Alevi Studies and Debates on "Orthodoxy" & "Heterodoxy"

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Summary
Orthodoxy refers to the official and dominant interpretation of a religion, while heterodoxy defines belief systems that deviate from or are marginalised by that norm. However, this distinction is shaped not only by theology but also by power relations and the politics of academic knowledge production. In Alevi studies, the concept of heterodoxy has often confined Alevism within a framework that defines it merely as a divergent interpretation of Islam. This approach has overshadowed Alevism’s unique structures, reducing it to a category dependent on Sunni (Islamic) normativity. Therefore, a critical examination of the orthodoxy–heterodoxy dichotomy in the context of Alevi studies is essential for understanding the historical and theological diversity of Alevism.

Keywords: Alevi Açılımı, Alevi Festivalleri, Alevi Ocaklar, Alevilik Çalışmaları, Animizm, Cami-Cemevi Projesi, Halk İslamı, Halk Kültürü, Herezi, Heterodoks Dervişler, Heterodoksi, Hristiyanlık, İslam, Kent, Kır, Maniheizm, Manizm, Ortodoksi, Otopraksi, Şamanizm, Sapkın, Senkretizm, Yüksek İslam, Yüksek Kültür, Zerdüştilik, Zındık

Etymology and Context

The concepts of heterodoxy and orthodoxy are complementary meaning categories that inherently involve ideological, political, and institutional asymmetries. Typically, the institutional representatives of a given religion -particularly those aligned with the state or dominant structures- alongside its sacred scriptures, sanctioned discourses, and formalised ritual patterns, produce what is

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recognised as orthodoxy. In turn, discourses and practices that fall outside of these established boundaries -yet are still linked in some way to the same religious axis- are defined as heterodoxy.

The term heterodoxy is derived from the Greek heteros (other) and doxa (belief/thought), combining to form heterodoxos -literally meaning “other belief”. Its counterpart orthodoxy (from orthos – correct, and doxa – belief) came into use in Late Antiquity to describe the “correct belief” and was later adopted into Latin (orthodoxia) and French (orthodoxie). In religious contexts, orthodoxy refers to adherence to doctrines or sects deemed correct or legitimate. For example, within Christianity, it designates conformity with the teachings and practices set forth by the early Church. From this perspective, heterodoxy can be interpreted in two ways: (1) as alternative interpretations and practices within the same religious framework - essentially, internal dissent or **unorthodoxy**; or (2) as **heresy**, a more radical deviation often implying a complete break from the accepted doctrine. The line between heresy and heterodoxy is often blurred and depends significantly on the stance of the actor defining it (Gültekin 2020, 823-26).

From a political standpoint, orthodoxy encompasses doctrines and practices legitimised by state power or traditional institutional authority. Heterodoxy, while still operating within the same religious tradition, consists of interpretations, practices, and discourses that diverge from this official line. In this sense, the mechanism of inclusion and exclusion is clear. Importantly, these categorisations are shaped by the historical, social, and class positions of the actors involved. Thus, orthodoxy and the heterodoxy defined from within it only gain full meaning within relations of power. Religiosity that is institutionalised -especially state-backed, ideologically integrated into ruling elites, and systematised through canonical texts- constitutes orthodoxy. Conversely, belief systems that fall outside of this sphere are labelled heterodox, albeit to varying degrees, by the same powers (Gültekin 2020, 823-26).

It is essential to note that these definitions are highly context-dependent. A religious practice or discourse considered orthodox in one historical or social setting may be deemed heterodox -or even heretical- in another. Therefore, neither term can precisely define religious identities with fixed boundaries. Within the flow of cultural processes, these meanings shift in accordance with the political choices and religious positions of those using them. Ultimately, they function as analytical categories deployed to construct or enforce hegemonic positions.

Alevi Studies and the Debates

Since the surge in Alevi studies in Turkey during the 1990s, a common analytical formula has been to classify Sunni interpretations of Islam as orthodoxy and to categorise more "controversial" belief forms -such as Alevism- as heterodoxy. This binary was often reinforced by conceptual dichotomies such as **urban** vs. **rural**, **high**– vs. **folk-culture**, or within religious terminology, **high-Islam** vs. **popular-Islam**, especially when analysing the religious landscape in Turkey. However, the core assumption embedded in this classification -the shared origin from the same religious source- has been increasingly challenged, especially as the Alevi identity movement has expanded to transnational scales, developed institutional expressions through distinct political experiences, and gained recognition from some European states.

Even though Alevism has always displayed theological and ritual distinctions that diverge significantly from scriptural Islam, the tendency to read it as a heterodox form within Islam remained dominant until recently. From this perspective, there seems to be a broad consensus that Alevism represents a syncretic combination of ancient and monotheistic religious-magical cosmologies native to West Asia. Accordingly, Alevism is understood as drawing from cultural sources such as **Shamanism**, **Manichaeism**, **Zoroastrianism**, **Christianity**, and **Islam**. The convergence of migratory pathways and mass social movements in

Anatolia is seen to have produced a large, syncretic religious formation within **Anatolian Islam**. In this view, Alevism's relationship with Islam is treated primarily as a matter of historical contact, and thus, it is positioned within **popular Islam** as one example among many heterodox belief systems.

However, cultural differences among Alevis in Turkey -such as their identification as Kurdish, Arab, or Turkish; their diverse languages; and their various regional practices- have led to essentialist (primordial) objections to such pluralist approaches, especially as cultural identities have become increasingly politicised. Throughout both the Seljuk-Ottoman and Republican periods, Alevism was consistently left outside formal recognition structures. As a result, it has often been regarded not as heterodoxy, but as **heresy** -a position outside religion altogether. It has been defined through categories such as **deviance** (sapkın) or **apostasy** (zındık), entirely disconnected from the foundational discourses and practices of Islamic belief.

At the same time, political developments -such as the institutional strengthening of the Alevi movement, along with favourable legal and social developments for Alevis in Europe- have led to efforts to redefine Alevism's relationship with Islam in clearer and sharper terms. As Alevism's political relevance has grown, the need to delineate its ties to Islam has turned into a subject with real consequences for public policy, law, and international relations in Turkey. For example, since the state began participating in **Alevi festivals** during the 1990s and initiated gestures such as the **Alevi Opening**, long-standing policies of official disregard began to shift in certain respects. Alongside symbolic projects like the **Mosque-Cemevi** complex (which was ultimately unrealised), and through the academic discourses emerging from theology faculties, Alevism has increasingly been processed within the dominant framework as "a variant within Islam that needs reordering (or re-education)."

At the same time, voices representing the Alevi identity

movement -mostly led by Alevi intellectuals and activists- have emphasized that scriptural Islamic doctrines are not determinant in Alevism, and that in practice, Alevism constitutes a wholly different form of religiosity. These opposing intellectual discourses have gained significant traction.

On one hand, the state portrays Alevism as a folkloric expression of Turkish national identity, a carryover of pre-Islamic traditions that should be "re-aligned" with Sunni Islam. On the other hand, many Alevi institutions seeking legal recognition have increasingly framed Alevism as a distinct and original religious system with only historical ties to Islam. It is important to note that these discussions are largely conducted in the vocabulary of national and international constitutional law, driven by strategic political concerns. Theological and historical discussions about Alevism tend to be treated as secondary.

This, however, has led to a situation where the concepts of orthodoxy and heterodoxy -originally analytical tools of the academy- are now used to justify both essentialist and pluralist claims, giving them shifting and even contradictory meanings. For instance, heterodoxy once used academically to explain historical continuity and cultural exchange, has in recent years come to signify rupture and separation.

Orthopraxy

One more idea connected to these debates is the concept of **orthopraxy** -meaning "correct practice"- which some scholars believe offers a more appropriate framework than orthodoxy-heterodoxy when analysing Islam. According to this view, orthodoxy, rooted in early Christian theology and institutional history, loses its inclusive capacity when applied to Islam due to the plural centres of power and interpretation within the Muslim world. For instance, treating Sunni Islam as an orthodoxy is problematic, not only because of internal diversity within Sunnism but also because of differing traditions like Shiism, which propose

distinct theological and ritual models. Moreover, even communities that do not observe the so-called “pillars of Islam” may still be classified within the Islamic fold.

Hence, some scholars -both Turkish and international- have suggested using orthopraxy instead. From this perspective, Islam is defined not doctrinally but through shared practices. As long as one affirms belief in God and shows allegiance to the Prophet (and by extension, the political-spiritual authority seen as his continuation), then practical variations in worship are considered acceptable. This framework also supports the argument that Alevi communities, their **ocaks** (sacred lineages), and so-called heterodox **dervish** orders were consciously tolerated by the Seljuk and early Ottoman states. These policies, it is argued, were strategic, facilitating the spread of Islam across Anatolia and the Balkans.

However, from the late 19th century onward -particularly with the emergence of Turkish modernisation that would culminate in the Republic- the ancestors of these communities (eventually named “Alevi” under an overarching identity) experienced multiple uprisings, massacres, exiles, and waves of repression, driven by both socio-economic and religious causes. During both imperial and republican periods, states exercised heavy-handed political and institutional control over Alevi orders and dervish groups.

Ultimately, the political dimensions attached to orthodoxy and heterodoxy in the Islamic and Turkish contexts seem to exceed the conceptual reach of orthopraxy alone. These terms are intimately tied to the dynamics of power and control.

Conclusion: Orthodoxy, Heterodoxy, and Academic Anti-Alevi Discrimination

In academic literature, the concepts of orthodoxy and heterodoxy are often used to classify religious traditions and

to explain the diversity of belief systems. However, within the context of nation-states' strategies to regulate and control religious groups, these concepts can also acquire ideological and political functions. In Turkey, the concept of heterodoxy has frequently been used in Alevi studies as an epistemological tool to position Alevism as "a deviation from the core of Islam". This framing tends to disregard the possibility of Alevism being an independent belief system in its own right and instead defines it as a necessary extension -or deviation- of Sunni Islam.

As Markus Dressler (2015: 445-451) argues, defining Alevism as heterodox is not just a matter of academic categorisation; it becomes a discursive instrument that facilitates the assimilation of Alevis within the process of nation-building. From the perspective of Turkish state policy, defining Alevism as a "heterodox interpretation of Islam" produces an epistemic framework that legitimises its absorption into the Sunni majority. Dressler refers to this as "the Turkish politics of doxa," emphasising that how Alevism is defined and positioned is determined by the knowledge regimes constructed around state-centric secularism and nationalism. These regimes recognise Alevism as a part of Islam in a formal sense, but simultaneously mark it as a deviation -thus demarcating the normative boundaries of Sunni Islam.

In this process, the state tends to reduce Alevism to a folkloric element, while still treating it as an intra-Islamic interpretation in political and legal terms. This approach renders Alevism a category suitable for assimilation, while also designating it as the "other" of Sunni Islam -thus placing it at a disadvantage in both legal and social spheres.

The epistemological framework that underpins this treatment has the potential to produce a specific form of academic anti-Alevi discrimination. The label of heterodoxy increasingly becomes a discursive device that obstructs Alevism from being recognised as a legitimate religious system and instead suggests that it should remain under the

state's jurisdiction. Dressler points out that by classifying Alevism as a sect, the state enables its assimilation into the Sunni majority -and that this approach has also been internalised in academic discourse. A similar issue can be observed in Western academia: in the context of Alevism's recognition in Europe, the orthodoxy-heterodoxy binary has led to Alevism being presented either as a "tolerant interpretation within Islam" or as a "mystical form of popular Islam." These interpretations effectively strip Alevism of its right to self-definition and lock it within academic categories that often situate it squarely within the framework of Sunni Islam.

In sum, the orthodoxy-heterodoxy dichotomy in Alevi studies must be critically reassessed. These categories confine Alevism within a narrow epistemological frame that compels it to be defined only in terms of normative Islamic interpretations. Academic knowledge production must interrogate the ideological and political contexts in which such categorical frameworks are applied. Instead of continually coding Alevism as a heterodoxy, there is a need to develop more pluralistic and critical perspectives -ones that take into account its historical development, theological distinctiveness, and socio-political context on its own terms.

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