

# Judith Perkins and “Christian” Identity Formation

Richard S. Ascough

I have been given the pleasant, albeit challenging, task of drawing the Seminar’s attention to the work of Judith Perkins and its implications for how we frame our understanding of the development of what will come to be called “Christianity.” It is pleasant, because Perkins’s writing is erudite yet accessible. It is challenging, because there is just so much information packed into her work, particularly reference after reference to a vast array of ancient texts, both inside and outside the stream of Christianity writ large. Distilling her work seems to leave out so much. In my comments I want to focus on her books to highlight two areas in that I think the Seminar needs to give some sustained attention: the role of pain and suffering in identity formation (in *The Suffering Self*, 1995) and the related issue of trans-empire collective identity (in *Roman Imperial Identities in the Early Christian Era*, 2009).

## *The Suffering Self* (1995)

Perkins argues that Christianity itself was not somehow “special” or “different” in its discursive practices of identity formation within the Roman empire. Rather, the Christian texts of various sorts, from those that made it into the canon to the so-called “heretical” texts of the second century through to the martyr stories of the third and early fourth centuries, were all part of a broader cultural shift. Narratives of different types represented “the human self as a body liable to pain and suffering.”<sup>1</sup> The Greek dichotomy of mind/soul versus body were being challenged. And whatever the political realities of the so-called “triumph” of Christianity, it was the Christ adherents’ particular representative construction of suffering persons—the suffering “self”—that forged a social, and to some degree political, unity that led to persons aligned with Christianity ascending to claim dominance through institutional power. Thus, Perkins can write, “It is my contention in this study that the discursive focus in the second century on the suffering body contributed to Christianity’s attainment of social power by helping to construct a subject that would be present for its call.”<sup>2</sup>

1. Perkins, *Suffering Self*, 3.

2. Perkins, *Suffering Self*, 3.

Drawing on theorists such as Michel Foucault, Perkins argues that humans are not born with some innate “self-understanding” but rather acquire a self-understanding by negotiating the self-understandings and self-representations manifest in their cultural context. Over time, as the cultural context shifts, humans negotiate new or nuanced self-understandings. Culture provides categories that enable expressions of what it means to be human. These categories are not, however, politically neutral and generally reflect the mores of dominant power brokers in a given society who can then maintain their grip on power. Simply put: “power belongs to people like me, so if you want to be powerful, be like me. But since you can’t be like me, better leave me in charge!” These are always emic categories—they reflect how insiders to that particular culture think—but are often set by the elite. In the Hellenistic and Roman epochs we see this reflected in a new literary genre that, for all its innovation, reinscribes elite values: the ancient novels.

For those who have not read the novels, their storylines tend to be somewhat formulaic: boy meets girl (often catching one another’s eye at a distance), boy and girl are separated by some violence, girl protects chastity to blossom into virtuous woman while boy faces challenges that help him man-up, and eventually man and woman are reunited and love wins over all! Logically, the protagonists’ love for one another makes no sense, as there are barriers that would prevent their being together; the girl is betrothed to another, or they come from different social classes, they do not have the approval of family or friends, their background experiences are not aligned. Yet love is blind to all such rationalizing and allows only for that deep resonance of emotional response as the couple is drawn together.

What interests Perkins in these writings is the representation of suffering and the effect in the lives of their authors and audiences.<sup>3</sup> The narrative world of the novels imagines a self that is exempt from pain and suffering.<sup>4</sup> Although endurance is required through the many trials and tribulations, and various characters sink into a despair that evokes suicidal thoughts,<sup>5</sup> very little permanent trauma is enacted, and the happy ending of the marriage of the besotted couple is inevitably reached. In this, the world as it is—at least, the world as the elites imagine it must be—is affirmed. There is a “veil of power” that masks for elite readers of the novels the lived pain, inequity, and suffering of the majority.<sup>6</sup> These “elite” are, as Perkins later defines, “persons bound together by ties of privilege, education, culture, and connections with the imperial center and by the shared self-identity these ties constituted.”<sup>7</sup> As such, she will argue in a later book, they forged a trans-empire collective.

3. Perkins, *Suffering Self*, 41.

4. Perkins, *Suffering Self*, 77.

5. Cf. Perkins, *Roman Imperial Identities*, 78–80.

6. Perkins, *Suffering Self*, 84.

7. Perkins, *Roman Imperial Identities*, 5.

Culturally determined categories of self-understanding are not static; they change over time. This latter point is key to Perkins's work. She argues that, even as the novels are placing positive emphasis on the role of suffering in identity creation (albeit if in service to reifying elite dominance), during this same period of time a new type of thinking arose from below, from the non-power brokers and very much in response to the physicality of the wielding of power from the top in the form of violence, particularly imperially sanctioned violence: "the suffering body became a focus of significant cultural concern, and this gave rise to the creation of a new subjectivity—the self as sufferer."<sup>8</sup> She traces this in the writings of the period, to some degree in the philosophers and elite, but most clearly in the medical texts and so-called "Christian" writings. Yet this is not a distinctly "Christian" phenomenon, as Christianity was very much part of its broader culture, which itself was undergoing a shift.<sup>9</sup>

Surveying early references to Christ adherents, Perkins observes, "if Christianity was known at all, it was known for its adherents' attitude toward death and suffering."<sup>10</sup> More importantly, the *reason* Christ adherents were known for their embracing of death and suffering is precisely because this is the message that they themselves were broadcasting: "Christian discourse in the early empire worked to construct a particular subject, a particular self-understanding: namely, the Christian as sufferer."<sup>11</sup> It is as if they had taken a page from George Lakeoff on how reframing "the mental structures that shape the way we see the world . . . is social change."<sup>12</sup> It not only shifts how an individual might see the world and themselves within it; reframing also functions on a more collective level to change "the way the public sees the world."<sup>13</sup> To do so requires not just thinking differently, says Lakoff, but also speaking differently. And it is this different-speaking to which Perkins draws our attention, insofar as the texts written by Christ adherents seek to give voice to new conceptualizations, new framings, of what personhood means.

Perkins gives particular attention to select *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, written in the second and early third centuries. Like the martyr *Acts* that will appear later, these earlier narratives end "well" insofar as the Christian ideal of a horrible death is enjoyed by each of the protagonists, albeit personalized so as not to become too formulaic in the exact nature of the tortures and fatal blows inflicted. As the heroic sufferer faces down death, it remains clear that the final breath is not the point. Perkins cites Justin, who argues against suicide, for death itself is both insufficient and, for the Christ adherent, impermanent (Justin, 2 *Apol.* 4). The accusations, condemnations, tortures, and eventual rather creative eradication of life are all part of the package (Tertullian, *Apol.*

8. Perkins, *Suffering Self*, 7.

9. Cf. Perkins, *Roman Imperial Identities*, 7.

10. Perkins, *Suffering Self*, 20.

11. Perkins, *Suffering Self*, 23–24.

12. Lakeoff, *Don't Think of an Elephant*, xv.

13. Lakeoff, *Don't Think of an Elephant*, xv.

1.12). And while all this may sound rather masochistic to the modern reader, these writings are part of the process by which a particular self-understanding of individual as sufferer is forged.<sup>14</sup>

Beyond the individual, the ritualized nature of the accounts of dismemberment and death serve to forge a collective identity—Christians as a community of sufferers, from whom some go forward to embrace death.<sup>15</sup> But it is not all suffering, as healing too plays a part in the narratives. In contrast to the “false healings” of the non-Christian narratives in which individuals are simply pursuing self-aggrandizement, in the *Acts* healings not only demonstrate the superior and real powers of the Christian community but also that suffering can, in itself, still be profitable. Apostles such as Peter come to recognize that suffering, in this case his own, is part of God’s plan, and thus he willingly accepts his own death.

Perkins can thus conclude, “From its earliest periods, Christianity’s growth correlated with the constitution of a category of sufferers, in particular, with the poor and the sick”<sup>16</sup> and in this altered how people could imagine what it meant to be human. So when Christ adherents recruited new members they could do so on the basis of a subjective individual “call to suffering,” because the cultural discourse had shifted, through their own and others’ efforts, to place value in the suffering self within the cultural consciousness. The veil of power that prevented elites from recognizing the harsh realities of life under imperial Rome was lifted, not only to present a (divine) challenge but also to offer up an alternative to escape from anguish and sorrow. Through the stories about the lives of select Christ adherents, “individuals began to think of themselves as bodies liable to pain and suffering.”<sup>17</sup> The church as an institution was thus able to “acquire and consolidate wealth and power” in the name of those who were categorized as “sufferers”: “the poor, the sick, the deformed.”<sup>18</sup>

Perkins is correct in claiming that the early martyr narratives are not so much historical reports as “key documents in early Christian self-fashioning.”<sup>19</sup> Despite their similarity in form and to some degree content with the novels (adventures, death, miracles, and healings, etc.), the martyr texts have a different function. Rather than reifying the elite cultural values, martyr texts such as the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* explicitly challenge and subvert the hierarchical dominance of the elite. Men and women—especially women—refuse to play the role society expects from them, not only by asserting their autonomy from those who would dominate them, but by willingly embracing suffering and death. This is not a subtle leitmotif in the texts; it is clearly brought to the fore, as Perkins illustrates from *Perpetua*. In her final dream in which she meets

14. Perkins, *Suffering Self*, 32.

15. Perkins, *Suffering Self*, 40.

16. Perkins, *Suffering Self*, 8.

17. Perkins, *Suffering Self*, 12.

18. Perkins, *Suffering Self*, 11.

19. Perkins, *Suffering Self*, 104.

her pre-deceased brother who is suffering in the afterlife, Perpetua recognizes in herself the potential to bring about change through her own suffering. She comes "to a full recognition of her power and her rejection of the subordinate female role decreed by the norms of a male-dominated hierarchy."<sup>20</sup> Her death is her victory because she embraces it with controlled autonomy. Through this and other examples, Perkins demonstrates that "the focus on women and the infirm serves to emphasize the martyr *Acts*' position that the endurance of pain is empowering even for those without power in their contemporary society."<sup>21</sup>

Perkins contends that narratives such as the *Acts* of the apostles and the martyr *Acts* show how the Christ adherents did not reject the body but rather invested it with new significance and, in so doing, embraced bodily suffering as a key part of their community identity.<sup>22</sup> The connection to the novels demonstrates that this focus on the suffering self as an identity marker was not created *ex nihilo*. There was already a "turn towards the body," which is reflected in the medical literature of the time, particularly the writings of Galen and Aristides. In the case of the latter, the suffering body is to be relinquished "to divine surveillance and control, even to the point of submission unto death."<sup>23</sup> Similarities found in the writings of Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, suggest that this is neither a Christian nor a "pagan" phenomenon but rather a cultural shift in the second century in which "a new conception of human subjecthood was gaining ground—the subject as sufferer."<sup>24</sup> This shift would then become the basis for a political, social, and religious cultural shift.<sup>25</sup> Among the Christ adherents, the martyr *Acts* became the locus of dissemination for the message that "to be a Christian was to suffer."<sup>26</sup> Despite its presenting horror, suffering is to be embraced as bringing honor through the counter-intuitive claims that torture is victory, death is life.<sup>27</sup>

### ***Roman Imperial Identities in the Early Christian Era (2009)***

In *Roman Imperial Identities* Perkins broadens her reach, both literally and figuratively. Again drawing on an array of theorists, in this book she attempts to sort out how different social groupings responded to the geographic expansion and consolidation of the Roman empire.<sup>28</sup> On the one hand, she looks at the elite as they forged a "trans-empire" coalition of shared privilege and status, reified for

20. Perkins, *Suffering Self*, 109.

21. Perkins, *Suffering Self*, 114.

22. Perkins, *Suffering Self*, 142.

23. Perkins, *Suffering Self*, 192.

24. Perkins, *Suffering Self*, 192.

25. Perkins, *Suffering Self*, 199.

26. Perkins, *Suffering Self*, 204.

27. Perkins, *Suffering Self*, 206.

28. Perkins, *Roman Imperial Identities*, 1–2.

themselves through cultural and educational pursuits. Using similar moves, but to different effect, “Christians connected by shared religious and moral beliefs and practices.”<sup>29</sup> Although eventually Christianity would come to dominate the cultural and political sphere, having largely been taken over at this point by the elites themselves, in its earlier stages it was the non-elite Christ adherents who were forging an identity for themselves that ran parallel to how elites were negotiating an empire-wide self-identity.<sup>30</sup> Such identities are never static, as they are constantly evolving over time and, more importantly, can never be understood as binaries. In fact, an essential argument for Perkins is the interplay of Christians within their broader cultural context. There is no “pagan” versus “Christian,” despite the “enormously influential” position this dichotomy has enjoyed throughout the writing of (Christian) history. Christ adherents were fully immersed as inhabitants of the Roman empire, and thus “Christianity was not only a religious entity, but a political and social one as well.”<sup>31</sup>

Through what she calls “a series of sketches,” Perkins aims to demonstrate “that in the interstices of the social dynamic producing these new cultural identities, one a trans-empire alliance of wealthy and high-status individuals, the other mostly non-elite persons calling themselves Christians, a shift in cultural perspective was occurring that would sharply realign traditional notions for human and social being.”<sup>32</sup> In particular, she focuses on how the Christian focus on the material resurrection of the body was a response to the increasing cultural shift in the justice system that separated the elite and non-elite. She begins, however, with the elite, demonstrating through writers such as Hippolytus and Aristides that during the first centuries CE “a network of the highborn was under construction that would join together elite from across the empire”—a new cultural identity that would link people previously separated by categories such as nationality, religion, status, or geography, to name but a few.<sup>33</sup>

It was the Second Sophistic with its emphasis on education (*paideia*) that brokered this trans-empire identity as generation after generation of the wealthy Romans forged bonds around a shared cultural script of Greek social and political values. Perkins writes, “By the end of the republic, the Romans were already co-opting Greek conceptions of *humanitas* to define the essence of Romanness,” making it the defining stamp of what it meant to *be* Roman.<sup>34</sup> As Rome expands its reach in the imperial period, education (*paideia*) and culture (*humanitas*) distinguish the elite from the non-elite across the swath of previous geographic and cultural boundaries. The ancient novels have a role to play in propagating these values by narrating the exploits of passive heroes who by the end of the

29. Perkins, *Roman Imperial Identities*, 2.

30. Perkins, *Roman Imperial Identities*, 2.

31. Perkins, *Roman Imperial Identities*, 4.

32. Perkins, *Roman Imperial Identities*, 10.

33. Perkins, *Roman Imperial Identities*, 18.

34. Perkins, *Roman Imperial Identities*, 26.

stories pose no real challenge to imperial dominance, as enacted through local elite rulers. Civic and domestic concord are in the end happily affirmed.<sup>35</sup>

As the majority of Christ adherents were non-elites, they could not, of course, participate in this evolving project of trans-local elite self-identification. Nevertheless, from early on Christian apologists like Hippolytus, Aristides, and Tertullian were, even before Christ adherents were numerically significant, proclaiming Christianity to be a global entity that, like the elite, traversed geographic and cultural boundaries. This discourse both mimics the imperial elite claims of cosmopolitan connections while at the same time challenges the very privilege that it would inscribe.<sup>36</sup> Christian texts show that, despite their integration into the everyday life of their surrounding culture, the behavior and beliefs of the Christ adherents set them apart as sojourners in a foreign land: "even the most positive assessments of Christian and imperial interrelations in the early centuries construct Christians as alienated from their social surroundings."<sup>37</sup>

Such claims, however, hardly empowered Christians, so they needed to turn elsewhere to find their argument for ascendancy over an elite class that in every way outstripped them in cultural honor. Unsurprisingly, it was in claims over the body that Christians found the rhetoric to assert their own superiority, particularly the affirmation of the material resurrection of the body for those who were aligned with Christ, who himself triumphed over death. Perkins writes, "All power ultimately is reduced to the vulnerability of the body to be hurt, destroyed, dissolved, and obliterated and the opportunity to coerce that this vulnerability cedes to the powers that be."<sup>38</sup> Disallowing this vulnerability rendered it powerless.

In the ancient novels, all deaths, at least all elite deaths, turn out to be "false" in so far as elite protagonists only "seem" to die but never really do. In the world of the elite, death holds no sway, but only because it is easily brushed out of sight. In contrast, the protagonists of Christian stories willingly and enthusiastically embrace real and horrifically painful deaths. That they can do so is predicated on their unwavering belief that their material body is immune to permanent destruction, no matter how much maiming and mutilation is inflicted upon it.<sup>39</sup> This attitude developed, Perkins argues, not in a theological vacuum but in direct response to a Roman judicial system that differentiated punishments for elites and non-elites, with the bodies of the latter being subject to harsh physical tortures and gruesomely violent deaths. Of course, Christianity did not present a monolithic understanding of the body, and thus Perkins gives

35. Perkins, *Roman Imperial Identities*, 81.

36. Perkins, *Roman Imperial Identities*, 30.

37. Perkins, *Roman Imperial Identities*, 40.

38. Perkins, *Roman Imperial Identities*, 41.

39. Perkins, *Roman Imperial Identities*, 55.

attention to competing views on the resurrection in the *Acts of Peter* and *Acts of John*, as well as the writings of Tertullian and the *Passion of Perpetua*.

Ultimately, by asserting the full material resurrection of the body, Christians denied power to the judicial system itself: "Christian refusal to find the material body disgusting was the key to the challenge of the operating hierarchical social paradigm supporting differential legal penalties."<sup>40</sup> And by locating the Christian apostles and martyrs in prisons, the *Acts* are claiming a new social space for the Christ adherents, counter to the cultural and educational spaces favored by the Sophists in the prosperous imperial cities. Their invocation of a "Last Judgment" allowed them to express final vindication over the Roman imperial courts: "while the martyr's focus on future punishments suggests a certain desire for revenge, the overall emphasis in the resurrection discourse seems to be on equitable justice more than payback."<sup>41</sup> Together, resurrection and eschatological justice were what made Christianity appealing in the face of ongoing changes to the Roman judicial system that disenfranchised the non-elite.<sup>42</sup>

The Sophists and the Christians presented two competing discourses, the one focused on an ideal past and the other on an ideal future. The latter "destabilizes the present and the status quo and thus provides a powerful ideological and political message"<sup>43</sup> by imagining another possible world, a world in which the non-elite body matters and is treated with dignity, in stark contrast to the Roman judicial system. This, Perkins suggests, "tapped into some cultural desire"<sup>44</sup> and, while in and of itself does not fully explain how Christianity rose to dominance, it certainly plays a key part. By presenting itself as an alternative to the trans-empire elite "monopoly on power and authority . . . the Christian Church became a player in the earthly realm."<sup>45</sup>

### Individual versus Communal Suffering

Although Perkins quite deliberately avoids discussing the canonical "new testament" texts, since she (modestly) claims she does not have the specialist knowledge in the area,<sup>46</sup> her work does bring to my mind Paul and his role in the development of the notion of the "suffering self," particularly within identity formation among Christ adherents. The tendency among biblical scholars is to see (or invent!) a trajectory from Paul through to the later Christian texts whereby Paul becomes the originator of what will later be ratified as orthodox

40. Perkins, *Roman Imperial Identities*, 102.

41. Perkins, *Roman Imperial Identities*, 101.

42. Perkins, *Roman Imperial Identities*, 107.

43. Perkins, *Roman Imperial Identities*, 175.

44. Perkins, *Roman Imperial Identities*, 176.

45. Perkins, *Roman Imperial Identities*, 179.

46. Perkins, *Suffering Self*, 13.

belief and practice. Even if done unconsciously, there is the desire to see later ecclesial doctrine always grounded in this earliest "Christian" writer. Whether deliberately or not, Perkins's work demonstrates for me that the later embracing of suffering among Christ adherents is somewhat different from Paul's own views.

Paul explicitly references suffering only a handful of times in his letters, as do his earliest interpreters. Curiously, in all of these instances "suffering" is linked to honor in some way, either explicitly ("honor" [τιμή]; "glory" [δόξα]) or obliquely ("joy" [χαρά]; "deliverance" [σωτηρία]), perhaps nowhere more clearly than when he claims, "we suffer with him [Christ] so that we may also be glorified with him" (Rom 8:17). Even the catalogue of hardships Paul delineates is done in the service of bringing honor to himself—to his suffering self—in the eyes of the Corinthians (2 Cor 11:21–12:13). But for Paul, this suffering is deeply personal. It links him to Christ, and through Christ to God, rather than to the community. I imagine his declamation if put on trial would be "I am an apostle" rather than "I am a Christian."

This is not to deny a communal component to Paul's view of suffering. In Phil 2:6–11 Paul employs a previously composed hymn to underscore his injunction that the Philippians forge a unity among themselves through humility and looking out for one another (2:1–5). Commentators have noted how Paul's rhetoric in the first chapter of the letter anticipates the example of Christ that he weaves into the hymn in chapter 2. Emphasis is rightly placed on Paul's dire and dishonorable situation in prison as a parallel to Christ taking on the humiliating form of a mere human when the glory of divinity lay before him. In imitation of his own attitude, the Philippians must also be prepared to take on humility in the name of unity. Yet there are further rhetorical resonances that may serve to exalt Paul, for the inner-textual connections can move both ways. In the opening of his letter to the Philippians, Paul does not use his more common self-designation "apostle" and instead describes himself as a "slave" (δούλος; 1:1), anticipating the language of the hymn in which Jesus is described as taking the form of a "slave" (δούλος; 2:7).<sup>47</sup> Paul seems to be linking and likening himself to the descended Christ. Moreover, Paul not only cites a pre-existing hymn about Jesus' death and resurrection, he interjects into it something visceral and bodily around Jesus' death—he did not just die, he died "on a cross" (2:8), a bloody and painful reminder of what it is to be human and to be humiliated. Paul claimed earlier that, "Christ will be held in high honor in my body," perhaps anticipating the high honor Christ receives in being exalted by God after death on a cross. For Paul "to live" is indeed "Christ" but, since "Christ is with God" and is "highly exalted," Paul may be indicating that in his own death he too is to be "exalted." This is an example, I think, of the "trans-value" Christ

47. Gupta, "Not be put to shame," 258.

adherents ascribe, according to Perkins, to the material body.<sup>48</sup> And Paul here brokers it to emphasize his call for communal unity—the humility of Christ is to be imitated by the Philippians themselves. Nevertheless, that Paul interlaces this hymn with his own suffering through incarceration demonstrates that for him the “suffering” of the self is primarily focused on the individual, or at least on *him* as an individual.

Paul claims to be the victim of a lot of hardships at the hands of others, something borne out in the narrative of the Book of Acts, not to mention later traditions that have him persecuted wherever he goes. Paul’s letters demonstrate how as an individual suffering can be experienced on the personal level, for it is deeply personal and all consuming. The physicality of suffering has also an emotional import that calls into question so much, challenging past choices and making ambiguous any future possibilities. Anger and resentment are natural responses to the possibility of life being taken away prematurely. And so, it is understandable that Paul wants to frame his own suffering in a way that makes sense of his choice to abandon his past—so securely grounded, according to his own words, in Pharisaic Judaism—in favor of what so many consider, again in his words, “foolishness.” “Paul shows us in an anecdotally specific manner how the claiming of suffering works in experientially specific and socially quirky ways.”<sup>49</sup> He turns to identification with Christ in order to make sense of his own personal suffering.

Where I see a major shift between Paul’s own personalized writing and the Apostolic and Martyr *Acts* in terms of the suffering self is the emphasis in the latter on the communal dimension. Although I have no doubt that Paul is community focused (and I have done a bit of work myself on Pauline community structures), in the case of suffering Paul seems to imagine that his own suffering will bring him, personally, recognition rather than seeing it locate him in a wider group context. Thus, for Paul there is no claim “I am a *Christian*” but rather versions of “I am with Christ” (Gal 2:19; cf. Phil 1:23) or “Imitate *me*, as I imitate Christ” (1 Cor 4:16; 11:1; 1 Thess 1:16; cf. 2 Thess 3:7, 9). Although I am not attempting to place back on Paul the “introspective conscience of the West,”<sup>50</sup> if I am correct in this assessment, it highlights what comes to the fore in later texts produced by Christ adherents, particularly those to which Perkins draws our attention; namely, the importance among *later* writers of locating suffering and death within a broader community context in which it “makes sense,” which is a different emphasis than that of Paul.

It is this collective identity that can then frame the regular, daily suffering that the Christ adherents are experiencing. Thus, Kotrosits has rightly stated,

48. Perkins, *Roman Imperial Identities*, 102.

49. Maia Kotrosits, personal communication, 2016.

50. Cf. Stendahl, “Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West.”

"Particularly in the ancient world, the 'individual' body was always already a social body."<sup>51</sup> I think that Perkins takes us there. But I fear that it is not highlighted enough, and at times I found myself reading too much of the "self" part of the "suffering self" and not enough of the communal aspects. No doubt, as the majority of Christ adherents faced their own type of suffering and contemplated their own death, outside of any forms of systemic persecution they framed it, as did Paul, through their own personal lens. But that is a different process than turning to the martyrdom stories to which Christ adherents could look to the suffering of others—to the apostles and martyrs—and see in them inspiration not for individual endurance ("I am a Christian") but for self-identifying as part of a collective that was much bigger than themselves ("I am a *Christian*").

In part, this is linked to my view of how these stories functioned as a means of memorializing the deceased for the community. In my experience, oft times those who over-identify with pain and suffering—their own pain and suffering—find it debilitating. All of life is filtered through this lens and daily living can become daily dying, even if the suffering is not immediately life threatening. Relationships with other people can become nothing more than a reminder of possibilities of a life without suffering and pain, or worse, become simply the conduit for expressions of frustration and anger—at the cosmos or at god—for allowing "this" to happen. It is an understandable response, but not one that the martyrdom accounts allow. We need to resist reading these stories through the individualistic lens, or even the lens of Pauline identification with Christ (even though they invoke such), and see how they function as communal stories.

I have argued elsewhere that the circulation of martyr stories served the same function as epigraphic memorialization insofar as these stories bore testimony to the deceased by recalling their deeds and affirming their place within the living community.<sup>52</sup> In so doing, memorials provide the living with a mechanism for forging a collective identity. Although likely revised and refined in circulation before ultimately being written down and edited, even in their earliest iteration likely among small groups or even simply within a single group at first, each story served as a means whereby the living recalled the deeds of the dead. By inviting individuals, presumably gathered in small groups, to reflect collectively on the continued presence of the dead—the martyr—among them, the stories themselves became part of the shared identity of the collective. These are not simply stories of pain and suffering for imitation by individuals. They are memorializations of those who underwent physical extremes, which assert that those who died can still be claimed as part of the "us" that forms the collective identity of the living.

51. Kotrosits, *Sovereignty*, 89.

52. Ascough, "Memorializing Martyrs."

It is difficult to capture just how identity formation would take place in such “groupness” due to the variegated nature of the category of “identity” itself. As Kotrosits notes, “Social bodies, meaning both inter-subjectively constituted ‘individuals’ and those collectives of which they are a part, are dynamically experienced and unevenly transferable; and because of their uneven transferability, they defy easy containment.”<sup>53</sup> Yet it seems likely that meeting together provided the participants with a sense of connectedness. And for Christ adherents there was the growing sense of writing as the place in which to capture memory. Thus, narrative stories took on the role of memorialization for the community, the “locale” at which local groups could gather in order to mourn and celebrate together. Through the martyr stories, members of a small group of Christ adherents forged connectivity to, and thus connectivity with, those who had gone and died before them. In so doing, the stories aided in forging both the collective and individual identities of those who read them. As Perkins says (drawing on Foucault and Hoy), “Individuals come to understand themselves and their worlds within the frames provided by their culture’s discursive paradigm, its cultural and social productions. Subjects do not exist apart from these discourses; rather, they come into being through them.”<sup>54</sup>

### Voluntary versus Involuntary Suffering

Perkins’s work also raised for me some questions around the voluntary nature of suffering. There is no question that suffering was ubiquitous in the ancient world and, for the majority, daily life was one of struggle and suffering. We need think only of diseases that for us are easily preventable that would have inflicted pain and discomfort, and eventually death, for anyone living in the Roman period. Even the elite, with access to the very best medical attention, could not escape pain and suffering in this regard, as Perkins’s summary of Aristides, among others, so aptly demonstrates. Roman imperial violence could be added to the mix of daily suffering. Oppressive tax policies, not to mention authoritarian control of all aspects of civic life in order to maintain the *Pax Romana*, had a cumulative effect of oppression and misery for most people at the time. Suffering abounded no doubt, and thus it is unlikely that many people had the luxury of not reflecting on the nature of suffering, of the meaning of the suffering self.

The martyr stories raise the issue, however, of what it means to voluntarily undergo pain and suffering. The stories are predicated on Roman administrators implementing physical sanctions upon those who would defy their

53. Kotrosits, *Rethinking Early Christian Identity*, 82.

54. Perkins, *Roman Imperial Identities*, 6.

authority, often through declarations of allegiance to Christ, and in this regard the suffering was not voluntary. Yet within the narrative worlds, the martyrs themselves seem willingly to go above and beyond the prescribed corporal punishments by inviting more and more potentially painful inflictions upon their bodies, a choice that also seems to be reified by accolades thrust upon the martyrs by the likes of Tertullian and Origen. The narratives seem to *imagine* Christ adherents taking on suffering voluntarily, or at least taking on extra suffering once incarcerated. To my mind this is a mechanism for the auditors to grapple with the involuntariness of the suffering all around them—they could “choose” it, just like their heroes embraced extra suffering in the face of death. But for the Christ adherents who were reading the stories, rather than those who are embedded in the narratives, the imagined embracing of suffering is experienced in the context of the collective reading of the stories. The imagined voluntary acceptance of suffering “valorizes (re-valences as full of virility) an inherently vulnerable experience, and in so doing forms people so that they cannot imagine an identity without it.”<sup>55</sup> For the Christ adherents who gather together to listen to the memorialization of the martyrs through their stories, the seemingly willing invitation of extra suffering and the superhuman endurance of pain would solidify the readers’ own commitment to see suffering as at the center what it means to be a Christian.

This play between the involuntary and voluntary nature of suffering in antiquity causes me to wonder where the gladiators figure in all of this, as they seem not to fit the dominate elite ethos reflected in the novels, but nor are they “Christian” in their outlook of the other-worldly redemptive power of suffering and death in the arena. Perkins writes, “Bruises, wounds, broken bodies, provided unassailable, palpable evidence of realized power. But Christian discourse reverses this equation and thus redefines some of the most basic signifiers in any culture—the body, pain and death.”<sup>56</sup> Gladiators seem to me likewise to reverse the equation through their embracing of pain and suffering, but without the promise of post-mortem reconstitution. What they do gain, however, seems to me to be somewhat parallel—honor. Discourse among Christ adherents seems to frame post-mortem existence in honorific terms—for example, “glory”—which, once stripped of its ontological fallacy (they did not actually rise—at least, not yet!), functions the same as the gladiatorial claims of post-mortem honor for fighting, and dying, well. Thus, as Burrus notes, the “rise of a discourse of martyrdom” is correlated, not only with a broad turn to interest in suffering and passivity as Perkins lays out (whom she cites), but also with “the history of imperial spectacles.”<sup>57</sup>

55. Kotrosits, personal correspondence.

56. Perkins, *Suffering Self*, 115.

57. Burrus, *Saving Shame*, 160 n. 28.

The connection between the gladiatorial games and the martyrdom stories has long been made, even among the early Christian writers themselves and within some of the *Acts*.<sup>58</sup> Susan Elliott has taken up links between martyrs and gladiators recently in the Westar Seminar itself. She argues, "the martyrs became icons for Christian identity in a Christian vision of the empire much as the gladiators functioned as icons for the Roman identity in the Roman empire."<sup>59</sup> The gladiators in the arenas were part of spectacles that provided social cohesion among those in the crowd as they were made to feel connected not only with one another but also with the gladiator him or herself.<sup>60</sup> In affirming his choice to fight, and perhaps die, as a gladiator, by taking an oath, both the voluntary and to a degree the involuntary recruit upholds his honor.<sup>61</sup>

Whereas I do not disagree with Elliott that the "accounts of the Christian martyrs move the martyrs into the arena to take their place in a similar trajectory from 'othered' disposables to icons of a new form of Roman identity,"<sup>62</sup> I would expand it to suggest that it is not *simply* the presence of the martyrs in the arena that contribute to identity formation. It is the recalling of their memory among those who gather to do so that contributes to the development of what will become the "cult of the saints" among communal groups. There is clear evidence in a few different locales that fans of the gladiator games, or admirers of individual gladiators, formed associations, or what we might call "fan-clubs."<sup>63</sup> It is not a big leap (at least for me) to think that when Christ adherents thought about the martyrs, and thought about them in terms of gladiators, at the urging of their leaders, they would form small associations that would celebrate and memorialize these "brothers" and "sisters" who died for their commitment to Christ. Certainly Christ groups were imagined to fit into the broad category of "associations,"<sup>64</sup> and Christ adherents continued to belong to associations of various types well into the post-Constantine period. So why not martyr "fan-clubs"?

Carlin Barton demonstrates that a voluntary gladiator's death "was a parable of hope to every victim" that "offered a pattern of glorification to the powerless."<sup>65</sup> For Christ adherents for whom the gladiators were no longer an option as a means of hope, the stories of voluntary martyrdoms continued the role of providing hope in the face of Roman imperial oppression that was the mainstay of life for the majority underclass. As Perkins notes, "Christian martyr literature

58. Brown, *Ransom of the Soul*, 7; Rhee, *Early Christian Literature*; Barton, "Savage Miracles."

59. Elliott, "Gladiators and Martyrs," 29, cf. 50.

60. Brow, *Ransom of the Soul*, 84, 88.

61. Elliott, "Gladiators and Martyrs," 42.

62. Elliott, "Gladiators and Martyrs," 46.

63. See Harland, *Greco-Roman Associations*, 116.

64. See Ascough, "What are They Now Saying."

65. Barton, "Scandal of the Arena," 15.

displays Christians' consistent dis-identification with the dominant culture's figuration of their social identity. When they are judicially condemned and die horrible and painful deaths, Christians project themselves and are recognized by their communities as triumphant and victorious champions."<sup>66</sup>

Perkins ends *Suffering Self* with the bold claim that Christianity could not have developed as an institution had it not brokered a cultural shift that saw suffering as positive and drew all those who suffered individually together to form community. Although most Christ adherents would not face their own torture and death, as Perkins points out, it is in "seeing martyrs perform their belief in a body immune to consumption and destruction that made this body and the sense of identity that went with it available for all adherents."<sup>67</sup> I would add to this, in fact emphasize as perhaps more important, that as Christ adherents *heard* the stories about the martyrs (which is more likely than having witnessed one of the events themselves), they were able to forge a sense of collective identity in which bodily pain was directly linked to the claim "I am a Christian."

### Christian "Distinctiveness"

Perkins makes great strides in addressing the rise of a distinctly "Christian" identity. Christ adherents refuse to accept the dominant culture's identification of them as criminal or humiliated and, instead, in the face of death "project themselves and are recognized by their communities as triumphant and victorious champions."<sup>68</sup> The martyr *Acts*, however, seek to make an exclusive claim for that identity. By inviting individuals, presumably gathered in small groups, to reflect collectively on the continued presence of the dead—the martyr—among them, the stories themselves became part of the shared identity of the collective. I think we are remiss to accept at face value such claims of distinctiveness. As Brown summarizes so nicely,

Most early Christians in Carthage, as elsewhere, did not spend their whole time being early Christians. They had many identities. They maintained all manner of connections with a pagan society that, for most of the time, took little notice of them as Christians. Many of them did not think that being a Christian was a full-time and irrevocable identity. They joined the church easily. But when they realized that commitment to Christianity clashed with other, stronger loyalties they lapsed just as easily.<sup>69</sup>

Multiple identities, only one of which was "Christian," would mean competing claims on one's time and energy, yet Christians were well able to navigate this

66. Perkins, *Roman Imperial Identities*, 115.

67. Perkins, *Roman Imperial Identities*, 55.

68. Perkins, *Roman Imperial Identities*, 115.

69. Brown, *Ransom of the Soul*, 6, drawing on Rebillard, *Christians and Their Many Identities*.

reality. Thus, the claim “I am a Christian” is not to be understood as an either/or binary of identity but rather along a hierarchy “as individuals relocated themselves or redefined the structures of their allegiances.”<sup>70</sup> Martyrdom, Moss argues, is a “discursive practice”—a set of overlapping constructions—that shaped early Christian identities, theologies, and practices and in so doing provided meaning to suffering Christians with a way of dealing with what they themselves described as “persecution.”<sup>71</sup> Thus, even in terms of “martyrdom” there were diverse perspectives and understandings across the empire, often tied to local social, intellectual, and cultural factors.

In light of this, I wrestle with Perkins’s broad claims about a thing called “Christianity,” although I understand her deployment of it within the broader scholarly discourses. On the one hand, she shows how thoroughly normal are the tropes of suffering and trans-empire identity. On the other hand, to suggest then that Christian deployment of these tropes are somehow unique or distinct and are somehow tied to the eventual success of Christianity seems problematic in her description.<sup>72</sup> Certainly in terms of going forward with a re-descriptive project, I think we are at a place where we need to be much more conscious about our description of the “rise of Christianity” or of how “Christianity came to dominate.” “Christianity” did no such thing. “Christianity” is a construct that does not have agency or personhood. It was people who rose to places of power and influence, not a “religion.” Many, and perhaps even most, of these people aligned themselves with beliefs and practices focused on the Christ cult. But it was they—the “selves”—that wielded power, even institutional power. Perhaps this is a subtle nuance, but I think it is an important one. When we de-personalize “Christianity” and grant it agency divorced from its practitioners, it is easy to slip into assumptions of “inevitability” or “mandate.” Let me attempt to put it bluntly: when we say “Christianity achieved institutional power,” people hear “God ensured that the one true religion would come to dominate.”

Of course, this is not at all what Perkins means in her own work, even when she does use expressions such as those I do not like. My point here is not to critique. In fact, it is her work that demonstrates just how important it is to de-personalize “Christianity” and to place the focus on the players themselves. It is the “suffering self” that is at the core of a cultural shift, says Perkins, and this is what is so key. It is the understanding of personhood that is transformative, not the understanding of “religion.” In our inquiry into the nature of “Christian identity formation,” we are looking to understand the actors themselves, not the label. That said (and here I want to introduce my own nuance) even the actors themselves had a collective identity. I think that this is where we can bring back in the terminology of “Christian”—as a collective identity marker that houses

70. Lieu, *Christian Identity*, 303.

71. Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 17–18.

72. An observation for which I am indebted to Maia Kotrosits.

many "selves" who make particular claims together rather than a rarified category to which persons can be inserted or removed.

When we connect with others—either individually or jointly—we forge continuity with their past, and they with ours, implicitly at first and increasingly more explicitly as we come to know one another's past, one another's memories (and thus, it is a manufactured continuity<sup>73</sup>). In hearing the story collectively, the auditors experience, even temporarily, a "vicarious *communitas*" with the protagonists as they identify themselves with the claim "I am a Christian" at the moment in which life and death hang in the balance. But there is no real transformation for the later auditors, and they do not "become" martyrs. They return to their everyday business perhaps edified, but not transformed in the ritual sense.

Suffering is not the draw; belonging is. But belonging is predicated on the suffering. It is neither one nor the other separated. And this is a key point in Perkins's later book. As there was a cultural shift that resulted in a greater separation between the elite and the non-elite, Christ adherents emphasized the material body and its resurrection as a means to resist the increasingly harsh treatment of bodies in the Roman judicial system.<sup>74</sup> In so doing, they forged their own bonds and alliances. Turning to her arguments for trans-empire self-understandings, despite Perkins's laudable desire to avoid binaries, by focusing predominantly on "elites" as a singularity (as if these were monolithic) and Christians as a distinctive grouping she gives a sense that these are two parallel if competing factions. But "Christian" is to my mind only one subset of a much larger taxonomic designation of "association."<sup>75</sup> And within this broader designation, other groups were forging trans-imperial connections at the same time. For example, associations of performers devoted to Dionysos—the *technitai*—were referring to themselves as a "worldwide" phenomenon and had in place mechanisms for transference between groups. Immigrant associations likewise maintained connections that extended far across local geographic boundaries.<sup>76</sup> Clearly the material resurrection of the body was not their concern, which begs the question why it is that these non-elite groups were fostering trans-empire alliances at the same time that Christ groups were doing so? Were they too responding to the imperial judicial system that divided the elite and non-elite and, if so, how so? These questions remain, I think, for the Seminar to consider as we go forward, placing Christ groups more firmly, if more messily, in their broader cultural context of group formations.

73. Cf. Kotrosits, *Rethinking Early Christian Identity*, 37, who uses the terms "continuity" and "belonging" for "identity" and whose comments sparked in me the notion of "connectivity" as a descriptor for "identity."

74. Perkins, *Roman Imperial Identities*, 7–10.

75. Ascough "What are They Now Saying."

76. See further Ascough, "Translocal Relationships."

### Conclusion

Judith Perkins's work not only highlights the centrality of "suffering" in the identity formation of Christ adherents, it demonstrates clearly that the claim "I am a Christian" in the second century and beyond is not an individualistic claim. It is not Martin Luther's "Here I stand, I can do no other." It is a claim to group belonging. It is the *opposite* of an individual theological declaration (such as Paul's own self-reflection). Certainly it has individualized elements—just as my claiming "I am a runner" may indicate that I as an individual "run," it has a much more important function of identifying me by the broader species to which I belong—the category of "runner."

Thus, the suffering *self* is not the case of individual selves making claims but about an individual being linked to others who suffer and, in our case, those who suffer in a particular way. The claim "I am a Christian" makes no sense otherwise. The claim "I am a unicorn," although semantically and syntactically sound, is laughable, since we know unicorns do not exist. So with what am I identifying? For the writers of the martyr narratives, however, the classification "Christian" as a collective entity must, in their minds and the minds of their readers, have existed as something distinct and distinctive from the others. Thus, for example, the Christians that Pliny had executed persisted in their commitment to group adherence in Pliny's eyes; their "faith" made no difference to Pliny. They were stubborn in their allegiance to a group identity, and thus they suffered for it. Eventually, the self-definition of the Christ adherents that claimed triumph over death allowed them "to reframe the contemporary power games," since all power is linked and "reduced" to the ability to inflict harm on the other. By denying the effect of any such harming—through pain or through death—"Christians preempted contemporary structures of power and opened space for their new cosmopolitan identity to emerge and eventually to flourish."<sup>77</sup> For the Christ adherent there was the choice to embrace pain and suffering, clearly articulated in the martyrdom accounts, but coming more to the fore in the ascetic practices of certain Christians in the post-Constantine era. The so-called triumph of Christianity does not alleviate suffering (for some) or the idealization of suffering (for most); it sanctifies it.

77. Perkins Perkins, *Roman Imperial Identities*, 41.

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