

On redescribing Christian origins

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1. The myth of Christian origins

For almost two thousand years, the Christian imagination of Christian origins has echoed the gospel stories contained in the New Testament. That is not surprising. The gospel accounts erased the pre-gospel histories; their inclusion within the church's New Testament consigned other accounts to oblivion; and during the long reach of Christian history, from the formation of the New Testament in the fourth century to the Enlightenment in the eighteenth, there was no other story except satires of cabbage stocks and kings.

According to Christian imagination, Christianity began when Jesus entered the world, performed miracles, called disciples, taught them about the kingdom of God, challenged the Jewish establishment, was crucified as the Christ and Son of God, appeared after his resurrection, overwhelmed his disciples with his holy spirit, established the first church in Jerusalem, and sent the apostles out on a mission to tell the world what they had seen and heard. Telling what they had seen was enough to convince the Jews and convert the gentiles into thinking that God had planned the whole thing in order to start a new religion. The new religion was about sin and redemption. What it took to start the new religion was all there as a kind of divine implantation in the life of Jesus, needing only to germinate and develop as early Christians heard about it, believed it, and came to understand its import. We might call this scenario the big bang concept of Christian origins.

However, since the Enlightenment, the effort to understand Christian origins has been pursued by scholars as a matter of historical and literary criticism, and the New Testament account has slowly been dismantled. The New Testament is no longer seen by critical scholars as a coherent set of apostolic texts that document a single set of dramatic events and their monolinear history of subsequent influence and theological development. Instead of one gospel story, we have four different accounts within the New Testament and several other gospels that were not included. Instead of one picture of the historical Jesus that all early Christians must have had in view, we now have

several competing views. We now know that there were many groups from the beginning, creating disparate traditions, responding to other groups differently, and developing various rituals and patterns of social congregation. Plural theologies and conflicting ideologies, as well as competing authorities and leaders, were the order of the day. So factors other than the marvels portrayed in the gospel account must have been at work.

And yet, the older picture of Christian origins according to the gospel story, largely Lukan, is still in everyone's mind. It is as if the emergence of Christianity cannot be accounted for any other way. It is as if the accumulation of critical information within the discipline of New Testament studies cannot compete with the gospel's mystique. This is odd, for without a more appropriate picture of the way Christianity began, the data pursued by critical inquiry have no frame of reference to give them any significance. These results of our critical inquiry seem to be floating free in the archives of a guild that has no log or registry to keep track of the knowledge it produces. It is as if everyone secretly hopes that the core of the gospel's account will eventually be shown still to be true. Thus the scholarly production of the guild has become a brew devoid of recipe. Are we waiting for some magic to make the mix a potion, redeem the gospel account, and make all of our labour finally seem worthwhile?

This Consultation on Ancient Myths and Modern Theories of Christian Origins was sponsored in the conviction that the time has come to account for Christian origins some other way. My own view is that a redescription of Christian origins would ultimately have to account for the emergence of the gospels themselves, turning them into interesting products of early Christian thinking instead of letting them determine the parameters within which all of our data must find a place to rest. With that in mind, I would like to take stock of the current state of New Testament studies and then present a proposal for a redescription of Christian origins.

2. Taking stock of our studies

We can begin by making a list of items in need of explanation. Some of these items are traditional *aporiae*, known as the gaps or holes in our systems of explanation. Others are clichés that have served explanatory functions, but are in reality unexamined assumptions in need themselves of explanation. Others are easily recognized as unresolved issues still under debate. Taken as a whole the list suggests that, as a scholarly discipline, we are sure of less than we pretend to know. For the sake of brevity, I shall not add comments to any item. I will list them as topics in need of explanation, hoping that, in the majority of cases, the reasons for their inclusion in the list will be obvious.

May I suggest that you consider them slowly, and pause briefly after each item?

- The import of the teachings of Jesus *à la* Q and the Gospel of Thomas.
- The notion that Jesus was a reformer of Judaism.
- Messianic expectations as definitive of the Jewish mentality at the time.
- The presence of the Pharisees in Galilee during the time of Jesus.
- The disciples as a select group.
- The disciples as trained by Jesus for leadership in a kingdom program.
- The meaning and conception of the language of the kingdom of God.
- The reason for the attraction of the Jesus movements.
- The historical data and the reasons for the crucifixion of Jesus.
- The shift from Jesus movements to the congregations of the Christ.
- The attraction of the Christ congregations for both Jews and gentiles.
- The original impulse for using the designation *Christ*.
- The occasion for and the logic of the Christ myth (or *kerygma*).
- Whether all early Christians met for common meals.
- The significance of common meals for social formation and mythmaking.
- The rationales and practices of baptisms.
- The reasons for and modes of reference to the Jewish Scriptures.
- The attraction of the concept "Israel."
- The formation of the passion narrative(s).
- The notion of a last supper.
- Easter as a datable datum.
- The notion of a first church in Jerusalem.
- The reasons for and the locations of the Jew-Gentile debate.
- Accounting for the emergence and history of Jewish Christianity.
- The notion of apostle.
- The notion of mission.
- The influence of popular Greek philosophy and ethics.
- The intention to form an alternative society.
- The concept of the church.
- The notions of and fixations on persecution and martyrdom.

We all could go on, adding to this list of aporiae and issues that the gospel paradigm presents but cannot explain. Thus the gospel story of Christian origins is inadequate as a description of Christian origins, though we use it still as the only account we have. It is as if a ring of fire protects it, since no other explanation will do. This can be illustrated in the way scholars often acquiesce to the gospel's mystique even at the end of the most detailed, penetrating, and critical investigations.

To take one example, the history of investigation on the miracle stories in the gospels has taught us much about the notion of the miraculous in

the Greco-Roman age, its institutions, professions, practices, and genres of report. But it has not led to a critique of the gospel or a redescription of Christian origins. John Locke did not believe in miracles, but in the case of the miracles of Jesus, he said, one must accept them because they were so exceptional. D. F. Strauss thought gullible Galileans made up the miracle stories, mesmerized as they were by the superior person of Jesus. He did not say how they knew that Jesus was superior, what that may have meant, or why it called for miracle stories. The recent scholarship of Gerd Theissen, Morton Smith, Paul Achtemeier, Anne Wire, Howard Kee, and others has emphasized the Greco-Roman parallels as if to say that, since the cultures of context had no trouble with miracles, neither should we. But each scholar has then found a way to note the differences between the pagan genres and the miracles of Jesus, as if to say that “*something* extra special must have happened in the case of Jesus’ miracles”, meaning, “let’s not explain the gospels away”.

The current, hotly-debated list of topics under investigation among us can all be understood as items that became issues because their study threatened the gospel paradigm. This is true of the quest for the historical Jesus, the debate about the historicity of the temple-cleansing pericope, renewed attempts to explain the crucifixion and argue for the historicity of the passion narrative, the furor over wisdom and apocalyptic, the consternation over Q, the arguments against the two-source hypothesis, the redating of Matthew, and underscoring the importance of Paul’s theology and religious experience as primary data for the way Christianity began. The juices are flowing because the New Testament paradigm of Christian origins requires a certain answer to each of these questions, and struggling with each of these questions has led some scholars and historians to conclusions that do not agree with the traditional picture.

3. The “catch-22”

Allowing the gospel paradigm to define Christian origins is quite understandable. It is the only scenario that everyone automatically shares, thus providing a comprehensive frame of reference for scholarly research and discourse. It serves as a kind of map within which we try to place our various, detailed labours. It also protects a set of assumptions about the way Christianity began, forming as it does the basis for what has been imagined as an otherwise inexplicable emergence of a brand new religion of unique conviction and singular faith. Something overwhelming must have possessed those early Christians, so the thinking has been, or they would not have converted to the new religion with its extraordinary claims. It is the gospel story that feeds that suspicion of an overwhelming something at the very beginning of the Christian time.

There are, however, three reasons for setting the gospel account aside. One is that the gospel paradigm creates a scholarly catch-22. Another is that the attempt to protect the gospel account sacrifices academic explanation to a hermeneutical desire for contemporary theological relevance. And a third is that doing so fosters a theory of religion that only Christianity can illustrate.

We are all familiar with the catch-22. It is that, for Christian mentality, the New Testament is taken as proof for the conventional picture of Christian origins, and the conventional picture is taken as proof for the way in which the New Testament came to be written. Thus the story of New Testament scholarship is one of heroic struggle to overcome the entanglement of mythic text and critical history in the quest for Christian origins. Only a concerted effort to pop that catch can escape its circular logic and put us in a position to explain Christian origins some other way.

We also know about the stated objectives of New Testament scholarship – historical research leading to critical exegesis, and hermeneutical translation that can spark contemporary theological insight. The tension between the two is sometimes stretched to the point of snapping, for doing exegesis requires critical historiography which seeks to understand Christian origins in terms of the humanities, while formulating a hermeneutic leaves the mystery of Christian origins untouched and treats the New Testament as the source for contemporary Christian experience and knowledge of God. New Testament hermeneutics seek to meet Jesus again for the first time, hear afresh the Word of God, or contact in our time the original fire that brought and brings Christian faith into existence. Thus the hermeneutical enterprise continues to let the New Testament stand as the church's myth and ritual text, the oracle that gives it its charter and makes its claims legitimate. Let's be honest. Interpreting the New Testament as a quest for contemporary theological relevance is a sophisticated form of mythic thinking. Its pursuit is not appropriate within the academy. We shall not be able to redescribe Christian origins if our ultimate goal is a Christian hermeneutic instead of a contribution to humanistic understanding.

There is, however, a much more serious obstacle to a redescription project than either the textual catch-22 or the persistence of mythic thinking in the hermeneutical enterprise. These two are problems of which we are somewhat aware and about which we sometimes talk. The phenomenon I have in mind, on the other hand, is seldom mentioned and hardly ever discussed. It may even be that many are not aware that it exists. I refer to the theory of religion implicit in our scholarship and naively assumed as natural by most New Testament scholars. New Testament studies are generally pursued without feeling the need for discussing theories of religion, much less articulating the assumptions about religion that are taken for granted by most New Testament scholars. These assumptions are obvious, however, to historians of

religion who happen upon our discourse in the quest to see how religion is being understood across the humanistic disciplines. The historian of religion would say that New Testament scholars work with a concept of religion that is thoroughly and distinctly Christian in its derivation and definition. That may come as no surprise. Since we deal with Christian texts in the interest of understanding Christian origins, and since our discipline does not demand setting our work in the context of comparative religions, cultural anthropology, and religious studies, it has not seemed necessary to venture beyond the history of Christianity to develop a general theory of religion. Our familiarity with the Christian religion has taken the place of theoretical discussion, and Christianity has provided us with the categories we use to name and explain early Christian phenomena.

The problem is that the understanding of religion implicit in our discipline is inadequate for the task of redescribing Christian origins. Interest in religion among New Testament scholars comes to focus on personal transformations, or what is sometimes called "personal religious experience." By this is meant some kind of contact with the divine, a contact that requires a breakthrough from both sides of a wall that inhibits clear vision, communication, and personal relations. The breakthrough from the divine side is imagined in terms of revelations, appearances, miracles, and dramatic events, exemplified most clearly in the appearance of Jesus whose unique life and "ministry" are understood to have occasioned a new situation and released the powers that make it possible for others also to make contact with God. From the human side, the breakthroughs happen in terms of visions, conversions, and personal transformations that shatter older patterns of self-understanding and transfer persons into a new world order or relationship with the divine. Everything else in the myth-ritual package of Christianity, such as worldview, concept of God, history, human problematic, Christ-event, and notions of salvation, are merely reflectors hung on the walls of the Christian sanctuary for the purpose of intensifying the focus of divine light upon the individual positioned at its centre. With such a fixation on personal religious experience and dramatic moments of divine transformation, is it any wonder that we have had trouble explaining the mythic data of the divinity of Jesus, miracles, resurrection, cultic presence, reports of ecstatic visions, and apocalyptic persuasions, any other way?

This ring of fire around which we dance has always occasioned caution lest we get too close to these mysteries and find ourselves tempted to explain them. The history of our discipline is strewn with intellectual giants who, like Bultmann, have set out to dismantle the encrusted mythologies, and have arrived at some suspected core of the crucifixion *kerygma* or the *Dass* of incarnation, only finally to back off and leave the mystery untouched and unexplained. The rule seems to be that, "Neither the historian nor the theologian should try to answer these questions", as Koester put it. The questions

he had in mind were such as "... whether Jesus expected a visible demonstration of God's rule in the near future as a result of his path to the cross?" (1983: 2, 84) The critical thinker is stunned and stymied when confronted with such scholarly hesitations in the face of the gospel's mystique. Taking up such questions directly, in the attempt to make some response, leads nowhere. That is because questions such as these are phrased in existentialist, psychological, and mythic terms which leave the gospel's aura of mystique in place. If one is drawn into this discourse on its own terms, one cannot avoid joining its dance around the gospel's ring of fire.

When chided by historians of religion for hesitations such as these, the caveat has sometimes been that New Testament scholars have *not* been unsophisticated in their attempt to find neutral concepts from the history of religions to explain early Christian phenomena. We know, for instance, that Eliade's phenomenology of religion has been particularly influential in providing categories for naming and comparing Christian phenomena with things held to be religious in general. The problem in this case, however, is that Eliade's phenomenology was hardly neutral with respect to Christianity. Christianity was, in fact, the religion that provided Eliade with the religious system he assumed and proposed as universal. Creating designations for religious phenomena in general that were actually (though surreptitiously) understood on the Christian model turned out to be a very seductive proposition. Many of us played that game for a while, setting up this or that comparison of Christianity with other religions, only to find that a Christian exemplum invariably exemplified the essence of a category more clearly than any example from another culture.

Thus, both Bultmann's existentialist interpretation and Eliade's theory of religion have proven inadequate for redescribing Christian origins. One privileges the uniqueness of Jesus; the other assumes the superiority of the Christian religion. Neither has provided a model for the task of critical and balanced comparison of early Christianities with the religions of late antiquity. The flush of euphoria and the sense of understanding created by these exercises are now passé, to be sure. But New Testament scholars are still locked into comparative methods that always result in a demonstration of early Christianity's uniqueness and superiority. Thus the comparative studies we produce are not only boring, they actually inhibit asking the next, and most fundamental set of questions. The question should be, superior in respect to what, or merely different in respect to which criterion? There is always a criterion at work in the making of comparisons, though the standard used may well be implicit, taken for granted, or even unconscious. It is our failure to state and discuss the criteria implicit in our comparative exercises that short circuits learning and leads to compromising conclusions that do not penetrate the gospel's mystique.

4. Entertaining another theory

If we want to account for the emergence of Christianity, including the formation of groups and congregations, the development of their various practices and rituals, the production of their mythologies, and the writing of their literature, and if we want to discover the reasons for and the motivations involved in their many investments in their new associations, we need a better theory of religion than the one that has implicitly been at work among us. If we want to account for Christian origins as a thoughtful human construction, instead of as the overwhelming activity of a god, we need a theory of religion that gives the people their due. We need a theory of religion firmly anchored in a social and cultural anthropology, capable of sustaining a conversation with the humanities.

Since theories serve to sharpen debate, are always open to testing and revision, and come in clusters of variant hypotheses as well as dominant paradigms, there need not be a ready-made theory waiting in the wings with which we must all agree. A theoretical shift of such proportion would not be possible in any case as the first and only item for discussion among us before getting on with the task of redescription. But the need for a shift in theory does need to be acknowledged, I think, if we want to take full advantage of each other's work and develop a deliberate discourse about Christian origins that does not self-destruct when approaching the ring of fire. What to do?

There are some features common to many theories of religion now being used and tested across the humanities. I think we might want to take note of them, and perhaps find ways to discuss them in the course of a project on redescribing Christian origins. I would like to suggest five propositions that, taken as a set, provide a perspective on religion that is certainly different from the one our scholarship has taken for granted. If we were to use this set of propositions as a kind of lens or working hypothesis, a different approach to our data would certainly be possible. My suspicion is that this set of propositions is sufficient as a framework for getting started on a collaborative redescription project.

(1) Religion is a social construct. The notion of personal religious experience is inadequate as a point of departure for defining religion or developing a theory of religion. That individuals have religious experiences is not in doubt. But individuals in any culture experience religion in many different ways. And persons do not see visions of the virgin Mary in cultures where catholic Christianity has not penetrated. The more interesting phenomena are the myths, rituals, symbols, beliefs and patterns of thinking that are *shared* by a people. These cultural constructs can be experienced and manipulated in a variety of ways by individuals, but it is their self-evident status as common cultural coin that marks them as the religion of a people. In the case

of Christian origins, we need to ask about the people who joined the various movements, entertained Christian myths, and practiced Christian rituals. We need to ask about the reasons for and the processes whereby their myths and rituals were first constructed and agreed upon, and how they came to be taken for granted. It is the social factor, the possibilities and rewards for coming to these agreements as groups in the context of a social history rife with other peoples, groups, and religions, that we need better to understand.

(2) Social formation defines the human enterprise. Constructing societies large and small is what people do. It is a fragile, collective craft requiring enormous amounts of negotiation, experimentation, living together, and talking. And it invariably results in very complex arrangements of relationships, agreements reached on better and less better ways to do things, and practices established to pass on the knowledge and skills accumulated in the process. Social formation is hard work, creates as many tensions as rewards, and is overkill if thought of simply as a strategy for survival. But despite the risks and repeated disasters, watching each other and talking about each other is what we humans find most interesting. So we need a social anthropology to counter our endemic personalisms and ask about the reasons for and the processes whereby early Christian myths and rituals were first conceived and agreed upon. What if the Jesus movements and the congregations of the Christ were attractive as intentional experiments in social formation and mythmaking?

(3) Myths are more than fascinating fantasies, fuzzy memories, misguided science, or collective deceptions. Myths acknowledge the collective gifts and constraints of the past and create a foil or gap for thinking critically about the present state of a group's life together. We need to consider the possibility that early Christians entertained fantastic mythologies, not because they were overwhelmed by encounters with a god or a son of God, but because they wanted to comprehend and justify their investments in a movement that made social sense to them, but which may have looked funny when compared with other associations. Myths are not only good for creating marvellous narrative worlds in which to stretch the imagination and work out theoretical equations, they are also good for reflecting upon the world in which one actually lives. In the case of early Christian myths, we need to ask what they were good for. What did those early Christians get when they dared to imagine their pasts and their worlds the way they did?

(4) Rituals are more than divine placations or magical attempts to channel the powers of the gods. Rituals are the way humans have of concentrating attention on some activity or event of some significance to a group, and observing its performance apart from normal practice. Much can happen at a ritual, for rituals are social occasions, require roles, invite attendance, display skills, confirm loyalties, trigger commitments, evoke thoughtfulness,

and reconstitute the structure of a group without having to engineer it any other way. In the case of Christian origins, we need to know what activities were chosen for ritual performance, why they were chosen, how they were performed, and what such observation may have achieved for the group. I can't resist the temptation to remark that, as far as I can tell, the supper texts in the New Testament were not taken as scripts for reenactment until the third century. If so, we have a wonderfully elongated process of ritualization on our hands. I am afraid we shall have to redo Richardson-Lietzmann to get that story straight.

(5) Mythmaking and social formation go together. In a stable situation, where pressure to change a way of life is not serious, a people's myths and social structure may not need constant tinkering. But when circumstances change and the social fabric tears, and especially in the case of a clash of cultures, the pace quickens, for the older plots will need revision and the social structure will need repair. Experimentation and bricolage mark the ways in which myths get rearranged and groups reform. Except for the case of an obvious pathology, even the most daring social experiments and the most fantastic mythic constructs turn out to be thoughtful and constructive attempts to regain sanity in a social situation that threatens human well-being. In the case of early Christians, we need always to consider the possibility that the making of their myths and the processes of forming social groups were constructive and thoughtful human activities. And whenever we have the chance to catch sight of both mythmaking and social formation happening at the same time in the same place, we need to explore the relationship of the one to the other.

5. Toying with an appropriate method

As many of you know, I think Jonathan Z. Smith might help us out of our embarrassment. The reasons are not just that, as an historian of religion, Jonathan works with texts from our era and is thoroughly acquainted with our discipline. His value for us is that he always does his work as a contribution to the discussion of theory in the study of religion. It is the way in which he works that I would like to propose as a model for the project we have in mind. His method can be described as the performance of four operations, not necessarily in separate, sequential stages: description, comparison, redescription, and the rectification of categories.

(1) After identifying a text, topic, myth, ritual, genre, practice, or social-historical item as interesting and worthy of additional attention, as full a *description* as possible is in order. That involves paying close attention to the forms of its documentation, social-historical incidence, cultural context,

and the particular situation to which the item might be considered a response. Careful description is absolutely necessary to make sure we have noticed the details and have not assumed that we already understand what it is that has caught our attention. Thick description is absolutely necessary in order to locate our exemplum in the texture of its social, historical, and cultural environments, the texture that gives it significance. To emphasize the need for description keeps us honest, keeps calling us back to the arena of social and empirical reality, and makes sure that we treat our examples as human constructs.

(2) The next step is to look for an example of a similar construct in some other cultural context. This second instance of a construct will be used for making a *comparison*. Comparison is fundamental to the cognitive processes whereby we notice, classify, define, and think about things. We can't do much with an absolutely unique phenomenon, one that is incomparable, one for which we know of nothing similar in any respect whatsoever. And we don't find perfectly identical copies of a thing worthy of further observation. Comparison is always triggered by interest in something that is sort of like, but not identical with, something we already know about or at least have noticed before. So we need more than a single or singular instance to study.

In setting up a comparison for the purpose of humanistic learning one must constantly keep an eye on the features that commend themselves as similarities as well as those that appear to be differences. These features need to be described and ranked in light of questions about the significance of each example in its larger scheme of things. Done well we shall have learned much about each example of a phenomenon, something about the situational factors that may have accounted for the distinctive variants of each, and we may even be able to detail the cluster of features both examples have in common that makes them instances of a general phenomenon. In Smith's essays, the frequent practice has been to select examples from two widely separate histories and cultures. That is because Smith's project has been to review those examples that have influenced the construction of theories of religion, examples that have in fact been taken from many disparate cultures, but also because his own approach to theory has demanded cross cultural comparison.

Luckily, in our case, the cross-cultural component in Smith's project of comparison can be met without having to range so far afield. The Greco-Roman age supplies us with more than enough data for comparison, as we well know. Comparison with other examples from the Greco-Roman age is tricky business, to be sure, for proximity has invariably raised questions about influence and derivation in our discipline, and our track record in dealing with this bug-a-boo is not good. "Influence" and "derivation" are spectres that have always derailed closer analyses and cut short the investigation of analogies too close for comfort. But having comparables close at hand can also be very helpful, for our early Christian texts seldom provide enough

data for full descriptions, and a good example of a similar phenomenon from an adjacent people can frequently suggest ways to make use of otherwise inexplicable features of an incomplete reference or report. As we know, early Christians had to breathe the same cultural air as everyone else, even though their responses to particular social-historical situations may have taken quite distinctive turns. And besides, a concerted attempt to understand Christian origins as one among other responses to the Greco-Roman age is strategic because, if we could do it right, others would have to take note. Using comparisons from the cultures of context is exactly what our discipline has said it was doing all along. The problem has been with the way in which comparisons have been set up and pursued, as Jonathan Z. Smith has shown in *Drudgery Divine* (1990). What if we learned to do it right?

(3) Invariably, the process of comparison will give rise to a *redescription* of the objects under investigation. That is because the comparative enterprise, having to take note of situations, humans interests, the investments of a people in a project, and the circumstances, skills, and effects of its production or cultivation, will put us in touch with an ever more complex and interesting set of details. It may be that something will have been learned about factors that make the two situations similar, something about the difference another myth makes, something about the reasons for a people's interest in or fascination with a particular notion, role, or activity, and so forth. These insights will change the way in which the examples under investigation are understood and thus require redescription. A redescription will register what has been learned in the study. My impression is that, while we have learned to be thorough in the description of this or that feature of a text, we have seldom thought it necessary to describe in detail, much less redescribe, any piece of the social and cultural picture puzzle we are trying to assemble. What if we really got serious about the question of meeting for meals, for instance, asking how congregating that way would have happened, why early Jesus people and Christians did it, and what it might have contributed to early Christian social formation and mythmaking? Come to think of it, with the exception of Lee Klosinski, Dennis Smith and Hal Taussig, no one I know of has ever thought it necessary to ask questions so seemingly banal. Studies of the supper texts have always been undertaken with only one objective – to anchor the origins of the Mass or Eucharist in the life of Jesus at the point of his passion. We need to set aside this history of scholarship. It has taught us very little about the importance that meals, congregating, and ritualizations had for early Christians and their mythmaking projects. Even after generations of studies on the origins of the “Lord's Supper”, we still have only a mystery on our hands.

(4) At the end of such a comparative study it might be possible to rename the phenomenon of which our case studies are examples. This, at least, is what we should strive for. Smith's term for this operation is the *rectification*

of categories. By that he means that the terms we use to name and describe things are important, and that the traditional terms we use are not innocent with respect to parochial connotations. It is frequently the case that a term can be found that fits the new descriptions better than older designations. I still remember a conversation with Jonathan Z. Smith about ritual theory in which I used the term “reenactment” to describe what I thought Christians imagined they were doing when they performed the Mass or Eucharist. Smith demurred because he knew of no other instance in which ritual was best described as reenactment. So I asked him to come up with another term. When he said, “How about replication?”, my heart stopped. I had been reading Victor Turner’s description of Ndembu circumcision and “replication” fit the process perfectly. I mentally scurried through other rituals I had read about and found myself giddy with the difference a different category made. And what if Christian ritual fell now somewhere between replication as commonly observed and the oddity of reenactment? Wouldn’t that come close to marking one of its distinctive features without having to set it apart from all other rituals as unique and incomparable?

In a sense, all of Jonathan Z. Smith’s work can be understood as a rectification of categories common to the history of religions. And the point? The point is nothing less than the construction of a theory of religion. A new designation for a recognizable phenomenon can become a building block for constructing a descriptive system. And the descriptions of phenomena in such a studied system can actually become mid-range axioms that might eventually be used to build a cultural (and in Smith’s case, cognitive) theory of religion. Note that, because the new designations are won by comparing examples cross-culturally, they have already been raised to a level of generalization without losing their descriptive power. That is the genius of Smith’s program. It cannot spin out of control because its categories retain their descriptive power even while being raised to a level of cross-cultural generalization. It need not pretend universal validity, because the factors of difference and variation are built into the equation. Smith’s categories for thinking about religious phenomena are neither culture specific designations, nor abstractions with universal claim. If we were to take Smith seriously, we would have a lot of interesting work to do, for almost every term commonly used to designate early Christian phenomena is ripe for redescription. Why not do it?

6. Thinking about such a project

Such a project calls for a concerted effort and a collaborative approach. And there are signs that our chances of starting such a project are excellent. The current furor about the historical Jesus and the historicity of the gospels, both

in the guild and in the media, will run its course without resolution. In the meantime there is work to be done that can be done. Solid work is actually being done already on many other fronts that eventually might be brought together in the writing of a different history. Think of the various areas of investigation that we now take for granted as significant for understanding Christian origins. The importance of extra-canonical texts is taken for granted. There is agreement about the importance of finding and fleshing out the social locations for our texts. The social history of Galilee and Palestine is now a matter of great interest. A multiplicity of both Jewish and Christian groups is recognized by all. The attitudes of different early Christian groups toward various Jewish groups are now being explored as a matter of some significance for the early period of Christianity. There is an effort to understand gnostic Christians as integral to the early history of Christianity. And, looking head, there are signs that we may learn much more about popular forms of Christianity including such things as the attitudes of early Christians toward the Roman empire, the burial practices of early Christians and their relation to ancient cults of the dead, and the role of bishops in the dispensation of social welfare. And what of work being done both within and without the guild on the archeology of Galilee and Palestine; the social history of the Levant; the emergence of the synagogue; the clash of cultures during the Hellenistic age; the Hellenistic institutions of education and learning; the arts and applications of rhetorical education; the philosophical discussions of kings, sovereignty, and law; the economic history of the Roman empire; the importance of associations as social institutions; the social role of women in early Jewish and Christian circles, and throughout the empire; the mystery cults; and the entrepreneurs of divination and healing? What an exciting chapter of human history we have on our hands. It is chock-full of social experimentation, strategies for the preservation as well as the revision of cultural traditions, and bursts of creative intellectual energy trying to make sense of that complex, multicultural scene. We ought to be able to find some features of that intermingling of cultures that bear directly upon our quest better to understand Christian origins.

What we lack is a concerted effort to rephrase our questions of the complex social and ideological history that has finally come into view. And we need a new map of the complex and interesting social and cultural terrain, as well as a new plot, one that does not start with Paul and Mark and stop with Luke's Acts of the Apostles. We need to imagine a larger frame of reference within which connections can be made among the many studies that now languish as isolated findings because they do not fit the Lukan scheme. A collaborative effort seems to be called for in order to support a discourse that consciously keeps the goal of redescription in view, one that seeks a relatively consistent level of humanistic explanation for all the data we collect.

I would like now to share a list of studies that came to mind as I pondered such a proposal. Since the list grew in a hurried and helter-skelter fashion, and since it consists of ad hoc items recalled from several years of reading, I surely run the risk of failing to include other, similarly important works. I am willing to run the risk, however, in order to make a point. The point is that excellent studies line our shelves that cannot be made to fit the gospel paradigm of Christian origins. Thus the list illustrates good work that gets lost, or worse, dismissed, because we have no place to register it as important, to regard it as a building block to be used in the construction of another history of Christian beginnings. I wanted to mention studies that, in my judgment, should make a difference for our understanding of Christian origins if Christian origins were understood as the work of early Christians. Some are studies whose importance is mainly that they continue the dismantling of the traditional Christian imagination. Some are by scholars who tried to align their findings with the standard gospel paradigm and may not have wished to contribute to a markedly different vision of Christian origins at all. But all contain significant findings, in my opinion, with potential for contributing to a redescription project. And all therefore deserve more discussion of the "so what?" variety than they have received. As with the *aporiae*, I do not have the leisure to comment on any of these studies. I hope, nevertheless, that some of the reasons for my judgments will be apparent.

Paul Achtemeier on the mythic pattern implicit in the chains of miracle stories.

John Alsup on the post-resurrection appearance stories as *literary* performance.

David Aune on the imbalance of the term *Christ* in Paul versus the synoptics.

Daniel Boyarin on the intertextuality of the Mishnah.

Daniel Boyarin on Paul as a radical Jew.

Peter Brown on the holy man as entrepreneur in late antiquity.

Rudolf Bultmann on the wisdom myth background to the logos hymn.

Ron Cameron on the rationale for the earliest John and Jesus material in Q.

Ron Cameron on Eusebius and the canonical (Lukan) myth of origins.

Elizabeth Castelli on *mimesis* as a discourse of power in Paul.

James Charlesworth on the lack of evidence for the notion of "the" messiah.

Adela Yarbro Collins on the myth of "persecution" in the Apocalypse of John.

Hans Conzelmann on Greek as the original language of the *kerygma*.

Kathleen Corley on the public role of women in Roman society and the synoptics.

Dom Crossan on the parables of Jesus in the Gospel of Thomas.

David Efroymson on the reason for the *adversus Iudaios* literature.

- Henry Fischel on the *chreiai* in the early Hillel tradition.
- Robert Fowler on the non-eucharistic function of the feeding stories in Mark.
- Lester Grabbe on the intellectual vitality of Judaism from Cyrus to Hadrian.
- Robert Gregg on the mixed demography of the Greco-Roman Decapolis.
- K. C. Hanson on the "beatitudes" as non-eschatological attributions of honour.
- K. C. Hanson on kinship in the Mediterranean and the Herodians.
- Martin Hengel on the post-Alexandrian hellenization of Palestine.
- Richard Horsley's critique of the scholarly category of "the zealots."
- Luke Timothy Johnson on *pistis* as "faithfulness" in Paul.
- Steven Johnson on two ideologies of baptism in early Christian texts.
- Werner Kelber on the lack of evidence for Jesus naming twelve disciples.
- Werner Kelber and others on the passion narratives as Markan.
- Karen King on gnostic ideology as social critique.
- John Kloppenborg on the compositional history of Q.
- John Kloppenborg on the theological stakes in the synoptic problem.
- Lee Klosinski on meals and social formation in Mark.
- Helmut Koester on the importance of the Gospel of Thomas for Christian origins.
- Werner Kramer on the earliest use of the term *Christ* – in the Christ myth.
- Jack Lightstone on scribalism and the development of the synagogue.
- Bruce Malina on "religion" as integral to the social fabric in antiquity.
- Luther Martin on "secrecy" in Hellenistic associations and mystery cults.
- Luther Martin on the "syncretism" of Hellenistic religions.
- Willi Marxsen on the Lord's supper as christological problem.
- Wayne Meeks on early Christian urbanity.
- Merrill Miller on the "pillars" in Jerusalem as a conundrum, not a datum.
- Jacob Neusner on the Pharisees and the logic of the Jewish purity systems.
- George Nickelsburg on the "wisdom tale" and the passion narrative.
- Kenneth Pomykala on the lack of evidence for a "Son of David tradition."
- John Priest on the lack of evidence for the notion of a "messianic banquet."
- Jonathan Reed on the archeology of Galilee and Hellenistic culture.
- Vernon Robbins on the Hellenistic rhetoric of the pronouncement stories.
- David Seeley on the Greek background for the "noble death" in Paul.
- David Seeley on the influence of the ruler cult on early christologies.
- Dennis Smith on the association pattern for communal meals in Corinth.
- Dennis Smith on the myth of the "messianic banquet."
- J. Z. Smith on the "apocalyptic situation."
- J. Z. Smith on early Christian baptisms.
- J. Z. Smith on the meaning of the term *mysterion* in scholarship and in antiquity.
- Morton Smith on Palestinian parties and politics that shaped the Old Testament.

Stan Stowers on the rhetoric of Romans and the Hellenistic ideal of self-control.

Stan Stowers on the politics of sacrifice in ancient Greece.

Shemaryahu Talmon on diversification in postexilic Judaism.

Hal Taussig on the ritualization of meals in early Christianity.

Joan Taylor on the lack of sacred Christian sites before Constantine.

Sam Williams on the Greek background for Jesus' death as "saving event."

Vincent Wimbush on asceticism as a strategy for cultural critique.

Leif Vaage on the Cynic parallels to the teachings of Jesus.

Think how nice it would be if we had a project, seminar, or discourse where studies such as these would be taken seriously as contributions to a redescription of Christian origins. What if we could turn studies such as these into building blocks for a redescription project? What if we found a way to wriggle free from the gospel's mystique and change the subject?

7. Changing the subject

Taking the question of the disciples as an example, what if we went about the task of trying to make sense of our data without letting either the orthodox mythology about Jesus and his disciples, or a piety focused on Christian life as one of "discipleship," set the agenda? What if we started with the recognition that neither of these views can be supported by the textual evidence we have, and that reference to disciples in the early Jesus materials might be used to great advantage for a redescription project if only we changed the subject? What then? Why then it would suddenly be very important that the earliest views in Q, Paul, Mark, the miracles stories, the pronouncement stories, and the Gospel of Thomas did *not* agree, could not be *made* to agree. What then? Why then we would have to ask about disciples in the cultures of context, about teachers and their disciples, about schools and their teachings, about disciples and their ways with the teachings of their teachers, about mutual recognition among kindred schools, about belonging to a school, and so on. Interesting stuff and very important as analogy and foil for going back to our texts. Maybe the problems we had with our data were not really problems at all. Maybe the differences among our sources are just what one might expect of kindred movements in competition who thought of themselves on the model of schools. Maybe the funny ways in which "the" disciples get named and storied are more to the point than the question of why, if Jesus named and commissioned them, the earliest texts do not agree. Think of it. One could actually use the sociological role and image of the "student" to trace a vigorous and complex history of social formation and ideological position-

taking in the early Jesus movements, then use it as a point of departure for understanding the emergence and significance of the plethora of later myths about the disciples *as* apostles, including Peter at Rome. Paul could be positioned. And Luke's portrayals of Peter and Paul might finally make sense as mythmaking instead of historiography. Wouldn't that be something? And the thing of it is, discipleship is not the only category that could easily be redescribed and rectified. All of the *aporiae* mentioned earlier could be handled the same way. And, since all such studies would be interlocking, it would not take long before a plausible picture of Christian origins surfaced for theoretical contemplation.

The work of redescription could be very rewarding, I should think, making significant contributions both to the discipline of New Testament studies and to the study of religion in general. The Greco-Roman period is rich in interesting phenomena, and early Christian literature is full of puzzle-like material. To redescribe Christian origins as a history of human inventiveness would make of it a much more interesting story than any scenario yet painted by the gospels and Christian theologians. It could happen as well, for once, that the work of New Testament scholars might come to be seen as significant and helpful for scholars in other divisions of the humanities. Historians of religion, for instance, might finally be able to take early Christianity as an example of the emergence of a new religion. That is because the gospel myth of Christian origins will have been accounted for in the course of redescribing the human investments and inventiveness of two or three hundred years of early Christian mythmaking and social formation. We might even make a contribution to cultural critique in our own time by analyzing the charter documents of the Christian imagination in order to retell the story of the first Christians who produced them. In what, do you suppose, were they investing? Why did they write the literature they did? And how was it that a small selection came to be called the New Testament? Plain answers to such simple questions would certainly clear the air for the discussions of religion and society that should be taking place in contemporary public forum. And the stories are right there, waiting to be told. I see no reason not to begin.

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