress excludes exclusion. At least two states of ethical or doctrinal perfection must be allowed for anyone to progress between them, and many more are needed to make progress a universal rule. At every moment constant progress intrinsically links greater and lesser, better and worse, allowing no settlement ever.

Although Christian councils have made ideological (hardly historical!) claims to repeat one faith delivered once and for all, current debate wrongly stereotypes orthodoxy as rigid and liberalism as apostasy. Contrary to institutional myth, living orthodoxies typically sidestep settlement and embrace contest. For example, Tibetan Buddhism has conserved every major Buddhist teaching tradition, eschewing none, and Tibetan monks debate daily in every monastery square like athletes competing for the release of all sentient beings. Tibetan adepts progress from one school's doctrine to another until each finds an appropriate place in living practice.

Our Jewish cousins also uphold diverse doctrine, differing openly over the resurrection of the dead among other matters Christians call core beliefs. Ruth Langer, Professor of Jewish Studies at Boston College, explained to her father-in-law, the biblical scholar Nahum Sarna, why the first Bible translation from Hebrew into Greek, written in Alexandria by Jews and for Jews, got the name Septuagint after the Latin number seventy. Jewish legend tells how seventy scholars working in seventy sealed rooms emerged with uniform Greek texts, proving their work was divinely guided. Sarna replied, "It would have been a greater miracle if seventy rabbis meeting in the *same* room had come up with one translation!"

By contrast, Christian campaigns for uniform faith have amazed other orthodox peoples, including some today counted "conservative." When the national unifiers Ferdinand and Isabella expelled Jews from

Catholic Spain in 1492, and launched the Inquisition for policing converts, the pious mosque-building Sultan Bayezid II sent his navy ships to ferry Spanish Jews to Turkey. Bayezid II often taunted Western ambassadors to the Sublime Porte: "How can you call Ferdinand of Aragon a wise king? The same Ferdinand who impoverished his own land and enriched ours!"<sup>3</sup>

The *Analects* verses heading this article speak more bluntly yet. Historians date neo-Confucian orthodoxy to the medieval Yuan dynasty (1279–1368), which legally established the previous Song dynasty's philosophical renaissance. But analysts using tools common to biblical criticism find orthodoxy evolving within the fourth-century BCE *Analects* text itself. Brooks and Brooks date these verses two centuries after Confucius, to an era named for the "Hundred Schools" competing among his followers.<sup>4</sup> These uphold debate as a heuristic necessity. To an orthodox Confucian, neither high authority nor collegial agreement suffice, because without contradiction we cannot know whether our reasoning is more advanced. Rival Chinese philosophies concur. The contemporary Taoist classic *Zhuangzi* often shows Master Zhuang refuting both Confucius and Master Hui, a logician in the Greek style that Norris would find familiar. Nevertheless, while walking in a funeral cortège past the logician's tomb, Zhuang tells his disciples: "Since Master Hui died, I have been without the proper stuff to work upon: I have had no one with whom I could really talk."<sup>5</sup>

Norris would talk with everyone, whether convincing them or not. We may like to imagine saintliness as irresistible goodness: New York Mayor Ed Koch gave Mother Teresa for free the buildings he had meant to refuse her, saying afterward, "Nobody says 'no' to Mother Teresa." Nevertheless people did say "no" to Jesus. Devout, virtuous people in every age have said "no" to him. A vital Christian orthodoxy must comprehend their response, not attribute it condescendingly to the church's miscommunications or moral flaws. Internal Christian debate requires comprehensiveness too. Efforts to end churches' differences by imposing settlement have been attended

<sup>3</sup> See Sidney N. Fisher, *The Foreign Relations of Turkey 1481–1512* (Champaign, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1948, rep. Utrecht University, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> E. Bruce Brooks and A. Taeko Brooks, *The Original Analects* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> *Zhuangzi* xiv.6, *Three Ways of Thought in Ancient China*, trans. Arthur Waley (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1939).

by schism so regularly—the more settled, the more splintering—that we may ask whether the drive toward settled agreement is intrinsically schismatic. Certainly it puts a limit to progress.

And it is hardly biblical. The synoptic gospels show Jesus correcting his ignorant disciples and their proof texts (“it was said . . . but I say to you” [Matt. 5:43–44]) yet not convincing them; we see them abashed, but not converted until after his resurrection. In synoptic *midrash* no one is ever converted save the tax collector Zacchaeus, whom the common mob all hate, as Confucius’s *Analects* expect (Luke 19:2–10). In John’s gospel Jesus likewise engages the disciples’ limited understanding without condemning them. Instead, John envisions unending progress: “I have many things to tell you but you cannot bear them now” (John 16:12).

Jesus’ own teaching supports a unifying covenant even less. The parables are our likeliest authentic sayings from Jesus, and these never tell of happy persuasion to agreement. One implied exception, the parable of the barren tree, ends without revealing whether the gardener’s plan succeeded at harvest time (Luke 13:6–9). More parables’ heroes choose alone against a crowd’s common counsel, as Confucius’s *Analects* advocate: the wise bridesmaids, against the foolish (Matt. 25:1–13); the canny landowner with fields poisoned by darnel, against his impetuous sharecroppers (Matt. 13:24–30); the astute king yielding to a stronger foe, against his captains spoiling for a fight (Luke 14:31–32).

Moreover, Jesus’ parables set losers alongside winners without uniting them. Christian preachers may fondly find a unifier in Matthew’s story of the shepherd who abandons ninety-nine sheep to find a lost one. But the gospels give no hint those ninety-nine are rescued; indeed Luke’s dramatic language “leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness,” where the Bible’s hostile powers dwell, implies those animals are destroyed or lost track of while the shepherd brings his favorite sheep home rejoicing (Matt. 18:12–13; Luke 15:4–6; Thom. 107). In Thomas’s version the shepherd proclaims the lost sheep is fattest and best and the only one he loves. Luke’s sunny gloss “ninety-nine who have no need of repentance” grants that the shepherd omits such care as sheep in a wilderness require. No synoptic version of this saying reunifies the flock. John’s version envisions unification only in future; as for today, John stipulates that others “not of this fold” belong separately to the Lord (John 10:16).

Here Jesus was a scriptural conservative. Although the New Testament Book of Acts relates a few hopeful agreements among disciples, Hebrew Scripture scarcely ever describes happy agreements, far more often terrible ones: plots by enemy leagues lamented in the Psalms, or foolish alliances doomed by the prophets. In the Hebrew editors' view, even peacemaking presumes no reunification. Once Esau and Jacob make peace they do not collaborate, but continue apart ever afterward on their chosen paths (Gen. 33:12–17).

The Pauline author of Ephesians says Jesus' death secures our peace (Eph. 2:15), but in Paul's own letters peace is still an ardent wish (Gal. 1:3, 5:22, 6:16, and many other blessings). For now Paul disputes passionately and remorselessly, seeking no middle ground. His favorite source for imagery is athletic competition (was he a runner? a boxer? a fan?) where defeating an opponent is intrinsic.<sup>6</sup> Some translators emphasize Paul's pugnacious style: Do they want you Gentiles to accept circumcision? "I'd like to see the knife slip!"<sup>7</sup> And like an athlete, Paul puts no stake in including or excluding his opponents after besting them. He hopes the Jewish branches who reject Jesus may one day be grafted back onto the tree—yet his faith does not require reunification. Indeed, Paul allows this religious division may be permanent, without impeding God's promises to both sides (Rom. 11).

Nor does God's grace relax Paul's readiness for contest. Some commentators imagine his unidentified "thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor. 12:7) as a disability like epilepsy, rendering him helplessly dependent on God alone. These overlook the prominence of athletics in Paul's writing, perhaps because they have lost their taste for it. (Plato and Marcus Aurelius loved wrestling, and many victorious Roman athletes became literati,<sup>8</sup> but today the academy's sirens lure scholars early to the library, forsaking champions' rings and fields.) On the contrary, Paul never presents himself as a passive victim, rather as a hindered fighter. We might better search for Paul's "thorn" among our contemporary athletes who triumph over physical limits: muscular wheelchair

<sup>6</sup> For example, Gal. 2:2, 5:7; Phil. 2:16; 1 Cor. 9:24–26; Rom. 9:16.

<sup>7</sup> Galatians 5:12, trans. Krister Stendahl, Trinity Institute lecture (untitled), New York, 1984.

<sup>8</sup> Michael B. Poliakoff, *Combat Sports in the Ancient World: Competition, Violence and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 113–173.

football players, for example, whose fast, bruising contests awe spectators by their “strength made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9–10).

As a onetime Rhodes Scholar athlete, Richard Norris handles Christian tradition like a disciplined *askêsis*. In this last essay Norris is not challenging orthodoxy. He is not critiquing, revising, updating, reinterpreting, or searching for orthodoxy. He is *practicing* orthodoxy. For Norris the orthodox Christian method does not mill faith’s harvest to a homogenous meal, but ever winnows it, yielding not agreement but engagement, as new times refresh ancient arguments across centuries.

Today the gospel requires pastoral truthfulness, whatever covenants prelates may sign. All San Francisco Episcopal parishes have openly gay members, many in long-term intimate relationships, a good number in congregational leadership. Here church and civic discussions rarely evaluate homosexual orientation—a reality taken for granted from daily interpersonal experience—but focus rather on relations between homosexuals and our predominantly heterosexual church, state, and national society: on the issue of same-sex marriage, for example. Here common pastoral tasks include healing homosexuals’ torn relations with their judgmental families and communities of origin, typically outside urban California. Here the *Analectis* dialog between Zigong and Confucius comes poignantly and often to mind. If gays must disobey “the folks back home,” cutting them out wholesale leaves open sores, sometimes for life. Norris’s winnowings will equip some homosexuals to dialog once again with at least “the *excellent* folks back home.” And Norris’s approach, always weighing, comparing, and choosing the best place to start over, sets a hopeful example for comprehending “those *not excellent*,” instead of polemically demolishing them. More than one gay magazine correspondent observes that despite all the pain and harm which so-called “reparative ministries” have caused by promising to restore homosexual Christians to “natural” heterosexuality, gays must come to terms with the fact that “on their own terms they genuinely love us.”

Churches now face a pastoral opportunity and danger where that appeal makes urgent sense. Sorting out *excellent* and *not excellent* voices has proved essential for progress, as living orthodoxies know. By contrast, history shows that the temptation to close up Norris’s Razor, force uniformity, and exclude dissent has undone reformers and conservatives alike. On Confucius’s native turf our era witnessed the most terrible instance in centuries, a parallel to sober our Anglican

primates. Losing his grip on Communist Party trends, Chairman Mao Zedong whipped up the common mob for his Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, a catastrophe that ironically gutted revolutionary progress in public education and medicine and launched what old Chinese socialists like Bishop K. H. Ting lament most: the slide toward a fascist state. In 1967, "big character posters" trumpeted Mao's charge to his wife Jiang Qing, exhorting the Beijing mob to shut down his rivals' offices. Widely quoted still, those posters used words Anglicans may recognize, and take as a warning: "BOMBARD HEADQUARTERS! TO BEAT THE GREAT DEVIL, LET THE LITTLE DEVILS RUN FREE!" After their rampage, Deng Xiaoping reopened Headquarters and scrapped Mao's programs, while Jiang Qing and her Gang of Four died in prison without declaring which devils proved right.

