

Introduction

The aim of this book is to give an overall account of early Christian beliefs. Such books are in short supply.¹ To be sure, a number of works cover much of the same ground, but do so from a different perspective and with a different aim. They include histories of early Christianity, which describe the emergence and development of the movement during its first century or centuries;² accounts of the social world of early Christianity;³ and introductions to the New Testament or to early Christian literature at large.⁴ I draw on their findings but am content with a more limited task. The “external” history and the history of the literary products form the necessary background for the mapping of the religious ideas on which I am going to focus. The love-hate relationship of this book to works called “theologies of the New Testament” will be discussed shortly.

My focus will be on the ideas of early Christians, but I want to emphasize the close connection of this thought world within its wider cultural context. Therefore the book starts with

a section called “Roots and Starting Points.” This section attempts to give a brief introduction to the wider world in which Christianity arose: the story of the rise and development of Christian beliefs involves among other things a shift from the Jewish bedrock of the Christian movement (chapter 1) to interaction with the world of Greco-Roman thought (chapter 2). Chapter 3 adds a survey of the literature produced by early Christians, placed within the framework of the crucial events in their history. These introductory chapters are mainly written for readers less familiar with the study of Christian beginnings. More advanced readers may wish to skip the earlier chapters and move directly to chapter 4; however, some academic judgments that will affect the presentation are stated in chapters 1–3, so that I will not argue about issues of authorship, dates, and the like in the main portion of the book.

The term *Christian* smacks of anachronism but is difficult to avoid; it would be cumbersome to dispense with it altogether. It should be understood here in a weak sense: the noun *Christian*

2 denotes all persons in whose symbolic worlds Jesus of Nazareth held a central place, one way or another; the adjective refers to their qualities and views. Using the term does *not* imply that there already was in existence a distinct new religion;⁵ at what point one can meaningfully speak of Christianity in that sense remains disputed. In many connections it is convenient to speak rather of (members of) the “Jesus movement,” or of followers of Jesus, especially with regard to those branches of the movement that preserved a basically Jewish identity. Nevertheless I have, for pragmatic reasons, retained the conventional “(early) Christian” as an umbrella term.⁶ Thus I shall at times speak even of Jewish-born followers of Jesus as “Christians,” but it should be understood that they may (or may not) be members of a group that still exists within the confines of Judaism.

Focusing on beliefs, or religious ideas, may seem a narrow task, for clearly the cognitive aspect is only one of several dimensions in a religious tradition.⁷ A full discussion of early Christian religion would indeed have to include many other aspects,⁸ but it is not my intention to provide a full discussion; that would vastly exceed my powers. I am consciously concentrating on a relatively small part—and the size and richness of that part alone makes me painfully aware of my limitations. I do not claim that the cognitive aspect is the most important one in religion. On the contrary, I think that Ninian Smart is right in claiming that “histories of religion have tended to exaggerate the importance of scriptures and doctrines”; while this is “not too surprising since so much of our knowledge of past religions must come from the documents which have been passed on by the scholarly elite,” it is clearly unbalanced for histories of faith to concentrate on doctrinal disputes. But Smart

also warns us not to go to the other extreme, neglecting “the essential intellectual component of religion.”⁹

A. J. M. Wedderburn makes a related point in his history of early Christianity: however much one may “deplore the way in which the New Testament has been studied for its ideas alone, in isolation from the social and cultural realities in which those ideas are rooted, it would be equally one-sided to ignore *the impact and the formative influence of those ideas upon the life of the early Christian community.*”¹⁰ And not just on the life of *early* Christians, of course. I think that my limiting myself to an analysis of religious thought is justified in view of our history: surely ideas and concepts loom large enough among the Christian influences on Western and other cultures to keep some general interest in them alive.¹¹ Yet I do not want to explore ideas as if they were floating in the air. On the contrary, they are to be firmly rooted precisely in the “social and cultural realities”: in the experience of those who gave verbal expression to the ideas.

THE RELATIONSHIP TO “NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY”

My views of how to conceive the task of dealing with beliefs, stated in earlier publications, has proved controversial. I therefore wish to clarify the issues by restating my views and briefly discussing some other opinions.

In its focus on religious ideas this book bears a family resemblance to the genre of New Testament Theology. It is, however, a somewhat distant cousin—some might say, a black sheep in the family¹²—indeed, it has been conceived of

as an alternative to these theologies. This means taking up a program sketched as early as 1897 by William Wrede but badly neglected during most of the twentieth century.¹³ As Gerd Theissen points out, New Testament theologies present “an internal Christian perspective,” being “written for Christians, as a rule for those who are to become clergy.” An alternative account, by contrast, seeks to approach the content of early Christianity “in such a way that it is accessible to men and women whether or not they are religious”; this is a cultural task, rather than a religious one, as the texts and convictions in question “are part of the basic cultural information of human history.”¹⁴ If it is assumed (and this seems largely to be the default assumption, though a broader view is possible)¹⁵ that theology must present an internal faith perspective,¹⁶ then a work of this kind falls outside theology into the field of comparative religion or *Religionswissenschaft*¹⁷—even though no clear boundary can be drawn, let alone a black-and-white contrast established, between the two.¹⁸

This way of defining the task means—to use catchwords that are unfortunately easily misunderstood and exposed to caricatures (sometimes vicious)¹⁹—that the approach has to be “descriptive” and, within the confines of what is possible, even strive for “objectivity.”²⁰ The word *descriptive* was once introduced into the hermeneutic discussion to denote a contrast to a *confessional* understanding, which implied that exegesis should be in agreement with doctrine, or at least come forward with an edifying religious message. In this vein, I use the word simply in the sense that the emerging construction is *not prescriptive* or normative.²¹ It does not follow that the topics “described” are understood to be static; a dynamic process can perfectly well be the object of “description.”²² Nor does *objective* mean that

one claims to be in possession of the Truth! The point is simply that one attempts to analyze the sources independently of whether one approves or disapproves of the ideas found in them.²³

In the descriptive method, the tool kit of the scholar does not contain such supernatural or metaempirical concepts as revelation, inspiration, act(s) of God(s), or “Word of God.” Such insider language belongs to a possible (but not mandatory) theological assessment of the findings in another context. A descriptive account must deal with the religious ideas of the early Christians as human constructs and apply to them methods similar to those that it would apply to any other texts,²⁴ an approach that I have called “fair play.” Delbert Burkett makes the point very clear in a recent textbook:

In an academic setting, we approach the New Testament in such a way that both Christians and interested non-Christians can participate. We seek to understand the New Testament without necessarily ascribing normative status to it. This approach is like that of a Christian student who wishes to study the scripture and religion of Islam or Hinduism. The student may want to have a description of these religions without necessarily adopting them. In an academic setting, then, we treat Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and all other religions in the same way: we seek to understand them, not necessarily to adopt or practice them.²⁵

Neither the existence nor nonexistence of God(s) is taken for granted. Conceptions of the divine, not God(s), are the object of the investigation.²⁶ What are accessible to scholarly analysis are human experiences and their interpretations; discussions about what may or may not lie behind those experiences belong to another context.²⁷

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Here the problem arises of how one should deal with the word *god*. Should it be capitalized and if so, when? I have decided to follow John Barclay's somewhat unusual practice of capitalizing the word in *all* contexts, whether in reference to the God of Jews and Christians or to the God/esses of Gentiles. Barclay's explanation of his reasons reflects the spirit of fair play at its best: "I have felt it better to equalize all parties in this matter, rather than succumb to the Jewish and Christian presumption that only their Deity is truly 'God,' while the rest are merely 'gods' (or worse)." Alternatively, it would have been possible to employ the lower case ("god," "gods") throughout; Barclay chose to use the upper case "since it customarily conveys respect for the beliefs and practices of the relevant worshippers."²⁸

The specific features of this book, then, include the following.

- ✦ *It is not limited to the New Testament canon, but deals with all material down to the last decades of the second century, occasionally casting a glance at even later developments. Wrede noted that "no New Testament writing was born with the predicate 'canonical' attached";²⁹ the canon is a later construction that came gradually into existence in a complicated process during the second to fourth centuries. While "New Testament theology" can by definition limit itself to the documents that make up our present New Testament, a descriptive-historical presentation must take into account all available evidence on equal terms.³⁰ The canon is not a starting point of the inquiry; instead, the beginnings of the process that later led to the formation of the canon are one of the topics to be considered within the account.³¹*

- ✦ *It makes no distinction between "orthodoxy" and "heresy" (except as historical notions). The blurring of the orthodox and the heretical follows from the previous point. It is imperative to include the important texts found in the twentieth century—the *Gospel of Thomas* and other writings from the Nag Hammadi library—as significant witnesses in their own right. The conservative Jewish Christians who came to stay outside what became mainstream Christianity likewise deserve a place. Yet doing away with canonical boundaries is not just a question of sources, for the canonical *point of view* must not guide the account either.³² New Testament theologies tend to give very much space to Paul—as the canon, of course, does—and regard him as more or less normative.³³ In the present book Paul is seen as *one* (prominent) person among many (though I am afraid that he may still have too dominant a position!). Paul's Christian opponents, and those he opposed, should be taken just as seriously as Christians as the apostle himself.³⁴ Presumably all sides in a conflict had a point, and fair play demands that scholars try to put themselves into the shoes of each. The same applies to the later conflicts between proto-orthodox (the term will be explained shortly) and gnostic Christians. One has to avoid judging the conflicts from the point of view of the victors alone, recognizing (in contrast to a strictly confessional approach) that the development of religious beliefs "is not teleologically guided by any predetermined direction or destiny."³⁵*

- ✦ *It considers the roots of early Christian ideas in their cultural and religious environment. To emphasize this (uncontroversial) point, a*

(very) brief outline of the Jewish and Greco-Roman context is prefixed.

- ✦ *It does not focus on “doctrines”* (though the development that led to the fixation of Christian doctrines, mostly after the period in question, is not without interest), *but on the formation of beliefs in interaction with the experience* of individuals and communities. The term *Rise* in my title indicates that this is understood as a living, dynamic process.³⁶ This process can be described as reinterpretation of traditions in new situations in light of new insights and experiences.³⁷ But it should be noted that “experience” here refers more to *social* experience than to private inner emotions.³⁸ It is often impossible to penetrate into the individual experience of any single author or group, so much so that in working out my account I have found myself putting more emphasis on the traditions and less on the experiences than I had originally assumed. But on a general level the impact of social experiences, often conflict experiences, is crucial, at least in heuristic terms. Such experiences include the Jewish War, the rejection of the Christian message by Jewish recipients, the pressure from suspicious pagan neighbors, and the persecutions by the state.
- ✦ *It concentrates on great lines and main problems and opts for a thematic organization.* New Testament theologies are often organized according to writings: Paul, the Synoptic Gospels, the Johannine writings, and so on. Comparisons among the different writings tend to be accidental,³⁹ and Paul is likely to receive exaggerated attention, as the New Testament contains so many writ-

ings from his pen. It is also possible to organize an overall account in chronological or tradition-historical terms, but here the fragmentary nature of the early sources causes problems;⁴⁰ one is forced to resort to very hypothetical constructions.⁴¹ Some have suggested that we have lost no less than 85 percent of Christian literature from the first two centuries—and that includes only the literature we know about!⁴² “We have to be careful that we don’t suppose it is possible to reconstruct the whole of early Christian history and practice out of the few surviving texts that remain. Our picture will always be partial—not only because so much is lost, but because early Christian practices were so little tied to durable writing.”⁴³ In view of such considerations a thematic structure seems justified. Nevertheless, I have also tried to pay attention to diachronic developments in the subsections of the thematic chapters, where I do distinguish between earlier and later sources. In addition, one may assume that modern readers can profit more from a sketch of the great lines and main issues than from an exposition of the profiles of individual authors. Yet any choice of organizing the material has its advantages and disadvantages.⁴⁴ In order to offer the reader at least a glimpse of the diachronic development as I see it, as well as of the character of the main sources and authors, I have prefixed to the thematic main part a (very compressed) chapter on events, persons, and sources.

- ✦ *It tries to do justice to the diversity of early Christianity.* Today even conservative authors admit that within the New Testament alone a considerable theological

6 diversity prevails. This is felt to be a problem that should be solved either by showing that discrepancies are only apparent⁴⁵ or that beneath the diversity a fundamental unity can be established after all. A more radical solution is to identify what is often called “a canon within the canon,” the basic truth or principle with the aid of which the various parts of the New Testament are evaluated. But as W. G. Kümmel pointed out at the end of his *New Testament Theology*, the problem of unity and diversity is a theological one: it arises only for believers who are convinced that they encounter in these writings “the knowledge of God’s revelation in Christ.” The question of a common message “does not thrust itself upon us from the involvement with the proclamation of these witnesses themselves, who stand in no direct connection with one another, but from the awareness of their common membership in the canon.”⁴⁶ While there is nothing inherently impossible in the question about unity being asked even in a historical perspective, the diversity seems so obvious that unity can be sought only on a rather abstract level; quite often authors of New Testament theologies end up with assertions of basic unity that stand in tension to their own presentations of the diversity.⁴⁷ When the perspective is widened to comprise even noncanonical materials, a further increase in diversity is a natural consequence.

- ✦ *It acknowledges intellectual and moral problems in the sources.* With regard to the former, a case in point is the question of possible inconsistencies or contradictions in Paul’s thought; this question has almost become a watershed between theological and *religions-*

wissenschaftlich approaches to Paul.⁴⁸ As for the latter, the striking reluctance of New Testament theologies to even mention the notion of eternal torment in hell, imposed on the majority of humankind according to central New Testament texts,⁴⁹ is difficult to explain in any other way than as an apologetic attempt to assuage an ugly side in the biblical message. A *religionswissenschaftlich* approach has no inhibitions on such points (though I fail to see why sharp ethical criticism could not be applied even within a theological approach). *Relative* value judgments that deal with the human decisions and attitudes of those who produced the relevant texts, or with the effects of these texts, are by no means prohibited in a descriptive account as I understand it.⁵⁰

- ✦ *It hints at the subsequent reception and influence of the ideas*, thus helping to build a bridge toward the present. This cannot be done in any systematic way, but happens on an eclectic basis in the form of a few examples.⁵¹

THE STRUCTURE OF THE PRESENT WORK

The choice of starting point deserves a comment. Obviously, it would not be wise to start an account of *early* Christian ideas with an exposition of the Trinity. The decision to choose anthropology as the starting point, favored by interpreters inclined to existentialist theology, also seems to lead to undue modernizing. Monotheism as the common basis for Judaism and nascent Christianity would be a possibility, and the same is true

of Christology; self-evidently Jesus has a central place in Christianity. Without denying the legitimacy of other options, I shall nevertheless start with “eschatology” (after three background chapters). The quotation marks indicate that the term is not used quite in the sense it has in traditional dogmatics. There eschatology, the doctrine of the “last things,” is explained in the last chapter, as a kind of appendix. In an account of early Christian religion, by contrast, “the end” arguably belongs to the *first* chapter. For a vivid expectation of a great and decisive *turn of history*, brought about by the God of Israel, was basic to the genesis of the new religious movement from which Christianity was to develop.⁵² Early Christology can be understood as part of eschatology (rather than vice versa): expectation of a redeemer figure was often connected with the expectation of the turn of history, and the understanding of Jesus as the Messiah/Christ has to do with this. A comprehensive account of eschatology, which also encompasses its transformation into something else (the great turn of history comes to be replaced by fulfillment in the beyond), could easily grow almost to an overall presentation of early Christianity.⁵³ This is an important reason for starting my account with the expectation of the great turn.

Indeed, most of the topics to be dealt with hang together with eschatology and its transformation; their treatment in different chapters, rather than directly in connection with eschatology, is due to pragmatic reasons. Nowhere is this clearer than in chapter 5, “After Death: The Destiny of the Individual,” which deals with the notions of judgment and afterlife. All this could well have found a place in the previous chapter; but then that chapter would have grown unreasonably long. In chapter 4 the focus is on collective expectation, in chapter 5 on the destiny

of the individual, though some overlapping has been unavoidable.

Chapters 6 and 7 deal with sin and salvation. This pair of terms is likely to evoke associations of individualistic piety in modern minds, but originally the notion of “salvation” hangs closely together with collective, national eschatology: the plight from which Israel is expected to be saved is attacks of enemy troops or occupation by a hostile power. The transformation of this concrete salvation into something more spiritual, either in this life or in a transcendent reality beyond this world, hangs together with the transformation of eschatology, hinted at above. Instead of enemy armies, one comes to think of sin(s) or hostile cosmic powers as the main threats to human life. The obstacles and means of salvation are obviously interrelated: the path to salvation envisaged by an author depends on his understanding of the human condition. In this case, too, pragmatic considerations about size caused me to deal with the topics separately: first the human condition, then the salvation. The focus of chapter 7 will be on the preconditions or means of salvation: how and why can one find a place in the number of the saved (or stay there)?

Only after having dealt with salvation do I turn to the person and work of the Savior. Once more, separating the issues is, in itself, artificial; one’s view of who Jesus was and what he achieved has very much to do with one’s vision of salvation. In this case, too, it is obvious that pragmatic considerations have dictated the course of the work. What may be a surprise, though, is my decision to postpone the chapter on Christology not only after eschatology but even after soteriology (to use the conventional doctrinal terms). I find the order a matter of taste; my decision reflects to a degree my conclusion that there is a certain ambiguity in Jesus’ place in the scheme of

8 salvation as presented by certain early Christian authors. Notwithstanding the undeniable centrality that the person of Jesus has in Christian doctrine, one may claim that it is subordinated to the vision of salvation. In addition, the order of the chapters reflects the changes of emphasis that took place in Christian thought during the early generations: in the proclamation of Jesus and in the thought world of his first followers, eschatology (the imminent expectation of the kingdom of God) is the focal point; in the theology of Paul, the doctrine of salvation (participation in the body of Christ) stands in the center; it is only in the Gospel of John that the questions who Jesus is and what his relationship to God the Father is (questions that will stay on the theological agenda during the next two or three centuries, if not ever after) become truly central.

A short chapter on the spirit follows, intended to cast light on the experiential side of early Christianity. As may be expected, it has connections to all previous chapters: the “pouring out” of God’s spirit on the followers of Jesus in the form of ecstatic phenomena was taken to be an end-time event; the spirit was conceived of as the power of Christian life, necessary to salvation; Jesus was seen as a bearer of the spirit par excellence. Some small signs of the personification of the spirit, which would later lead to the construction of the doctrine of Trinity, are also to be seen.

Chapters 10 and 11 deal with the forging of Christian identity. Once again, the place of the chapters in the whole is not self-evident.

This is especially true of chapter 10, on Christian identity vis-à-vis Judaism. One may feel that this issue should have been treated earlier. In the formation of Christian tradition, as in religious traditions in general, practice surely preceded theology. The formation of Christian beliefs had very much to do with practical issues connected with one’s relation to the Jewish Torah, and a number of theological issues can be understood only in that connection; Paul’s famous “doctrine” of justification by faith is a case in point. (Here, as often, “doctrine” is a misnomer, as the discourse of justification seems to have arisen as an attempt to legitimize a practical step: the acceptance of Gentile members into the Christian community without requiring circumcision and observance of biblical dietary rules of them.) It would have been proper to deal with these matters as early as possible; on the other hand, I just could not interrupt the flow from eschatology via soteriology to Christology. I can only emphasize that I regard the subject matter of this chapter as absolutely pivotal for any attempt to understand how Christianity emerged and, for better or for worse, separated from Judaism.

Many of the early Christians came to feel that they were a “third race,” to be distinguished both from Jews and from Gentiles. Their ambivalent relationship to Greco-Roman paganism, including its religious practices and its ethical and philosophical achievements, is discussed separately, in chapter 11. A final chapter is devoted to the development toward Christian orthodoxy that took place in the second century.⁵⁴