

The Quest for Christian Origins

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Christian Origins is the name of a project that NT scholars have undertaken in the interest of understanding Christianity as a social and historical religion. This project has been pursued in one form or another for about 300 years. One might think that there could be nothing left to discover about the NT and the beginnings of Christianity. But no. New questions, methods of research, and findings keep stacking up, as if we were not yet sure what generated Christianity, or what Christianity may be that still needs to be clarified, or what its origins can tell us about it.

There was a student studying John Kloppenborg's Q text, apparently troubled by the thought that the people of Q had not mentioned the crucifixion. Since the crucifixion must have been an important datum of Christian origins and since the Q people surely must have been early Christians, a closer look at the teachings was called for. As the student reported to me about his research, he was quite proud of finding a way to argue from the text that the Q people *did* know about Jesus' crucifixion. I did not ask him to show me the text. But it was clear that the Christian Origins project had been vindicated once again.

The embarrassment is that the student already had a picture of Christian Origins in his mind, and assumed that the NT writings by the "early Christians" should confirm it. This is a type of biblical scholarship that has produced many such examples in the course of its tradition, many much more sophisticated than the student's project. It works with a familiarity with the Christianity that developed centuries later and that then functioned as the cultural mythology of Western civilizations until modern times. The curiosity is that the Bible was not important as the historical record of Christian Origins until the Protestant Reformation. And even then its importance was mainly to lay claim to the Christian tradition independently from Catholicism, not to define Christianity as a social-historical religion. The reformers took the Bible with them when they left the Catholic Church, leaving behind its rituals, canon laws, pieties, and practices, but wanting to think of themselves still as Christians. The Bible was all they had in hand to make the claim that they were Christians. With the NT in hand they had entrée to the mythic world of Christianity apart from the Mass, the priests, and the pope. The sacred book was used for the Protestant rituals of breaking bread, baptism, and preaching without the Catholic confessionals and homilies. This actually enhanced the importance of the Bible for Protestants beyond its erstwhile sacral functions in Catholicism. The Renaissance and

Enlightenment had generated interest in the Greek "classical" tradition, the awareness of "history," the significance of "literature," and literacy. This meant that the Protestant focus on the Bible amounted to a step into the Renaissance and a leap over the years of Christendom to land at the gospel origins of Christianity with the Bible in hand. It was this leap that gave the notion of "origins" its authority as a category for thinking about the generation and definition of Christianity in the subsequent academies of the West. Historians of religion are now aware that there is no such thing as a singular event of origin for cultural phenomena, but because it was the Bible that was understood to document Christianity, the notion of origins was very difficult to dismiss.

And the times were right to generate the absolutely amazing scholarly investment in the social-historical study of the Bible characteristic of the German traditions. Unfortunately, the Bible was not actually there at the beginning, and the Christianity Christians had in mind did not appear until sometime after Constantine. But neither of these glitches was apparent at the time of the Reformation or during the flourishing of biblical studies in the two centuries afterward. And so the Bible was located in the Hellenistic period among a wide range of Greco-Roman texts and Jewish histories that were coming into view. It was a heady and exciting time for scholars of the Renaissance.

At first it was Paul's *kerygma* that seemed to focus upon the dramatic event that must have started everything. Then it was the gospel stories of Jesus and his teachings that anchored Jesus and the *kerygma* in the histories of the times to add their sensational logics. Then there was Luke's "first church" in Jerusalem to place the believers in their congregations and watch the apostolic missions unroll. Eventually there was much more to pore over: *chreiai*, associations, disciples and apostles, meals, letters, the narrative gospels, Q, and Thomas, to say nothing of the huge accumulation of comparative literature from and about the other religions ("Oriental" as they were called), such as the "mystery cults" (thought to have had a "dying and rising god"), the *Mithrasliturgie* (thought to have offered a ritual union of the human with the divine by means of a "*Seelen Reise*"), pagan poems such as the *Oraculis Chaldaicis* and the Orphic Hymns, Gnosticism, and the Hellenistic Jewish writings. All were available for comparison as the "backgrounds" for Christianity while searching for the original "kernel" event in the NT that must have generated Christianity's unique and incomparable appearance. The troubling issue of Jew and Gentile was given much attention because of Paul's interest in the issue and because of the standard views about Judaism as the precursor for Christianity. But luckily, because the Bible contained both the Hebrew Scriptures and the early Christian writings, and because Justin Martyr in the second century had established that the Hebrew Scriptures were an allegory of the gospels in advance, the *logos* kernel of the Christian gospels was not called into question. And from the Greek side of the cultural mix, the noble death of a Socratic martyrdom could be called upon to buttress the logic of the passion narrative much better than the Maccabean

martyrologies, even though the early Christians had only a mythic kingdom to die for instead of a Greek city-state or a Hebrew temple state. Recently it has even been proposed in a monograph that the resurrection and ascension were historical events as documented in the appearances and visions of the risen Lord. So there has been over 300 years of scholarship to document the origins of Christianity on the basis of its dramatic breakthrough into "history" as "documented" in the Bible. And this means that we became NT scholars because of a Protestant mistake and a cultural ruse.

I had been asking questions since high school about how Christians could possibly believe in the Christian myth, and by the time I had worn out my teachers in high school and college, I landed at San Francisco Theological Seminary because it was there, they said, that the Bible would answer my questions. The seminary experience was my personal enlightenment, to be sure, what with learning Greek, Hebrew, some Syriac, a bit of Aramaic, and my first serious review of the history of Western civilization (it was actually "church history"). But my questions about how so many Christians could believe in the Bible were still not to be answered even at a Presbyterian seminary. Ted Gill, James Robinson, Arnold Come, and others said I should go on to Germany where Conzelmann was dealing with the question of myth and history.

I arrived at the University of Göttingen in 1963 to study with Hans Conzelmann. By then the Germans had learned about myth and the history of religions. Bultmann said that modern-day Christians were not able to believe in myth, even and especially the Christian myth. Thus it had to be *demythologized*. An extremely rich period of discourse had developed. There was Kierkegaard, Jaspers, Sartre, and the list of books on "Jesus Christ and Mythology," "Kerygma and Myth," and "Christ Without Myth." Conzelmann was a student of Bultmann but more interested in the ways Ancient Near Eastern myths became intellectual traditions that influenced early Christianity. His essay on Sirach 24, in which he established some links between Sophia, Chokma, Isis, and Maat, caught my attention because it brought several cultures together as if their mythologies were modes of social thought. My assignment was to see if the *logos* in Philo and the first chapter of John's gospel also followed a mythic grammar indebted to the mythology of Sophia-Chokma. The notion that seeking for Sophia-Chokma, a mythological figure that had taken flight because of a rejection in society but who said she would return and/or could be found if pursued, was being discussed in Göttingen, along with the Ancient Near Eastern "Anthropos Myth." My assignment was to track the wisdom myth and the anthropos myth down and see if the Prologue to John was indebted to them. I spent two years researching the literatures of the Ancient Near East looking for traces of these myths. Then Carsten Colpe found that the anthropos myth was a scholarly fiction; there was no such thing in antiquity. And I, finally, told Conzelmann that the wisdom myth was hardly to be found in the Ancient Near Eastern literature, but that he had been right about the mythology of Maat as a

model for the figure of wisdom in Sirach 24, also for the wisdom poetry in the Wisdom of Solomon, and that Philo knew about this configuration but clearly preferred the figure of the *Logos* to that of *Sophia* for explaining the wisdom of the written books of Moses. Conzelman said, "Good," that it was enough, and that I should write it up. Well, they gave me a degree for it, but I never did get back to the Gospel of John.

So there I was back in the United States at the University of New Jersey assigned to teach courses in the NT when all I knew was the literatures of Greece and the Ancient Near East as the "background" to the NT. It was toward the end of the sixties when students wanted to know what had gone wrong with Western civilization, the Christian tradition, and why our nation-state thought it could spread democracy by dropping bombs on Vietnam. All I could do in New Jersey was introduce English majors to the literatures of Christian origins as I had learned to read them. The students thought it was interesting, of course, that they could read these texts "in social-historical context" as they said, without having to deal with the Christian "belief system" as they called it. But of course, neither of us could say why Christians thought the NT and Christian Origins was so important, why I had to spend so much time studying it, why a college needed to offer a course in it, or what difference that knowledge made for the way the world was working in the present.

Then some NT scholars who found my work on wisdom and Philo interesting asked for a lecture or two. There was the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL), the Jesus Seminar, The Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, and eventually the Seminar devoted to "Ancient Myths and Modern Theories of Christian Origins." I think it was Merrill Miller and Ron Cameron who came up with this title. When they asked the Executive Board at SBL to form a seminar, the Board responded that the title should be "Ancient Theories and Modern Myths of Christian Origins." But Miller laughed and said to leave it as it was. By then I had written the *Myth of Innocence* book because Funk said I could not have NT credentials on the basis of writing only about OT texts and authors. When Cameron, Miller, and Jonathan Z. Smith read the Mark book, they gathered around, looked me in the eye, and asked about my social theory of religion. They said I had written the Gospel of Mark book to explain its mythology, but without referring to its Christian meaning or theology. How did I do that? Did I have a social theory of religion related to what they saw as my rationalism supported by a merely descriptive method and style? When I said that I did not know what my social theory was, they told me we would have to form a seminar on the Mark book to find out. Well now, we did have a marvelous go at it. They said that my description of Mark's text sounded like Jonathan's method of redescription, and he might help us with his theory of myth and ritual. Oh my. We had to struggle with a redescription of the several groups that produced the early myths, all of which NT scholars (and I at that time) had called "congregations" or "communities." Now there were instead the Q people, the Thomas

people, the Hellenic schools of philosophy, Mark's stories of the disciples debating the Pharisees in the synagogue, Paul's *ekklesiai* (for which there was a translation familiar to Christians), and so forth. It was tough going, however, and we were not able to find the attraction for any of these social formations that called for the myths they came up with, and none that fit with the eventual pictures of Christian congregations that all of us still must have had in mind. We did tussle a bit with the question of myth theory, reading some of Jonathan Smith, Levi-Strauss, and especially Marshall Sahlins, where he coined the term "conjuncture of cultures" to explain the shifts in British and Hawaiian ideologies during the Captain Cook encounters. But our papers stayed pretty much at the level of social-historical description without getting the link between "mythmaking" and "social formation" clarified by a mechanism.

And because the historical data were murky and the categories for social formation and mythmaking were all still beholden to the Western intellectual tradition, our studies did not work well to identify and explain "early" (actually "pre") Christian social formations. That meant that the subliminal mentality embedded in the scholarly tradition of biblical studies was still at work among us, providing the questions and the categories for the redescriptions we were trying to imagine. We were somewhat aware of this problem of course, but thought that we could tackle it by charting the processes by which the various components of the Christian myth and practices had occurred, and then assessing the reasons for the components one by one. In some ways we did do that, but we did not come upon any particular event or set of reasons that could explain the "origins" of Christianity. Instead, what we found were scattered teachings, schools of thought, groupings into associations, and bios of intellectuals and teachers working with ideas about the kingdom of God in the interest, apparently, of finding some orientation to the Hellenistic age in a period of national and cultural breakdown and conflict. We could not fully explain the attraction of these teachings, schools, gatherings, and the Jesus myths that dotted the Greco-Roman world canvas in ways that could account for the eventual emergence of the Christianity we had in mind. We did see that certain features of significance for the traditional societies and cultures that were swirling around in the Greco-Roman world, features that belonged to the social theory of religion we were working on, were not available for the Jesus people. The early followers of Jesus had no homeland traditions of their own to anchor them in history, no common myth or ritual, and no cultural symbols. All they had, as far as we could tell, were some teachings about how to live in the midst of a troubled world and about another kind of kingdom, one they imagined might be possible were *theos* the king. This may have been a heady idea for the times, and it became a kind of metaphysical philosophy as some of these Jesus groups worked over his teachings. Some groups must have discussed these teachings on the model of the Greek schools of philosophy and formed networks of small groups on the model of what the Greeks called "associations." The intellectuals

of these school traditions, many of whom were Jewish scholars troubled by the tragedies and uncertainties toward the end of the history and epic of Israel, seemed to be working on the problem of how the Jesus teachings and schools could be understood to belong to Israel as a kind of sequel to the Hebrew epic. They were not at all clear about that question or its answer. They were, however, producing a huge literature in some attempt to fit their kingdom philosophy into the bigger picture of the Hebrew epic and the Greek cosmos in order to locate the Jesus schools and *christos* groups within the lands and powers of the Roman empire. Meanwhile, the local leaders of these associations found themselves taking care of the practical needs of their people, perhaps on the Hebrew model of care for the "widows and orphans," thus providing a kind of social service to peoples whose erstwhile kings and officials were no longer in power.

Eventually Constantine took note early in the fourth century, and because the Romans were running out of energy, ideas, and the control of the many peoples in their empire, Constantine apparently thought the networks of Jesus schools and Christ associations (the term *christos* having become a common name for the founder figure) might help as a kind of social glue. He was an unlikely candidate for the office of emperor, with its senatorial notions of aristocratic dynasty, but succeeded nevertheless to that office as a military man. Another odd feature of his credentials was that he understood himself to be a Christian even though tutored in the court of Diocletian at Nicomedia, the Eastern emperor who unleashed the last of the persecutions of Christians in the early fourth century. Historians have not been able to explain how it was that Constantine had become a Christian or survived as a Christian in the court of Diocletian. But it does appear that there was some influence from other prominent Christians, including perhaps Constantine's mother, who by now may have been in evidence at the Eastern court. It is also the case that during this period of confusion about the empire there were many would-be-emperors in the wings, several serving as generals in the armies throughout the erstwhile spread of the empire, and all of them devoted to this or that deity or hero as their protector.

In any case, once Constantine was secure in his position as the next Roman emperor, he announced devotion to Christ at the Milvian bridge and asked the leaders of several clusters of the Christian groups to accept Roman tutelage. Historians have sometimes thought it strange that Constantine could use the religion of a dislocated non-Roman people who sought to imagine god's kingdom on universal terms (one kind of big picture) in order to claim divine authority for the Roman empire (another kind of big picture). But that is what he did. He installed the Christians as the official cult (or religion) of the empire to be in charge of piety, welfare, and the instruction of the people. He convened councils of the leading Christian bishops to decide finally upon the dates for their major rituals and festivals as a respectable calendar required. He encouraged Eusebius and others to come to some agreement upon the selection of their scriptures, and to work out a common statement of what Christians believed to distin-

guish Christians from both their Jewish and Greek predecessor cultures. And Constantine asked the bishops to supervise the designs and locations for the basilicas he planned to build for them as temples for the honor of the emperor worship and the worship of their god. What an historic event, the installation by decree of a mythology, book, and epic worldview—and the creation of a myth-ritual institution for an autocratic empire. It must have been in the course of these many transformations of myth and social formation that the symbolic ritual of the death of Jesus as a martyrdom was worked out for the basilicas. Constantine must have been impressed with this arrangement as a whole, for the Christian scriptures, now to consist of the Hebrew Scriptures as the OT and the early Christian writings as the NT, allowed the *Roman empire* (soon to be a mythic concept able to survive the dismantling of the empire itself) to see itself in continuity with the epic of Israel, chosen by the supreme god of creation and the cosmos to rule in his name as the supreme authority and power for civilizing the world of pagans. Christendom had begun.

Constantine's vision changed the course of Western history, but it did not work as the solution to the unification of the Roman empire. Rome remained a "pagan city" soon to be set upon by Zenobia of Palmyra (third century), the Visigoths (Aleric, 408), Attila the Hun (410), the Vandals, Franks, and others during the sixth century, up until the Norman sack of Rome in 1084, which was still seen as a dismantling of the "empire." Then there was the conflict with Constantinople as the "capital" of Eastern power and the confused histories of the many wars and conflicts among the kings of various peoples throughout the Eastern, European, and Mediterranean lands for the next long chapter of what we have learned to call Western Civilization. Nevertheless, the combination of royal power and religious institution, a version of the ancient Near Eastern temple-state pattern, gave the church its curious role as the divine authority for Christendom and the later kings. This institutional form of religion was a winner for the long period of Western civilization. For about 1500 years no monarch among the European nations thought of ruling other than a Christian kingdom.

This means that Constantine and the *Roman* empire were not the winners. It was *Christianity* and its empire that won. It was the big picture of Christendom that eventually provided the mythic world and mentality for all of the subsequent kings, kingdoms, and peoples. The mythic picture was all encompassing. It filled the vast expanse of cosmos and history with the stories from the Bible until there was no room left for other histories or peoples. The Christian god ruled the universe as a solitary sovereign from creation to a "final judgment" (eschaton). The world of this biblical epic stayed in mind as people designed the shape of their cathedrals, palaces, and cities on earth. The monuments are obvious and familiar. The cathedrals at Chartres and the Notre-Dame in Paris are excellent examples. The Christian world of cosmos and history was etched in the stones of the portals, columns, and the arches high above. The apse was packed with images of the father-god above in the clouds of heaven, his son

ascending into heaven, and the figures of the pious from the history of Israel, the disciples from the gospel stories, and the saints and kings of the subsequent histories. Later, the so-called "passion narrative" could be depicted on the sanctuary walls as the "stations of the cross" on the way to the altar where the red candle light marked the presence of the divine spirit, and the ascending son of god was replaced with a crucifix. The cathedral was designed as a micro-cosmos and the ritual Mass within took place in otherworldly time. It was eternal theatre. All art, philosophy, piety, vestments, and discourse from this long period of Western history reveal a sensibility for the divine drama of heaven and earth that Western civilization has taken for granted.

One might think that the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century should have tempered the attraction of the medieval cosmic picture for Christians, so clearly etched on the portals of the Cathedral of Notre Dame and elsewhere, and in some respects it did. But the matters calling for reformation were hardly matters of distress about the worldview. They were matters of consternation about the Catholic confessional, ritual, and practice of selling indulgences. In view of the dawning Enlightenment and the Age of Discovery, the conflicts among the petty kings of Europe called for an awareness of the social interests of the several ethnic traditions that surfaced in Europe now that their encompassment by the Holy Roman Empire was dissolving. The emerging interest in the texts and histories of antiquity, a result of the Renaissance and Enlightenment, determined that the pieties of penance were no longer convincing, much less sufficient for understanding the function of the church for the believer. However, the medieval notion of "kingdom" was not dropped when the protest against the confessional gathered strength. It played a major role in the ideological separation of the two forms of Christendom. Martin Luther actually extracted the notion of the kingdom from Catholic Christendom and applied it to the role of the Protestant churches in their various European kingdoms by saying that the Protestant church continued to represent a "kingdom," but that the Christian view of the Church in the world was now a matter of having two kingdoms. He coined the phrase "two kingdoms" (in his *zwei Reiche Lehre*), which turned civil society into an order that was not at all devoid of Christian interests and mores even though thoroughly "secularized." This implicitly claimed a civic authority for the Protestant churches without calling the cosmic myth into question. The cosmic myth was simply left in place while the substitution of the biblical form of the myth for the Catholic ritual focused exegetical attention on the Bible and the early history of Christendom. The study of the Bible would be the way Protestants understood and confirmed their "faith" as a matter of intellectual commitment to a biblical theology. This transformed the liturgy of the Mass into a "service of worship" in which the Bible and preaching were central. As the famous cliché from Luther says, "where the sacraments are held and the Word is preached, there is the Church."

However, the Bible was no longer limited to its function as a ritual script for the Mass that celebrated the eternal presence. It was now the document of human history from creation to eschaton with a pivot at Christian origins. That means that the curious combination of myth as history in the gospels affected the reading of the entire Bible as a text of sacred history. Thus the narrative drama was no longer a matter solely of mythic events in the transcendent world of the cosmos. It became a double quest romance with two agents in an irresolvable tryst. The divine agent should be able to have his way, for he is the all-powerful creator of the world. But his need to be recognized, adored, and obeyed as the Father of his children and as the sole sovereign of the universe keeps running into trouble, for humans find themselves distracted by one another in their own quests for advantage and power. These human "questings" are regarded by the divine monarch as evidence of intransigence, and he responds with threats and promises. The threat is of punishment and final destruction. The promise is of forgiveness if his children repent or adoption if the ungodly convert. Viewed by Protestant Christians as the divine plan for human history from beginning to end, there is no other history that counts.

When we realize the scope of Christendom's big picture of the world, its total comprehension of the cosmic and worldly spheres, we can begin to understand its social and cultural effect as a pervasive mentality and sensibility that has persisted in Western traditions for almost 1600 years. It has absorbed untold intellectual inventions, social projects, and political philosophies without ever having to be acknowledged or dislodged. That has been its genius as the ultimate encompassment of the human imagination. As the cosmic scope of the mentality produced by the Christian myth, its unapproachable limits determine that its narrative grammar is not easily dislodged. There was the Renaissance that produced the psychology of the individual and that now can easily be seen as the result of a mythic and intellectualist invention that worked away from the traditional anthropology of Christendom. However, from Petrarch through Montaigne, to the Protestants and Postmodernists, the stunning discovery of the person as an individual has not erased a sensibility for some transcendent order of reality and a fundamental conviction that some kind of divinity or agency must exist beyond the limits of our human experience. The Enlightenment introduced intellectuals to texts outside the Bible and invented the concepts of history and criticism to understand them. There was Science and the astronomical world it discovered that did not agree with that of the Christian cosmos, but allowed the mythic world to continue. There was the Age of Discoveries that reshaped the world and its peoples in ways that no longer agreed with the biblical accounts of geography and lineage, but worked out ways to convert and instruct the natives without calling into question the mythic world of the Christian cosmos.

But then there was the Industrial Revolution and the rise of Capitalism that is now the driving force in our modern world of industry and finance, the force

that has created both the attraction and the ugliness of the picture of America in the world today. Neither industry nor our global financial institutions have needed Christianity or its god to tell them what to do or how to behave. They have been busy creating their own myths and a new social psychology of confidence in the human enterprise of capitalistic socialization without any appeal to divine authority or the model of Christendom. The social interests that have evolved have little to do with the medieval interests of Christendom or the biblical ethos of Protestantism. The social psychology of our global system of industry and finance is independent of the state and the institutions of religion. It supports private interests, not social, corporate, or national interests, and runs on the motivations required for competition, gaming, profit, growth, accumulation, wealth, and incorporation. One might wonder how the Bible has managed to keep its mythic world alive.

Focusing now on the Bible, there is a social logic to the narrative grammar of the Bible that is troubling. The logic determines the way in which Christians learn to think about others and, in fact, everything else in their worlds. The social logic of the biblical narrative determines the Christian's judgments about the right way to classify and define things. It begins with a logic of the singular, which says that there is only one god, one law, one credo, one system of values, and one right way to live and please the sovereign. In the Catholic tradition all of that was taken care of in the institutions and rituals of Christendom. But in Protestantism, this logic frustrates the individual Christian's quest to be sure of one's "election," to know for sure the right way to live in the world and what to think about political loyalties. It is also the logic behind what we can now call Christian mentality, the cultural preference for thinking that there is only one correct definition for an object and that the really important events and decisions are, as we say, "unique," that is, singular and incomparable. The trouble with this logic of the singular is that it cannot handle the real world. And it is compounded by a mythic logic of the dual.

The logic of the dual starts with the divine demand for obedience, which recognizes the fact that humans can disobey. The logic of the dual then continues with the distinction between the human and the divine, the cultural division of the human race into Christians and all the others, and finally with the oppositions of "right vs. wrong," "good vs. bad," and "us vs. them." This has made it extremely difficult for Christians to accept and appreciate difference, compromise with other points of view, and to negotiate with non-Christians and other cultures. Scholars have tried to trace aspects of this cultural mind-set to the Greek philosophies of "being" (versus "becoming"), and the Aristotelian theory of language whereby a single definitional term or name for a thing must be found before "knowledge" of the thing itself can occur. This has been worked out in Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*. However, Heidegger's analysis of this philosophic tradition in *Sein und Zeit* makes it clear that the Greek culture alone cannot account for the absolutism of the singular in the Western tradi-

tion of philosophy. It is true that the fixation on the “singular” definition of an object is a cultivation of the “mono” mindset of the world of “Being” that has been pursued by Westerner philosophers. But this Western tradition of philosophy is a combination of Greek and Christian concepts and worldviews, and the Christian myth also works with a mono logic. Thus cultural critics in our time, such as David Harvey, William Samos, and Fredric Jameson, have been referring to the *Logos* and logic of the Western tradition that has continued in modern and contemporary cultural manifestations including Postmodernism. It is important to see that the Western traditions of philosophy and theology (not always seen as forms of the same pursuit) have been grounded in the Christian worldview and the social logic of its myth. This means that a subliminal Christian mentality at the core of the Western cultural tradition is the form of Christianity that underlies the ways in which the people of the United States think about themselves and the world.

And yet, it was something of a surprise when the troubling concept of the “Christian Nation” popped up in American political discourse. At the people level the notion was more or less accepted as a statement about the nation we had always been. But everyone knew that the term “Christian” referred to individuals and churches, not to the society. Then it became known that a pseudo-intellectual cabal of the Bush administration was behind this talk, including Wolfowitz, Rumsfeld, Rove, Cheney, and others, who had created some white papers on “The American Century” to come, incorporating the notions of “manifest destiny,” the spread of the American way, executive authority, financial power, and global military control, all justified by the concept of the Christian nation as leader of the nations of the world. And the President, George W. Bush, cited the Prologue to the Gospel of John to describe America’s role as a light to the nations, a “light shining in darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” These conservative Christian politicians were obviously beholden to the expansive mythology of Christendom, now applied to the righteous nation and its global military destiny of control over the world. Carl Schmitt’s political philosophy had taken root in America¹ along with Jeff Sharlet’s insight about the Christian fundamentalism erupting at the peak of power, destined to cover the entire world.² I was stunned. The “Christian Nation” talk was grounded in the Christian myth of the Western tradition, but no longer needed the authorization of the Christian church. It actually violated the American rubric of the separation of Church and State and substituted “national and economic interests” as the reasons for its “missions” abroad instead of the traditional reasons for the Christian mission, namely, the conversion of others to the Christian religion. The goal of the so-called “American Century” was actually the “American

1. See Schmitt, *Political Theology*.

2. See Jeff Sharlet, *The Family*.

Empire" of global economic and military control. The "gospel" was now the "spread of democracy" and "nation-building." So there was little left of what Christians had understood as Christianity except the archaic fascination with sovereignty, power, and authority that was now being transferred from the deity in his cosmic realm to the hands of the conservative politicians and financial institutions of the American Nation-State.

"American Empire," "Christian Nation," "Manifest Destiny"—what a curious legacy of Constantine's Christendom, what a strange configuration of Luther's *zwei Reiche Lehre*, what an odd authorization for the global mission of a modern nation-state, and what a grotesque conundrum for biblical scholars in pursuit of the origins of Christianity. It is that conundrum that should refocus our project. The scholarly pursuit of Christian Origins has not told us what to think about Christian origins then, the eventual formation of Christendom, or about Christianity and the current state of the world now. It has produced an amazing accumulation of textual and historical knowledge about the first couple of centuries, both sides of the "historical Jesus" to be sure. And this knowledge is precious as the accomplishment of an intellectual and scholarly discipline within the Western academy. The function of biblical scholarship within the institutions of religion as a constant questing for theologies and the refinements of symbolic rationales has inculcated and supported the systems of belief and the politics of churches and denominations. But its relevance for the churches as the social institutions of religion in the modern world has become quite thin. It is now to be seen as a remarkable production of an academic discipline that used a mythic text as an historical document. And now that the modern world has created a conundrum for this project, some of us are wondering what to do with its learning and knowledge.

We could begin by recognizing the Protestant mistake of taking the ritual text of Christianity as an historical document for Christian origins. Then we might want to recognize the curious formation of the Bible as the epic mythology for the Western tradition of civilization. And then we might notice the social logic of this epic mythology and its narrative grammar as the mentality of Western culture. Since we are those who study this text and know all about its formations and applications, should we not be the expert professionals in the analysis of its role in current social and cultural issues? In some ways we are, but mainly as the providers for occasional footnotes for journalists, historians, and publishers outside the field of biblical studies. As members of the SBL, however, we have been having a difficult time letting the world outside the guild know what to think about the Bible as the cultural myth underlying Western mentality.

Natalie Houghtby-Haddon, a biblical scholar at George Washington University, decided to attend a Symposium on the Thirtieth Anniversary Celebration of *The Washington Times*, a conservative voice in opposition to *The Washington Post*. She sneaked in as a liberal to listen to the speeches on their theme of "Renewing our Common Legacy: Interfaith Unity for Family, Faith,

Freedom, and Service." Donald Rumsfeld was the Keynote speaker, and others included Cal Thomas, David Limbaugh, and Jennifer Spano from Fox News. The clear message was that Christianity is what made America strong, and the loss of Christianity to the liberals and secularists will be the downfall of the nation. For Natalie, a memorable moment was when Jennifer Spano said, "They're trying to take our Genesis away from us." In her report on the conference, Natalie gave a brief review of what scholars and liberals had said about Genesis that did not agree with the popular reading and the way conservative values were thought to be anchored in the Bible. Natalie found the conference troubling, not only because of the shrill and strident rhetoric against political progressives, but because of the harsh statements about those who did not "believe in" the Bible and did not honor conservative Christian values.

This means that the Bible is out there in the society under a debate of some kind by those concerned with cultural and ethical values. If this debate is left at the level of who gets to own the Bible, however, the arguments will all be ugly expressions of winning and losing in the "snatch and grab it" competition for controlling a commodity. There is little to say to Spano at this point that could answer her charge of the liberals taking "our Genesis" away. Neither the conservatives, nor the liberals, nor biblical scholars are able to calm things down, because they do not know how to talk about the Bible dislodged from its place in the world of the church. They do not think of the Bible as the culture's myth. They do not know why it is society that is now in trouble, and not the myth that no longer applies. But social issues are now under discussion, and the Bible is there, curiously conflicted by a combination of its inordinate authority as the scripture for Christianity on the one hand, and the growing irrelevance of Christianity on the other.

What needs to happen is for biblical scholars to recognize the Bible as the myth that underlies Western culture, the culture that is now in trouble. Biblical scholars should be able to do that by making two inversions of method. Instead of asking about the formation of the Bible at its beginnings, scholars might start asking about its applications from Christendom to the present. This would be one inversion: from then to now. And the second would be to relocate the Bible from its place inside the Church's world to the arena outside the Church in the social world. A change from inside to outside would affect the hermeneutical sensibilities. Instead of allowing the traditional theological aura to continue to have its play, the questions would be about the actual effectiveness of the biblical myth as a cultural grammar in relation to social situations. By describing the Bible's epic mythology as a social logic and analyzing its narrative as a social psychology, it should be possible to say something about the social issues under discussion in general public discourse and introduce some considerations of the possible role that the biblical myth might be making. This would not have to be a defense of the Bible or its logic but an exploration of the cultural mentality at work in the society. We are those who know the narrative and social logics of

the biblical mythology. Just to describe its possible application to a particular social issue in current debate and explain the logics involved would amount to an extraordinary contribution in cultural critique.

Discourse at the public level is, of course, quite different from talking to ourselves inside the boundaries of an academic club. But since the biblical guild is in the process of losing its traditional audiences in the churches and academies, anyway, its attempts at finding a responsible and reasonable role for its investments and labor is not much different from many other social academic disciplines that now find themselves at the limits of their orders wondering what to do next. So why not put our learning out there in the intellectual marketplace where social unrest and cultural criticism are now providing the topics for public discourse? We might have to learn a few new rhetorical ruses to get the attention of intellectuals in other fields. Most of them have not dared to analyze and criticize the social logics of religions. And our culture critics have not had the learning and expertise to do what biblical scholars are prepared to do, put the Bible as the Christian myth into the social and cultural situations to be analyzed. So the field of play is open for some questions about the Christian mythic logic that underlies American cultural mentality. It might be a very interesting academic and public conversation!

Works Cited

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