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Difference and Diversity: Writing the History of Ancient Christianity

What is the nature of religious tradition? Is it something fixed and unchanging that one can only accept or reject? If so, it is difficult to see any hope for change or even any place to discuss constructively problematic, religiously-based views, for example, on human rights, women's roles or religious warrants for violence. However, historical study, as it has been practiced since the Enlightenment, paints a very different picture of the history of religions. We can easily show, for example, that Christianity has always been made up of diverse and often conflicting voices. The earliest surviving evidence, i.e. the letters of Paul in the New Testament, raises numerous issues that were under discussion at the time, ranging from controversies over leadership and sexuality to practical matters such as how to divide up the food at community meals (I Corinthians; Galatians).

Subsequent centuries witnessed an enormous array of literary production, theological speculation, and ritual improvisation, much of which was subject to considerable controversy. There was no 'celebration of difference' here. Instead, by the 4th century, Christian discussions of variety and difference had more or less settled into the tidy bifurcating discourse of orthodoxy and heresy, right and wrong, true and false. Leaders sought to solidify Christian unity by attempting to institute uniformity in creed, canon and hierarchical male leadership. Any deviation or disobedience was considered heresy, and said to have been introduced by Satan to corrupt the truth and divide the church (Bauer 1971: xxi–xxv; Le Boulluec 1985; King 2003, p. xx).

Modern historical critics have found much to criticize in this theological portrayal of the causes and character of early Christian diversity and its rhetorical claims to uniformity and unity. They no longer understand history as the ground upon which Satan futilely opposed the inexorable, teleological movement of God's will, but rather as a place of human struggle, conflict and constructive negotiation. Starting perhaps with the work of Ferdinand Christian Baur, historians now commonly talk about the 'varieties of early Christianity' and understand that attempts at uniformity have always been partial and contested (for further discussion, see King, forthcoming).

I believe we are now on the brink of another watershed in the representation of early Christian diversity, building on recent approaches to historical criticism, social history, cultural anthropology, feminism, post-structuralism and post-modern criticism, and aided as well by work which integrates archeological materials, including sensational manuscript discoveries from Qumran, Nag Hammadi, Oxyrhynchus, and elsewhere,

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into early Christian historiography. Such approaches let us see that religious tradition, even sacred texts, are not static givens, but are always in ongoing processes of formation. Early Christian writings are in one sense examples of ancient Christians largely doing what people generally do, i.e. struggling to understand the meaning of tradition in the face of contemporary events, and to greater and lesser degrees in conversation and controversy with each other. Because such practice is selective, i.e. people choose which traditions to follow, they need to take responsibility for the effects of religious practice.

This methodological approach yields a very different portrayal of early Christianity than what is provided by the master story. Rather than anachronistically dividing the new manuscripts into ‘orthodox’ and ‘heretica’ based on hindsight, we can try to read them in their ancient historical contexts, at a time before it was entirely clear who would win the battle for Christianity. By placing texts from rejected ‘heretics’ side-by-side with their ‘orthodox’ opponents, we can better see where the differences lay and what was at stake. Let me offer two very brief examples from the second century CE: *The Gospel of Mary* and *The Gospel of Judas*. The first challenges the view that all Christians agreed that women should not be leaders in the church, while the second challenges the view that all Christians saw the martyrs as heroes of the faith who died as sacrifices due to the will of God.

The Gospel of Mary

Mary Magdalene is best known in the West as a repentant prostitute, the image of female sexuality redeemed. Yet there is not a shred of evidence to support this portrayal, and it was never held by the Eastern churches. All the sources, including the New Testament gospels, portray her as a faithful disciple of Jesus. Why, then, did such an erroneous portrayal arise?

Several early Christian writings were recovered in the past century. They portray Mary Magdalene as a leading disciple of Jesus after his death (Marjanen 1996). Chief among these is the *Gospel of Mary* (see King 2003). In it, the Savior gives special teaching to Mary about the nature of the soul. When she relates this instruction to the other disciples, Peter and Andrew react strongly, charging her with inventing lies. The problem for Peter is clearly depicted as jealousy: “Did (the Savior), then, speak with a woman in private without our knowing about it? Are we to turn around and listen to her? Did he choose her over us?” he asks. Levi assures Peter that the Savior did indeed favor her, and he admonishes the disciples to quit fighting among themselves and instead go forth and preach the gospel, as they were commanded.

The issue with which the *Gospel of Mary* struggles is the question of who has understood the teachings of the Savior. Who, then, is able to go forth and preach the gospel? Mary’s stability of character and advanced teaching present her as the model disciple. Peter, on the other hand, has not understood. He cannot get past the distinctions of the material body to see Mary’s spiritual nature. He fails to grasp that because the self is viewed as the spiritual soul, and because at death the body will dissolve back into matter, distinctions written on the body are therefore bound to pass away, as will sexual distinctions. What ultimately matters is the state

of one's soul. Hence, leadership should be based upon spiritual maturity, the capacity to understand Jesus' teachings, to meet the needs of others, and to preach the gospel – for both men and women.

The close association of Mary's name with a kind of theological reflection that was later rejected provides a new clue as to why the portrayal of Mary as prostitute was invented. Discrediting her may have been in part a strategy of the church fathers to counter the interpretation of Jesus' teaching and the arguments for women's leadership which were being spread under her name in works like the *Gospel of Mary*. Because it argues so forcefully for the legitimacy of women's leadership, the *Gospel of Mary* lets us hear a voice other than the one dominant in works like *I Timothy*, which silences women and insists that their salvation lies in bearing children. We can now hear the other side of the controversy over women's leadership and see what arguments were given in its favor.

The Gospel of Judas

The second example is the *Gospel of Judas*. What does it tell us about the larger issues that were debated in the earliest centuries of Christianity? Elaine Pagels and I have argued that the context for reading the *Gospel of Judas* is Christian persecution, and that its main point is to oppose the glorification of violence in God's name. The author is distressed because at the same time as Christians were dying for refusing to sacrifice to the Gods of Rome (an act of treason), some Christian leaders were bringing sacrifice right back into the center of Christian theology and practice by understanding Jesus' death as sacrifice, by practicing the Eucharist as a sacrificial meal, and worse, by encouraging fellow believers to offer themselves as sacrifices to please God (Pagels and King 2007, 59–75). For example, the 3rd century church father Tertullian, insisted that God uses the martyrs' suffering like a physician's tonic, painful when administered, but it improves one's condition. Indeed, it is “by means of fires and swords, and all that is painful” that God heals and grants everlasting life (*Scorpiace* V). Martyrs, he says, are “conquerors who fight with their blood to win victories,” and whose patience assures “hope of revenge” (*Scorpiace* XII). For the *Gospel of Judas*, such leaders have missed the whole truth of Jesus' teaching about the true God and Father, and are instead worshipping the false angels that God had set to rule over the heavens. Jesus teaches that a person's most intimate identity with God is spiritual – and immortal, untouchable by the powers that temporarily hold sway in the world below (Pagels and King 2007, 77–98).

Certainly, the *Gospel of Judas* is no moderate voice, but rather a passionate expression of anger and condemnation, bitterness and revenge. It lets us see more clearly how violence aimed at Christians from the outside took full root within the community itself, where we hear Christians raging against each other and see communities torn apart. If such polarization created a sense of unity and cohesion for some, it tore others apart. When Constantine converted, the persecutions came to an end and we heard no more of the heretics who told other stories. The opposition was all but silenced, not because remnants of their voices did not survive, but because narratives of glorious triumph flooded into any places where such views might have taken root.

Examining ancient Christian controversies brings historians into an arena fraught with complexities and ambiguities, contested stories, theo-

logical controversies, loud voices, and even louder, deafening silences. But perhaps it is precisely such a complex history that we need in order to address the complex issues of our own day in a critical and constructive manner.

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