The New Atheism and the Enlightenment
Part One
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Cover: A drawing, by Robaire Ream, that can be seen as a duck or as a rabbit but not both at the same time.
Awkward Openings

It can happen anywhere. Often it is awkward. Your mouth has been forced open with an array of dental devices, Novocain slowly creeps into your gums and lips, and the dentist says, “You’re a Bible scholar; what do you think about what they’re saying about Jesus?” Or, it might be shortly after a gall bladder operation, and, while you’re trying to get what little rest you can steal between blood pressure checks and pill dispensing, a nurse sheepishly inquires, “I know we shouldn’t ask these questions, but what do you think about God?” Perhaps the most uncomfortable situation occurs in the fetid “little ease” of an intercontinental flight, when the person beside you opens with, “I see that you’re reading a book about Revelation, . . .” and then proceeds to lay out a detailed flowchart of the final days. Unless this disquisition is interrupted by the food cart or warnings of turbulence, the inevitable question comes, “So, what do you think about that?”

Now, one could simply observe that all this is just part of the job of being a scholar of religion. It is the price scholars pay for getting involved in such matters. But curiously no one asking these questions ever worries about a consulting fee! Some years ago when Proctor and Gamble was bothered by the uproar over their “Moon and Stars” logo, a vice president called me, asking if I could explain the symbolism of the logo and its possible religious connotations. I told him I could, and remembering that my business school colleagues received a consulting fee from P & G, I cheekily added that I would expect a fee upon submission of my report. He demurred and never called back.

Actually I am not distressed over such awkward openings about things that matter. In fact, I am often reminded of the rabbinic challenge: that one should be able to encapsulate the entire meaning of Torah while standing on one leg! Such unexpected raids of the inarticulate compel me to gain some clarity about what in the world I am doing.

Indeed, let me repeat the question: What in the world am I doing? Such a question often ricochets about the brain when you are stunned by events, when you are thrown for a loss of words. It also intimates that whatever I am doing involves a “world.” Somehow a larger picture is entailed. And even the words I use are part of an ongoing conversation I am having with others. Despite the scholarly temptation to remain a comfortable recluse, I succumb to being bothered by the questions others offer me. Perhaps this weakness is congenital; it certainly is habitual. For I have gotten into the habit of being stunned. I have found that my experiences with others have continued to stretch me so much that I often have described theology untraditionally as the reflection upon the depths of our experience. I have tried to face honestly whatever emerges from the encounters of my life. I have recognized that I am not alone on this planet and that the resources to make sense of things are not limited to either the present time or place. I can thus attempt to listen sensitively to the variety of voices, past and present, which sometimes form a modulating chorus, sometimes reverberate with a callous cacophony. So, when unexpected questions detonate around me, I hunker down in the crater left by their impact, and feel my way along the inevitable aftershocks.

As you can tell, I’ve lapsed into metaphors. But this is no frothing on the rhetorical cake. Metaphors move us into the no man’s land of language, where we use sounds we know for what beggars our speech. We return from the depths of our experience with words that gesture beyond themselves. What we sighted—was it a grail?—comes back with us only on our lips. And when we listen to the speech of religious traditions we begin to see with new ears. Our very synapses begin to mirror the treks others have made. Somehow the clasped hands on an ancient funeral stele reach into our brains. Stone touches our flesh.

But that is not all that happens. These connecting jolts expose and often shatter our world. Every journey we make into the interior of our religious traditions disentangles us from the assumptions that determine our world. We can go home again, back to our world; but our perspective has changed. Perhaps for the first time we see the fishbowl we have always been swimming in. Plato talked about returning to the cave and taking the measure of the shadow show. The Matrix, the 1999 science fiction film, reprises that platonic spelunking. Another way of saying this is that our journey has taken a critical turn. We have become amphibians, conscious that our world is not the end of it all; nor is the world that intrigues us the final word.

But, because of those fragmentary contacts, nothing is ever the same. We can no longer read our world just along familiar lines. What we have seen, what visions and dreams we have glimpsed in our border crossings, haunt us. Worlds collide in us. We begin to notice that others,
The New Atheism

In the past decade, Sam Harris (2004, 2006), Richard Dawkins (2006), Daniel Dennett (2006), and Christopher Hitchens (2007) have each published books highly critical of religious belief and practice. While the authors are critical of religious belief as such, their books focus largely on belief in God, as found in Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. As a result, their overall point of view has been referred to as “the New Atheism.”

The form of monotheism found in mainstream Judaism, Christianity, and Islam has two key elements. On the one hand, God is seen as the transcendent being, or power, who created the universe and who regularly acts within it to achieve His ends. On the other hand, God is also viewed as the source of morality in that He has given us, through revelation in sacred scripture and in nature, the principles by which we are to live our lives. We can summarize these two elements by saying that within the Abrahamic theological traditions God is both the fundamental cosmological principle and the ultimate moral authority.

I think there are two proximate causes for the emphasis on the God of Abraham in the writings of the “New Atheists.” First, recent events, such as 9/11, the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the seemingly interminable conflict between Israel and the Palestinians feed the perception of a worldwide clash of religious values between adversaries who share a basic commitment—there is one God, the God of Abraham—but who differ, often violently, over which tradition embodies the true faith.

Viewed from this perspective, the present international situation bears some resemblance to the religious wars in seventeenth-century Europe when Christians killed one another for decades over various theological and ecclesiastical differences. Arguably, today’s conflicts between certain Muslim groups, on the one hand, and Israel or the United States, on the other hand, are not simply, or even primarily, about theology, but involve all sorts of geo-political, economic, and cultural issues. But, the same was also true of the Thirty Years War in seventeenth-century Europe. The important point is that these present-day conflicts are often framed in religious terms by the participants who see themselves as defending their religious values against those who seek to destroy them.

When framed in this fashion, the logic of Abrahamic monotheism tends to make disputes particularly intractable. Belief in one God slides very easily into belief in one truth and one right way of life. Thus, we should not be surprised that the histories of Christianity and Islam are replete with outbreaks of bigotry, intolerance, and violence. Judaism, on the other hand, has for much of its history been on the receiving end of religious intolerance and violence. However, the activities of some Jewish religious groups in contemporary Israel indicate that Judaism is not entirely free from what might be called religious totalitarianism.

The second proximate cause for the focus on the God of Abraham is that Harris, Dawkins, Dennett, and Hitchens are also responding to the emergence of the Christian Right as a potent social and political force within the United States. The political and cultural agenda of this movement is, I believe, best expressed in the idea that the United States is, and should be, a Christian nation. Both the cosmological and the moral aspects of the Abrahamic conception of God are fundamental to this idea. Thus, Christian conservatives...
have tried to subordinate a scientific understanding of nature to one based on theology. The most obvious example of this is to be found in the attempts to require the teaching of creationism in high school biology classes. More generally, conservative religious thinkers have worked to subvert the autonomous intellectual authority of science both by challenging the idea that science provides us with an objective and accurate account of the world, and by insisting that only the Christian religion can provide the answers to the so-called “big questions” of life.

In the area of morality, the Christian Right is often identified with opposition to abortion and gay marriage, but these positions are simply two elements in an overall vision of a form of life in which Christian values, as understood by conservatives, inform not only the private lives of Christians, but also the politics and public life of all citizens of the United States. While many on the right pay lip service to the principle of religious tolerance, that tolerance tends to evaporate when controversies arise, as with the proposal to build a Muslim center in lower Manhattan near the site of the 9/11 attack. The unfortunate truth is that there are groups within the Christian Right in the United States who are implacably opposed to the values of modern liberal pluralistic democracy. And these groups are quite willing to use the power of the government to enforce their views on others.

Of course, there are many persons within all three Abrahamic traditions who reject the violence perpetrated in the name of the God they worship, just as many Christians in the United States reject the social and political agenda of the Christian Right. Moderates and liberals within these traditions typically see the bigotry and violence associated with the Abrahamic faiths as products of what they refer to as “extremism” or “fundamentalism,” and they also typically regard these “extremists and fundamentalists” as having misinterpreted and perverted the very faith they—the so-called “extremists and fundamentalists”—claim to be defending.

It is not surprising, then, that many self-identified religious moderates and liberals regard the books by Harris, Dawkins, Dennett, and Hitchens as ill-informed and misguided attacks on religion. From their perspective the New Atheists have lumped all Christians, Muslims, and Jews in with the “extremists and fundamentalists” of their respective traditions, and have failed to recognize the complexity and diversity of both the history of the Abrahamic traditions, and present-day thought and practice within these same traditions.

Clearly, there are differences between the doctrines of Christian Fundamentalism and the religious views of those who regard themselves as Christian moderates or liberals. But, from the perspective of the New Atheists, these differences do not make a difference. On their view, the religious views of Christian moderates and liberals are just as irrational and potentially harmful to public well-being as those of the fundamentalists. Thus, the New Atheists reserve some of their harshest criticisms for those who label themselves religious moderates or liberals.

The conception of rationality invoked by the New Atheists in their criticisms of religion has its origins in a framework of ideas that emerged during the Enlightenment. In this respect, there is nothing particularly new about the New Atheism, and one can read Dawkins’ critique of the Theory of Intelligent Design, for example, as a continuation of an argument begun in the eighteenth century by David Hume in Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion. Similarly, the concerns of Harris and Hitchens about the adverse effects of religion on public life are prefigured in Baruch Spinoza’s Theological-Political Treatise (published in 1670). I would suggest, then, that the books by Harris, Dawkins, Dennett, and Hitchens are best understood as a part of an ongoing intellectual tradition that has been highly critical of religion since the Enlightenment.

I want to emphasize the notion of an ongoing and developing intellectual tradition because while Harris, Dawkins, Dennett, and Hitchens continue to subscribe to Enlightenment ideas and ideals, they do not attempt to defend these ideas and ideals in terms of Enlightenment era philosophy. Thus, it is necessary to understand both the Enlightenment conception of scientific rationality that is the historical source of the New Atheists’ claim that religious belief is inherently irrational, and the ways in which this conception has been modified in light of subsequent developments in philosophy and science.

The Enlightenment Background

Jonathan Israel, in his magisterial study of the Enlightenment, has argued that there were, in fact, two distinct and opposing overall philosophical perspectives present in the Enlightenment.2 On the one hand, there was what Israel refers to as the mainstream, or moderate, Enlightenment represented by figures like John Locke, Isaac Newton, and Voltaire, as well as many of the founding fathers of America, such as Benjamin Franklin. On the other hand, there was the Radical Enlightenment represented preeminently by Baruch Spinoza, and figures like Pierre Bayle and Denis Diderot, who were strongly influenced by Spinoza. On Israel’s reading, the distinction between the moderate and radical Enlightenment cut across philosophical, religious, political, and social issues, so that each perspective was made up of a network of ideas and attitudes, which were expressed not only in the realm of philosophical theorizing, but in political and social programs as well.

In order to understand why there was a split between the radical and moderate Enlightenments, and how this split lives on in the present debate over religion between
Harris, Dawkins, Dennett, and Hitchens, on the one hand, and their many moderate and liberal religious critics, on the other hand, it is necessary to provide a brief historical sketch. One of the common threads running through the Enlightenment was the idea that the new physics developed in the seventeenth century by figures like Galileo, Kepler, and Newton marked a genuine revolution in human history by providing human beings, for the first time, with accurate and reliable knowledge of the natural world.

The new physics replaced the older cosmology identified with Aristotle that had been incorporated into the philosophical theology of the Roman Catholic church. This Aristotelian cosmology contained two principles that were rejected by Galileo and later scientists. First, Aristotle held that the earth is the immobile center of the universe around which the stars and the planets move in circular orbits. The rejection of Aristotle’s geocentric theory in favor of a heliocentric theory is often referred to as the “Copernican Revolution.” Second, Aristotle attempted to explain motion, and change generally, by means of the Greek term telos, variously translated as “goal” or “end” or “purpose.” Aristotle’s teleological conception of nature meshed very well with the orthodox Christian view of God as the creator of the universe, and its rejection in favor of a mechanistic conception of nature was at least as much a threat to Christian cosmology as the rejection of the geocentric view of the universe.

The world revealed by the New Science, according to Enlightenment thinkers, is one in which nature is a self-contained mechanistic system functioning in accordance with universal causal laws. And as Galileo, Kepler, and Newton had shown, these causal relationships can be represented in the form of mathematical equations. As a result, reason and rationality came to be identified during the Enlightenment with the mathematical reasoning found in Newtonian physics, and this became for many the ideal for human knowledge as a whole.

The ideal of knowledge associated with the New Science fed the skepticism about the intellectual and moral authority of the Christian tradition that had already been generated by the religious wars of the seventeenth century. One of the conclusions that many drew from the bloody Thirty Years War in Europe was that no one church had a monopoly on religious truth, and even that ultimate religious truth might well be unobtainable by human beings. The sharp contrast between the successes of the New Science, on the one hand, and the inability of competing Christian groups to resolve their differences without resorting to coercion and violence, on the other hand, cast doubt on religious revelation and tradition as sources of truth.

For Enlightenment thinkers, the shift from an Aristotelian to a mechanistic cosmology was not simply a change in the way in which one explains the movements of the planets in the solar system. It was also an alteration in worldview that had a great many intellectual, social, and cultural effects beyond the domain of what we, in the twenty-first century, regard as purely scientific questions. For example, the conception of a universe that functions in accordance with universal causal laws is at odds with the premodern belief in a world in which magic, miracles, and disembodied spirits, such as angels and demons, held sway. And, once one empties the natural world of these supernatural elements, it is but a very short step to asking what role, if any, God plays in this world. Thus, while many Enlightenment era scientists, such as Newton and Robert Boyle, and admirers of science, such as Locke, identified themselves as Christians, the network of ideas associated with the New Science raised deep problems for Christian orthodoxy.

The emergence of the New Science was accompanied by the development of the so-called New Philosophy that attempted to create a new framework of philosophical ideas that would justify rejecting the older Aristotelian cosmology and adopting the mechanistic cosmology seemingly implicit in the New Science. The most influential thinker associated with this philosophical movement was undoubtedly René Descartes, whose work combined significant contributions to science—such as the creation of analytic geometry—with a metaphysical system that redefined the nature of the physical world and the relationship of human beings to that world.

**René Descartes**

While Descartes did argue that God is the ultimate cause of the existence of the material world, and that God is the source of those universal causal laws by which that world operates, he also thought that specific natural phenomena, such as the circulation of blood in the human body, could be explained solely in terms of the operations of natural laws. That is, we do not need to appeal to God or Divine Providence in order to understand how the heart functions as a pump.

In this respect, Descartes took a major step towards providing a philosophical justification for what most of us now take for granted: the intellectual autonomy of science, and, in particular, its independence from theology. Establishing the intellectual autonomy of science meant that scientific theories are to be judged by standards internal to scientific practice, and not by theological or political criteria. Thus, from a Cartesian perspective, the conflict between Galileo and the Vatican over Copernicus’ heliocentric theory of the universe was an attempt by the Roman Catholic Church to assert its authority in a domain where it had no legitimate intellectual standing.

Furthermore, Descartes also provided a rationale for rejecting what had, in the past, been regarded as genuine
sources of reliable knowledge, such as history, literature, traditional philosophy, and theology. In all of these cases, Descartes argued, the putative form of knowledge is subject to doubt because it is tainted by human subjectivity. What Descartes sought to provide was an account of the natural world as it is in itself, independent of any particular human perspective on it.3 And the burden of Descartes’ skeptical arguments is to show that only mathematical physics can provide us with such an objective understanding of nature. For Descartes, the objectivity of science meant that scientific accounts of nature have an intellectual authority not to be found in older, prescientific forms of learning such as theology, traditional philosophy, and traditional humanistic studies.

Descartes’ idea that science is an intellectually autonomous discipline that provides us with an absolute conception of the world that is intellectually authoritative was taken over wholesale by most Enlightenment thinkers,* as was his rejection of traditional forms of learning. However, he did place one very important restriction on the scope of scientific knowledge. Descartes argued that the human mind is an immaterial substance whose activities are not subject to the mechanistic laws that govern natural phenomena. His conception of the mind is cut from the same cloth as his conception of God. In both cases, we have a non-material entity that is independent of the “clockwork universe,” but which, somehow, can produce real effects in that universe. The major difference between God and the human mind, according to Descartes, is that while the former is omnipotent and omniscient, the latter is limited with respect to both its power to effect changes in the world and its intellectual capacities.

With his accounts of God and the human mind, Descartes does leave room, at least in his own mind, for orthodox Christianity in the universe of the New Science. And the great majority of Enlightenment thinkers shared Descartes’ idea that it is possible to reconcile the conception of a mechanistic universe with a belief in a benevolent God who had created that universe and who had established the moral order by which we are to live. In fact, the attempt to “have it both ways” on this issue was characteristic of what Jonathan Israel has called the “Moderate Enlightenment.”

Spinoza viewed religious beliefs as natural phenomena that are to be explained in exactly the same way as any other natural phenomena.

Baruch Spinoza

At the other end of the spectrum of Enlightenment thinkers from Descartes was Spinoza, who was the primary source of the ideas and ideals underlying the Radical Enlightenment. Spinoza claimed that everything that exists—inanimate objects, biological entities, minds, etc.—is a part of the natural world. And nature, on his view, is a self-contained and self-maintaining totality that can be properly understood only through knowledge of the universal laws of cause and effect that govern its operations. Thus, it is science, not theology, that reveals to us the true nature of our universe. It is also science that, by providing us with a correct understanding of human nature and of the conditions for human well-being, gives us the basis for a rational universal morality.

According to Spinoza, the mechanistic conception of nature is fundamentally incompatible with the biblical idea of God as an immaterial agent who acts in the world to achieve His ends. Only material bodies can cause changes in other material bodies, so that a belief in an immaterial cause producing real material consequences is a form of superstition parallel to a belief in witchcraft or magic. For similar reasons, Spinoza also rejected Descartes’ conception of the human mind as an immaterial substance that somehow produces real material effects in the world. For Spinoza, all mental activities and states, such as thoughts and emotions, are also bodily activities and states. For example, the states of mind known as being angry or frightened or thinking about the axioms of Euclidean geometry are also distinct and discrete states of the body.

As a result, Spinoza viewed religious beliefs as natural phenomena that are to be explained in exactly the same way as any other natural phenomena. He applied this naturalistic approach to religious ideas to the study of the Bible, which he saw as a purely human creation that has to be understood by discovering the causes that have produced the ideas to be found within that work. This approach, which foreshadowed the modern critical historical study of the Bible, led him, for example, to reject the reality of miracles and biblical prophecy.

Spinoza argued that all of our religious ideas are inadequate in that they fail to accurately represent their true causes. For example, people have believed that illness or ill fortune is a form of punishment for disobedience of God—a belief that, on his view, arises from an inadequate understanding of the true causes of the principles by which nature operates. His explanation for the error-ridden character of religious ideas is that they are the products of imagination driven by fear and hope, rather than reason. Despite claiming that our religious ideas are inadequate, Spinoza

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Why the First Quest for the Historical Jesus?

Joe Bessler

I was watching the first episode of Bill Moyers’ 2006 PBS Series *Faith and Reason.* He was talking with Salman Rushdie, author of numerous novels including *The Satanic Verses,* which was banned by the Indian government when it was published in 1988. It was also banned in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and South Africa. In 1989 Iran’s Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini issued a *fatwa* (an authoritative ruling on religious law) that called for the death sentence to be carried out by any Muslim not only against Rushdie but also his publishers for blaspheming Islam. For ten years Rushdie lived underground in England, moving from safehouse to safehouse until the ban was lifted in 1999. In this portion of the interview Rushdie protests the way Islamic societies—governed legally by theological law derived from the Quranic notion of *sharia*—have used theological claims to silence public discourse and to stifle the development of a genuine civil society.

Rushdie: Unfortunately the degree of censorship in the Muslim world is so rigorous at the moment that very few scholars are able to go back to first principles and re-examine the bases of the faith.

He then makes a remarkable suggestion:

Islam is unusual in that it is the only one of the great world religions which was born inside recorded history, and there’s an enormous amount of factual, historical record about the life of the Prophet and about social conditions in Arabia at that time. So, it’s possible to look at the origins of Islam in a scholarly way, based on historical fact.

I had been barely listening, but this last comment caught me. “Did he just . . . ?” Already, Moyers had begun to follow up:

Moyers: Do you expect Muslims to look at their faith in a historical context as opposed to supernaturally?

Rushdie: Yeah, of course; many people do. Actually, knowing a large number of Muslims around the world, many people do this. It’s just that it’s the public discourse that’s forbidden. (emphasis added)

“Yes,” I thought, still somewhat amazed, “he’s calling for a study of the historical Mohammed.” Lamenting the silencing of public discourse, Rushdie highlights the importance of historical studies as a way of moving Islam toward a more tolerant and open civil society. Such scholarship, implicitly challenging the notion that the Quran is a divinely revealed text, would undercut the theological argument by which Islamic states and radical clerics censor and silence public dissent. Rushdie continues:

It’s very interesting about Mohammed, the Prophet, that he has a character; that we know what he was like as a person. It’s very interesting to see how Islam grew out of the social and economic conditions of his time. It’s very interesting to see exactly how he learned from, and in many ways borrowed, stories and ideas from Judeo-Christian culture. That’s to say, it’s, to me, fascinating to see how this book came out of history. It’s not an event outside history but inside history.

When pressed by Moyers to explain what prevents Islamic intellectuals and scholars from articulating a kind of historically informed skeptical faith: “What do you mean? Someone has to say, ‘It’s okay?’” Rushdie replies with some exasperation.

Rushdie: I mean you have to stop oppressing them. Let’s say at the moment there has been a very widespread campaign of oppression against Muslim writers and intellectuals. It’s very hard to publish this kind of work; it’s very hard for anyone to read it. Such scholarship has been banned outside and is banned inside the Muslim world. So, I think, if we’re going to push toward the future you can’t go on being hidebound by ideas which come from hundreds and hundreds of years ago. You have to enter the modern world. (emphasis added)

Why would Rushdie call for a study of the historical Mohammed in 2006? Was it perhaps merely a private interest of his, something that he found “interesting,” as he says in the interview? Or does the question of an historical Mohammed raise, in effect, other questions—questions about the religious control of public discourse, about academic freedom, about the tension between religious authority and human freedom? Moyers’ interview with Rushdie gives an American audience the opportunity to see the importance of the West’s own history of conflict between traditional assumptions of religious authority and the creation of an open civil society. My own reading of
the interview is that Rushdie sees the question of the historical Mohammed not simply as a point of inquiry but as a needed point of leverage for opening up a broader sphere of public discourse in Islamic societies. And Rushdie knows that leverage for such an opening of a religiously conservative culture must come not from the outside, but from the inside; not from those hostile to Islam, but from those faithful to it. And Rushdie knows as well that Islamic theologians will argue in varying ways against this or that portrait of the historical Mohammed, and often for good reasons. But the key issue at such an early phase of inquiry isn’t whether an historian “gets it right.” Instead, the central issue is: “You’ve got to stop oppressing” those who would pursue and publish such research.

Who’s in control?
Rushdie’s call for Islamic states to allow studies of the historical Mohammed helps contemporary readers better understand what was really at stake in the development of historical Jesus studies in the Christian West. At stake was not simply historical information about Jesus but the expansion of public discourse and civil society beyond the strict control of the church. The real historic question—at once cultural, political, and theological—that informs the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Quest for the historical Jesus is this:

Do official, established churches have the authority to control and limit public discourse?

Put that directly, the question seems provocative. One might well ask: how could an inquiry about the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth really be about something as different as the control of public discourse? Isn’t it more likely that interest in the historical Jesus developed somewhat innocently as an almost natural response to the development of historical methodology in the eighteenth century? Or, isn’t it more likely that the historical Jesus is just one among the many changing faces of Jesus over the centuries? And, besides, isn’t the history of the quest for the historical Jesus a fairly marginal question in the field of New Testament research? In summary: how can it be that the question of the historical Jesus is itself part of an historic question about the ecclesiastical control of public discourse?

Prominent historical Jesus scholars, from Albert Schweitzer to Martin Kähler to Hans Conzelmann, have all acknowledged that the quest for the historical Jesus has always been about more than knowing the facts, as it were, about Jesus. Each of these three notable scholars have said that the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century quest was a critique aimed at “dogmatism,” or the “dogmatic Christ” of faith. But why would scholars talk about the historical Jesus in order to criticize dogmatism? What would be the point of that criticism? Schweitzer really doesn’t explain his assertion, nor does Kähler or Conzelmann. Perhaps they fail to do so because answering that question takes one afield from New Testament scholarship and theology, narrowly understood, and into the broader cultural and political issues of the time. To answer the question of why there have been quests for the historical Jesus, one must step back to view the broader cultural context in which Jesus emerged as a figure critical of the church and the church’s relationship to a newly emerging worldview and to newly emerging nation states. When one does this, one can see the truly historic dimensions of the Quest itself.

Medieval Background and the Emergence of New Tensions
Although the actual biblical scholarship about the historical Jesus began in the eighteenth century, we need to go much farther back in European history to trace the larger social and political developments in which the Quest was rooted. Medieval legal, and educational, structures were founded on Augustine’s argument that the role of the civil law in the “city of man,” was to make life secure for the citizens of the “city of God.” The civil law and its functionaries, including princes, were to be of service to the Church. The major authority on the art of statecraft in the twelfth century, John of Salisbury, writes in his classic, the 
Policraticus: The Statesman’s Book:

This sword [of justice], then, the prince receives from the hand of the church, although she herself has no sword of blood at all. Nevertheless, she has this sword, but she uses it by the hand of the prince, upon whom she confers the powers of bodily coercion, retaining to herself authority over spiritual things in the person of the pontiffs. The prince is, then, as it were, a minister of the priestly power, and one who exercises that side of the sacred offices which seems unworthy of the hands of the priesthood. (4,3)

And again,

A commonwealth, according to Plutarch, is a certain body which is endowed with life by the benefit of divine favor. . . . Those things which establish and implant in
us the practice of religion and transmit to us the worship of God . . . fill the place of the soul in the body of the commonwealth. And therefore those who preside over the practice of religion should be looked up to and venerated as the soul of the body. For who doubts that the ministers of God are his representatives? Furthermore, since the soul is, as it were, the prince of the body, and has rulership over the whole thereof, so those whom our author calls the prefects of religion preside over the entire body. (5,3)

Salisbury’s analogy of the body’s subordination to the soul was grounded in the Platonic Christianity of the Middle Ages in several ways. For centuries, Christian theologians had taken the Genesis image of humanity created “in the image of God” (Gen. 1:26) to mean that humans were created with a rational soul, capable of governing the passions and senses of the body. In addition, the christology of the Church began with the affirmation of the divine, eternal Word (Logos) of God that took on the condition of humanity in Jesus of Nazareth. Thus, even though the Council of Chalcedon (451 ce) had proclaimed that Jesus was both “fully God” and “fully human,” the Christian Platonism of the Middle Ages argued that the divine nature of the Christ subsumed his human nature. While there is far more that one could add to bring home the point, Salisbury’s arguments that the worldly prince is to be subordinated to the spiritual priest and that the civil law is to be subordinated to the divine law is clearly embedded in Christianity’s teaching on human nature and christology. Writes Salisbury:

“Every censure imposed by law is vain if it does not bear the stamp of the divine law; and a statute or ordinance of the prince is nothing if it is not in conformity with the teaching of the church.” (4,6)

Salisbury’s logic contains yet another assumption, namely, that the “divine law” as promulgated by the teachings of the church, is based in divine revelation, that is to say in “truths” known only to faith, and which, by definition, exceed the grasp of human reason. Precisely because Europe was not only Christianized, but Christianized within a Platonic framework, this theological assumption of the priority of revealed truth was never really challenged. The assumption that civil law must be informed by divine law meant that religious authorities were the effective censors of public discourse, not only with respect to religious discourse per se, but also with respect to any public claim that threatened the established church and its interests, the case of Galileo (1564–1642) being the most famous.

The Middle Ages bequeathed to the early modern period an ideologically unified West, publicly informed by the logic of Christian theology. While there were ongoing tensions between ecclesiastical and civil authorities, the ideology of a unified worldview remained largely intact. Indeed,
Reformation as Fragmentation

Under the aegis of “purification” and “reform,” waves of Christian Reformation brought religious and political fragmentation to Europe. The ensuing religious wars between Catholics and Protestants, followed by bitter disputes between newly emerging Protestant sects—with one church anathematizing another—turned what had been the unifying discourse of Christendom into an increasingly polarized and divisive discourse. Thus, the Reformation created the terms of political and religious anxiety that would help birth a longing for certainty in the modern world. In the wake of profound religious conflict, one finds religious and political leaders grappling with a key question: how could religion, which had been essential to the public and political identity of Europe for a thousand years, continue to shape public and political identities? It seemed, on the one hand, that the power of religious communities needed to be affirmed; after all, the Reformation in its various manifestations had sought to strengthen Christianity. On the other hand, the new situation of violence and vitriol with which Christians denounced one another, to the point of extended armed conflict and persecution, raised profound new anxieties about whether religion was helpful in securing the public welfare. Thus, one of the key questions emerging in the seventeenth century from the spiritual and political devastation resulting from the Reformation was how Christians, with now very differing theologies and commitments, would deal with one another.

There was another major question as well. In the face of profound new political, economic, and technological changes, what kind of public discourse would emerge to fill the vacuum left by the embittered splintering of the Christian ethos? The seventeenth century witnessed surges in economic growth and cultural complexity: the rise of nation-states as cultural bodies with distinct identities; a corresponding expansion of economic activity, not only within these nations, but globally with vast new trading possibilities opened to distant peoples, made possible by improved technology in shipbuilding and the competitive funding of rival states; a vast increase in publishing in vernacular languages; and the rise of intellectual and scientific bodies like England’s Royal Society of London for the Improvement of Natural Knowledge, established in 1660.

The Peace of Westphalia, in 1648, provides a benchmark for observing a number of these historic trends across Europe. The name for the series of treaties which brought an end to the Thirty Years War, the Peace of Westphalia is often credited with establishing the basic international infrastructure of modernity, establishing the principles of sovereignty and political self-determination of nation-states, of legal equality between nation-states, of legally binding treaties between states, and of non-intervention in the internal affairs of other states. In the process, the treaty also gave rise to several new states in Europe by granting independence to the Netherlands from Spain (ending the Eighty Years War), and recognizing the independence of Switzerland. In addition, the treaty ended the legal and political influence of the Holy Roman Empire and its Emperor, Ferdinand III, putting to rest the claim that the Holy Roman Empire should have secular dominion over the whole of Christendom. Most important for our purposes is the fact that the Westphalia pact ratified the 1555 Treaty of Augsburg which had established the principle *cuius regio, eius religio* (“whose realm, his religion”). According to this principle, the religion of a state, or region, would be dictated by the religion of the prince (a formulation which also tacitly acknowledged the facts on the ground in the English Reformation, as of 1534). The Peace of Westphalia also officially recognized Calvinism in addition to Lutheranism and Catholicism.

Jesus against “Altar and Throne”

From even this very brief and partial summary of the treaty, one can see the increasing complexity of political, economic, and social life at work in the seventeenth century. At the heart of that complexity and stress lay religion itself. As the treaty both recognized the profound importance of religion and sought to separate religious communities in the interests of peace, national sovereignty, and commerce, the resulting fragmentation and demonization of one faith against another deepened the felt divide amidst an increasingly dividing and diverse Europe. The treaty’s pragmatic solution created a new problem, namely, that of “official,” or “established,” churches, guided effectively not simply by the head of the church but by the political monarch in charge of the state. The more closely linked
the church and state—the “altar and throne”—became throughout this period, the more but sees only the continued emphasis on divine revelation as the source of the church’s authority over public discourse, but also the emergence of new theological defenses of the “divine right of kings,” which claimed to provide a scriptural defense for the king’s absolute authority over public life.

In the newly created state churches, it was not clear how the official teachings of the state churches would deal with the problem of the individual conscience. What if someone could not affirm the teachings of the state church? Would there be room for religious dissenters? Or would these dissenters be viewed not only as a threat to the official church but as a threat to the monarch? Didn’t the Reformation itself provide a warrant for the free exercise of conscience and for the right of public discourse? How would one balance the felt need for national and religious “identity” with the arguments for the liberty of one’s individual conscience?

For those whose religious views did not concur with the prince or monarch of their region and who became dissenters, several options presented themselves. The Peace of Westphalia itself allowed people three months to pick up their lives and move to a land with a more favorable religious option. Some endured this form of hardship for their faith. Others could affirm the new established religion publicly but privately maintain their former beliefs. Such persons might hold out for the time and place where their faith might become the religious establishment (as was the case, for example, with the Puritans and the Massachusetts Bay colony in the New World). Another option would be found in the newly emerging plurality of religious positions, an option that would look very different from Augsburg and Westphalia. For these voices, both within the established churches and for dissenters as well, the very plurality of religious positions, augmented by an affirmation of the inviolability of the individual conscience, would argue against any one church being elevated to the status of an official, established church.

Roger Williams was an early voice against the idea of established churches. Having been ousted from the Massachusetts Bay Colony for heresy, he wrote to Parliament in 1644 his landmark text, “The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution.” In the text, Williams presents a dialogue between the figures “Truth” and “Peace” in which he argues passionately that the union of religious and civil power actually creates public discord.

All civil states with their officers of justice, in their respective constitutions and administrations, are . . . essentially civil, and therefore not judges, governors, or defenders of the Spiritual, or Christian, State and worship. . . . It is the will and command of God that, since the coming of His Son, the Lord Jesus, a permission of the most Paganish, Jewish, Turkish or anti-Christian consciences and worship be granted to all men, in all nations and countries; and they are only to be fought against with that sword which is only, in Soul matters able to conquer, to wit; the sword of the Spirit—the Word of God. . . . God requireth not an uniformity of religion to be enacted and enforced in any civil state; which enforced uniformity, sooner or later, is the greatest occasion of civil war, ravishing consciences, persecution of Christ Jesus in His servants, and of the hypocrisy and destruction of millions of souls. . . . An enforced uniformity of religion throughout a nation or civil state confounds the civil and religious, denies the principles of Christianity and civility, and that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. 3

By pointing to the diversity of religious positions, and arguing for the priority of the public peace of the whole community, Williams claims that magistrates, who themselves might belong to one sect or another, are not competent in matters of religion. Magistrates should not, therefore, be in a position to rule on true religion versus false religion, or to impose penalties that would imprison, or confiscate property, or banish, or condemn those who in conscience believe differently from the majority, or ruling, faith. In a very interesting argument, Williams claims that religious communities, as diverse social groups themselves, are more like other self-governing corporations within the society, than they are analogous to the society, and its interests, as a whole.

The Church or company of worshippers (whether true or false) is like unto a . . . Corporation, Society or Company . . . in London; which Companies may hold their Courts, keep their Records, hold disputations; and in matters concerning their Societies, may dissent, divide, beake into Schisms and factions, sue and implead each other at the Law, yea wholly break up and dissolve into pieces and nothing, and yet the peace of the City not be in the least measure impaired or disturbed; because the essence or being of the City, and so the well-being and peace thereof is essentially distinct from those particular Societies; the City-Courts, City-Laws, City-punishments distinct from theirs. The City was before them, and stands absolute and intire, when such a Corporation or Society is taken down. 4

In addition to these arguments, which are largely pragmatic ones, drawn from the analysis of social organizations,
Williams claims that the practices that follow the joining of civil and religious authority are antithetical to “Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace.”

That the blood of so many hundred thousand souls of Protestants and Papists, split in the Wars of present and former Ages, for their respective Consciences, is not required nor accepted by Jesus Christ the Prince of Peace. It is, in fact, antithetical, according to Williams, for one to imagine that Jesus Christ would support the kind of persecution, banishment, torture, and death that occurs as part of the accepted regime of state-churches.

Setting Jesus Christ, as the Prince of Peace, against the theory and practice of established churches is a dangerous argument for Williams. After all, does not the voice of the established Church rightly interpret the Scripture? It was just at this point that the Reformers broke open the sealed authority of the Pope to interpret officially the meaning of Scripture. Williams turns to this Protestant principle about the priority and norm of Scripture itself to make his point. Williams grants that his critics can turn to Moses and the prophets to justify their claim to power over the society. But he goes on to argue that one cannot find justification for such a model of civil government in Jesus, who is, after all, the center of Scripture, the very Word of God to a Christian people. That turn to Jesus, by Williams, to argue for civil liberty from established church doctrine is an important piece in the broader story that one needs to hear in order to understand the why of historical Jesus research.

Another important figure is the famous Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius (1583–1645), considered by some to be the founder of modern international law for his works Mare Liberum (Freedom of the High Seas, 1609) and De jure belli ac pacis (Concerning the Law of War and Peace, 1625, definitive ed. 1631). He is also considered by some to be the founder, or major precursor, of Deist thought. To the question of how Europe would find a new framework for public discourse to deal with a rapidly changing world, Grotius provides important direction.

Grotius knew firsthand the serious wounds that religious certainty inflicted on civil society. He was condemned to life in prison in 1618 (following the Synod of Dort, convened by the Dutch political party aligned with “strict” Calvinists) because of his published support of a moderate Calvinist movement of Remonstrants (Dutch followers of Jacobus Arminius) and his arguments on behalf of religious toleration. Grotius escaped in 1621 by hiding himself in a chest, which was then carried out of the prison by friends, and he escaped to France, where his career flourished.

In the introduction to his 1609 Freedom of the High Seas, Grotius makes a move that is fascinating, not for the originality of his turn to God, but for the originality of what he draws from the biblical text. Grotius connects the reality of God as “the founder and ruler of the universe, and especially . . . the father of all mankind” to obligations inherent within the human family.

The law by which our case [the right of the Netherlands to engage in trade with the East Indies] must be decided is not difficult to find, seeing that it is the same among all nations; and it is easy to understand, seeing that it is innate in every individual and implanted in his mind. Moreover, the law to which we appeal is one such as no king ought to deny to his subjects, and one no Christian ought to refuse to a non-Christian. For it is a law derived from nature, the common mother of us all, whose bounty falls on all, and whose sway extends over those who rule nations, and which is held most sacred by those who are most scrupulously just.

But what exactly is the specific law of nature from which Grotius argues that the high seas are the “common property” of all humanity?

I shall base my argument on the following most specific and unimpeachable axiom of the Law of Nations, called a primary rule or first principle, the spirit of which is self-evident and immutable, to wit: Every nation is free to travel to every other nation, and to trade with it. God Himself says this . . . through the voice of nature; and inasmuch as it is not His will to have Nature supply every place with all the necessities of life, He ordains that some nations excel in one art, and others in another. Why is this His will, except it be that He wished
near-record number convened March 13–16 at the Flamingo Resort in Santa Rosa for the Westar Spring Meeting and the inaugural sessions of the Christianity Seminar. Workshops on the need for a Christianity Seminar (Bernard Brandon Scott, Phillips Theological Seminary) and on Magdalene Christianity (Melanie Johnson-DeBaufre, Drew Theological School) launched the project. Friday focused on Elaine Pagels (Princeton University) and her 2012 book, *Revelations: Visions, Prophecy, and Politics in the Book of Revelation*, and fundamental issues about the relationship between the Christian canon and history and about the meaning and impact of apocalyptic thought. Fellows Art Dewey (Xavier University), Glenna Jackson (Otterbein University), and Chris Shea (Ball State University) took part in a panel discussion with Pagels, which was characterized by lively audience participation. Fellow Stephen Patterson (Willamette University) ably interviewed Pagels at an evening session, again marked by alert questions from an absorbed audience.

Saturday’s sessions found the Christianity Seminar geared up to tackle some seminal issues:

- How did Christianity end up as the official religion of the Roman Empire?
- How did the historical Jesus become the second person of the Trinity?
- How did the earliest followers of Jesus self-identify?
- How did a movement birthed in Judaism come to be anti-Jewish?
- Was the biblical canon the necessary outcome of Christianity?

These issues were formulated by the seminar’s Co-Chairs, Brandon Scott and Nina E. Livesey (University of Oklahoma in Norman), and Westar’s Interim Director Lane McGaughy (Willamette University). Although the particular topics of this opening meeting focused on religious and gender diversity in the first century, the discussion also touched on such methodological issues as a need for a revised terminology to identify periods of Christian activity between Jesus and Constantine and a need to place early documents, even misattributed ones, on a timeline.

In what follows, Saturday’s scholars speak to what they would have liked the audience to take away from their presentations:

“The Historical Mary Magdalene and the Question of ‘Magdalene Christianity’” Melanie Johnson-DeBaufre (Drew Theological School)

In my workshop and the readings from Schaberg and King, I provided an overview of the work on Mary Magdalene and some reflections on the idea of “Magdalene Christianity” as a distinct movement in early Christianity.

There are only a handful of New Testament texts that speak of Mary of Magdala, and they agree on the following four things: (1) that she was part of the group around Jesus; (2) that she was present at his crucifixion; (3) that she visited Jesus’ tomb and found it empty; and (4) that she received a vision, either of an angel or of Jesus himself. In one range of non-canonical materials, her story is conflated with stories of Mary of Bethany and stories of unnamed women such as the “sinner” who anoints Jesus’ feet and the woman being stoned because of adultery in John. In the sixth century, Pope Gregory the Great identified Mary as a sinful prostitute whose seven demons (from Luke 8) represent all the deadly sins. Mary’s reputation in the Western imagination as a repentant prostitute is just that: imagination. However, there are signs that a counter-tradition about Mary existed in Antiquity. Across many texts, including several from Nag Hammadi, she is figured as a visionary, a close confidant and companion of Jesus, a star pupil with spiritual insights about the cosmos and the divine, a confident speaker and teacher, and apostle to the apostles. In many of these texts, she is often pitted against Peter for the claim to represent the authentic tradition and teaching of Jesus.

It is difficult to say how much of this portrait of Mary characterized the historical Mary. Schaberg has argued that the gospels’ strong agreement on Mary as having a vision of
Jesus suggests that she herself was one of the visionary leaders of the basileia movement. Whether or not this argument holds, it seems clear that some early Christians claimed Mary Magdalene’s tradition as authoritative in the late first century and beyond. In addition, there is evidence in this period of disputes about the authority of spiritual teachers, and diverse claims to revelation and knowledge, women’s positions in leadership, the place of sex, marriage, and celibacy in the Christian life, and the nature of resurrection.

Viewed in this context, Mary’s tradition seems to have been an important site—although perhaps not clearly the only site—of alternative theologies, community practices, and religious ways of knowing.

Schaberg proposed the term “Magdalene Christianity” as a framework within which to begin to imagine and research a movement or set of movements that continued, from the first to the fourth century and beyond, to exist and create on the basis of wo/men’s insight, revelation, and leadership. In using the name of Mary Magdalene, which appears in the canon only in the Gospels, I am giving a name to something that was unnamed and associating it with the testimony of this specific named woman, testimony understood as central to the resurrection faith and as rooted in Jewish apocalyptic and wisdom traditions (“Magdalene Christianity,” in On the Cutting Edge: The Study of Women in Biblical Worlds [ed. eadem, Alice Bach, and Esther Fuchs; New York: Continuum, 2004], 193).

This broad concept includes several positions that some members of the seminar may not agree with or that have not been sufficiently argued and debated, including the place of apocalyptic in the basileia (kingdom) movement, the origin and approximate dating of the empty tomb stories, and the reconstruction of the community in Corinth.

In the Saturday morning session, I also offered a few questions that Fellows and Associates might consider in the Early Christianity seminar. Feminists, such as Schaberg, D’Angelo, Schüssler Fiorenza, and I myself, have raised questions about the excessive focus on individual figures (including Jesus) when reconstructing ancient groups, as well as about the problem of inquiring after “Jesus and women,” which effectively keeps the focus on Jesus’ attitudes toward women. What happens if we inquire about “men and women” in the basileia movement and early Christianity? Such an approach should also take up issues of masculinity and femininity, family and economic relations, etc., as well as the disputed thesis of egalitarian impulses in the basileia movement, including the difference in methodological approaches to this question.

Regarding the notion of women as catalysts after the death of Jesus, I have an additional question to raise: considering the extensive contestations in first- to third-century texts about women’s positions and behaviors in the communities, and about sex and marriage, and the considerable attention to gender (be it creative transgression or stern reinforcing), and the proportionately larger number of positive figuring of the feminine in so-called gnostic texts, in what sense should we ask whether the subordination and control of women was a catalyst for the emergence of “orthodox” Christianity?

“Women’s Funerary Rituals and Christian Origins,” Kathleen Corley (University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh)

Scriptural proofs and scribal activity are not enough to account for the narrative design of the Passion narratives. Funerals, funerary meals, and women’s laments from the “cult of the dead” provided the context for early storytelling, worship, and Eucharist for the early Jesus movements. Along with the miracle stories, with their themes of burial, women, and meals, the Passion story can easily be shown to have arisen in women’s grassroots storytelling at the oral level, in the context of women’s lamentation for the dead Jesus. Cross-cultural studies of oral laments of women can be used to illuminate the oral core behind the four Passion accounts, whose differences can be accounted for on the basis of differing oral recitations in a women’s lament.

Further, in light of women’s roles in funerals, funerary meals and laments, which began on the third day following the death of an individual and where the dead were invoked and felt, it can be asserted that the pre-Pauline tradition that Jesus was “raised” and “appeared”—in the sense that his presence was felt—can be explained on the basis of women’s funerary practices and laments “on the third day” after death, in this case Jesus’ death. Thus the early attestation to the “raised and appeared” Lord has its roots in a grassroots cult-of-the-dead rituals of women and ordinary people, and not in the experience of an all-male group of scribal elites or apostles. It is the liturgical experiences and practices of women and ordinary people that best explain the “third day” tradition in 1 Corinthians 15.

“Women in the Authentic Letters of Paul,” Nina Livesey

The goal of my paper was to reassess the subject of Paul and women in order to bring greater clarity to this issue. By establishing Paul’s position, we can better assess the later challenges and modifications to it. The conclusion of my paper follows.

While from ancient to modern times, scribes and editors have altered the Greek texts of Paul’s writings and inserted passages aimed at diminishing women, a careful reading of his letters paints a different picture. Paul has a high and equal regard for women. He unapologetically and, one might even say unselfconsciously, refers to women as leaders. According to Paul, many women...
worked to promote the world-transforming message, enacting the same function as he and other male leaders he names. Paul counsels women and men to respect each other’s conjugal rights, with marriage his best advice to both for avoiding the possibility of uncontrolled sexual desire. He remarks that both women and men can be highly influential in the life of their spouses, serving as a positive force to bring them into the community of the Anointed. Contrary to Roman legislation, Paul does not require that single women (or men) become married. Indeed, Paul’s equal treatment of women and men and his recognition of women as leaders of groups was acknowledged quite early in the Christian tradition and likely motivated those who succeeded him to alter Greek manuscripts and insert passages such as 1 Cor 14:33b–36 and 1 Cor 11:3–16, resulting in a mixed and confused picture of Paul on the subject of women.

“Awomen in the Pastoral Epistles” and “From Storytelling to Written Text: The Loss of Early Christian Women’s Voices,” Joanna Dewey (Episcopal Divinity School)

In the two papers I presented, I argued that the Christian manuscript tradition substantially underestimates the participation and leadership of women in early Christianity; further, it tends to minimize and trivialize the women who do make it into the manuscript tradition. The Pastoral Letters (1 and 2 Timothy, Titus) are prescriptive texts instructing people what they should or should not do, and are evidence that the opposite behavior was occurring. Thus we can infer that there were groups of women of all ages living together and engaging in ministry.

“Roman Apocalypticism: Death, Doom, and Delight in the Early Empire,” Chris Shea

With my paper, I hoped to put the discussion of Revelation and other early Christian documents in a broader context, both by including apocalyptic literature of the Greeks and Romans and speculating on the reception of Revelation by Roman non-elites.

“Per Omnia Saecula Saeculorum: Worlds Colliding and Created,” Arthur Dewey

As part of the introductory work on the Christianity Seminar my paper contends that the trajectory of prophecy underpins much of what would eventually be called the origins of Christianity. In my view, the prophetic vein is so much larger than the Jesus traditions alone, as writers in the first two centuries used visions (the imagination) to create or sustain a world.

By considering the prophetic language of Paul, I suggest how to get a hint of the claims, from a number of competing Jewish and Roman voices, that the world was shaking, that visions of the world-to-be were colliding, that people envisioned themselves to be living through the birth throes of a new age. Moreover, the notion of prophetic consciousness allows us to see how Paul can take a stand against the givens of his culture. Further, in Paul’s estimation, the power of prophecy belongs to the entire community (Romans 8). Paul’s voice then becomes one prophetic voice among the choir of prophets who cry out of the heart of the universe.

In contrast, for the author/s of Colossians and Ephesians—letters falsely attributed to Paul—the prophetic period appears to be over. Now the revelation has changed from a prophetic vision to an insight into the divine plan. In one sense Paul and John of Patmos (the author of the Book of Revelation) are on the same page. Both function prophetically. But Paul differs from John of Patmos; Paul was crossing boundaries while John seems to have been reinforcing them. The more relevant contrast with John of Patmos is with the writer/s of Colossians and Ephesians. While Colossians and Ephesians have visions, they are not really prophetic; they are built on the same lingering elements in the last part of first-century world: hierarchy and patriarchy. There is no future breaking in; rather, the future is reserved in the skies.

A major task ahead for the Christianity Seminar is to determine if there are any useful strategies of imagination, any structures of composition and social function, that can be observed and employed in trying to make sense of the developing era, when worlds were colliding or about to collide. Further questions for the seminar include: What deep metaphors do we assume? What new ones do we need to comprehend the data? How does the inspection of prophecy/poetry assist us in this? What models of construction and communication must be envisioned in order to come to grips with this developing complexity?

On Saturday morning a ballot was circulated with the following propositions. (Since the voting choices were Agree, Disagree, and No Opinion and weighted averages were not calculated, the propositions are listed with those receiving the greatest number of Agree votes first.)

1. The ancient Christian manuscript tradition substantially underestimates the participation and leadership of women in early Christianity.

2. The manuscript tradition also tends to minimize and trivialize the roles of women who do make it into the manuscript tradition.

3. The Pastoral Letters are prescriptive texts (instructing people what they should or should not do). As prescriptive texts, we may infer from the Pastoralas that women were often engaging in the behavior that the writings condemn.

4. The prescription that “women are saved through child-bearing” is part of the argument to embed women in
the patriarchal household where they may more easily be controlled.

5. Paul names a woman as an apostle.

6. A major reason for the Pastoral Letters was to condemn oral traditions of active celibate women such as we read about in the Acts of Paul and Thecla.

7. There were groups of women who were living together and doing active Christian ministry.

8. The prominence of Mary Magdalene and other women as witnesses to the crucifixion and initiators of the resurrection faith in the canonical Gospels, the authority of Corinthian women prophets, and extra-canonical texts like the Gospel of Mary imply that Magdalene Christianity was a distinct movement in early Christianity.

9. A major location for early Jesus movements’ gatherings for worship, meals and the Eucharist was the cemetery and tombs, not just the house church.

10. The Pastoral Letters were composed around 125 CE (or later). They are not real letters to real people.

11. Paul exhibits no distinctions between male and female leaders; men and women perform the same types of functions.

12. 1 Corinthians 14:33b–36 is a non-Pauline interpolation.

13. These groups [see #7, above] were sometimes called “widows” but they could include never-married women.

14. The “third day” reference in 1 Corinthians 15 refers to women’s religious practices from the “cult of the dead.”

15. Women were present for the “third day” events and passed on oral traditions about those events and their experience of Jesus’ presence after his death.

16. Women were present and sought out Jesus’ burial site “on the third day” after Jesus’ death.

17. Women experienced Jesus as “raised” and experienced an “appearance” of Jesus the third day after Jesus’ death and memorialized his death with a meal.

18. 1 Corinthians 11:3–16 is a non-Pauline interpolation.

One final comment: many of the topics proposed for the Christianity Seminar were dear to Bob Funk, founder of the Westar Institute/Jesus Seminar. He was very near this week.

Science as Natural Philosophy and as Instrumentality

Modern science has consisted of two distinct endeavors. On the one hand, scientists have attempted to provide a coherent, intelligible account of the universe—i.e., what until the late nineteenth century was called “natural philosophy.” In this respect, modern science is continuous with the efforts by premodern thinkers like Plato and Aristotle to grasp the nature of the cosmos. The natural philosophy associated with the New Science of Galileo, Kepler, and Newton was that of the so-called “clockwork universe,” which postulates a universe consisting of material particles interacting on the basis of deterministic laws of cause and effect. And this natural philosophy was explicitly presented by its adherents, such as Galileo and Descartes, as a superior alternative to the late medieval Christian-Aristotelian natural philosophy that was based on the principle that nature is to be understood in terms of the concepts of function and purpose.

On the other hand, modern scientists have also endeavored to make discoveries and develop techniques that can be utilized to achieve various practical ends. For example, Descartes, who saw the human body as a machine, hoped that the New Science would lead to improvements in human health. This emphasis on the instrumentality of...
science marked a significant break from the philosophical outlook of the ancient world, where Aristotle, for example, drew a sharp distinction between theoretical knowledge, based on universal and necessary truths, on the one hand, and the kind of practical know-how involved in the productive crafts, which was based on contingent truths, on the other hand. Thus, unlike the conception of science operative in the ancient world, science and technology have been thoroughly intertwined in the modern world.

While Descartes and Spinoza argued for the notion of nature as a machine on the basis of philosophical first principles, the instrumental successes of Newtonian physics played a major role during the Enlightenment in convincing people of the essential correctness of the natural philosophy of the clockwork universe. At the same time, this natural philosophy was also appealed to in order to explain and make sense of those instrumental successes. The reasoning here was obviously circular, but the circularity appeared, to most, to be benign.

However, natural philosophy involves a conceptual interpretation of the instrumental successes of scientific research, and there have frequently been sharp disagreements among scientists as to what certain empirical results actually imply for our understanding of the cosmos. For example, Newton himself did not believe that gravitational attraction could be explained in mechanistic terms, and so, in this particular respect, he did not subscribe to the theory of a clockwork universe. Similarly, while Darwin’s Origin of Species provided strong evidence for the fact of evolution, his conclusion that natural selection was the mechanism by which that evolution occurred was far from obvious (Dennett, 1995, 39–42). In this respect, there is always a logical gap between a particular natural philosophy and the successes of the science on which that philosophy depends.

The dispute in the Western world about the relationship between science and religion has focused almost exclusively on science as natural philosophy. Though many subsequent thinkers on the grounds that while we do not explicitly claim that science provides us with an “absolute conception” of the world. In doing so he framed the terms within which so much of the post-Enlightenment discussion of the relationship between religion and science has taken place. On the one hand, he provided a theoretical framework to justify what became the pervasive modern distinction between facts and values. In terms of this distinction, science is concerned with facts, whereas religion, along with morality, is concerned with values; and, on the common understanding of this distinction the two realms are governed by fundamentally different principles. Thus, on this view, there can be no real conflict between science and religion.

On the other hand, Kant also argued that a scientific understanding of the natural world is the product of two distinct factors: our perceptions of the empirical world and the concepts through which we organize and make sense of those perceptions. Kant’s key claim in this regard is that our most fundamental scientific concepts, such as space, time, substance, and causality, are not derived from experience but are brought to experience as organizing principles. Thus, for Kant the idea of grasping the nature of reality as it is, in itself, is an illusion because we always understand the world from within a scheme of interrelated concepts.

Kant did not think that his analysis of scientific knowledge undermined its intellectual authority. On the contrary, he saw himself as providing a solid foundation for that authority that would replace what he regarded as the uncritical dogmatism of thinkers like Descartes and Spinoza. For Kant believed, and claimed to have shown, that the basic principles we bring to experience are universally and necessarily true. Thus, Kant redefined scientific objectivity as intersubjective agreement reached through the application of universally valid rules of thought. In doing so, however, he explicitly limited the scope of scientific knowledge to the public world of objects existing in space and time.

Kant’s idea that scientific knowledge is based on universally and necessarily true principles was attacked by a great many subsequent thinkers on the grounds that while we do bring organizing principles to experience, such principles

Kant on Religion and Science

Immanuel Kant is the key figure in the attempt to limit the scope of scientific knowledge and to discredit the idea that science provides us with an “absolute conception” of the world. In doing so he framed the terms within which so much of the post-Enlightenment discussion of the relationship between religion and science has taken place. On the one hand, he provided a theoretical framework to justify what became the pervasive modern distinction between facts and values. In terms of this distinction, science is concerned with facts, whereas religion, along with morality, is concerned with values; and, on the common understanding of this distinction the two realms are governed by fundamentally different principles. Thus, on this view, there can be no real conflict between science and religion.

On the other hand, Kant also argued that a scientific understanding of the natural world is the product of two distinct factors: our perceptions of the empirical world and the concepts through which we organize and make sense of those perceptions. Kant’s key claim in this regard is that our most fundamental scientific concepts, such as space, time, substance, and causality, are not derived from experience but are brought to experience as organizing principles. Thus, for Kant the idea of grasping the nature of reality as it is, in itself, is an illusion because we always understand the world from within a scheme of interrelated concepts.

Kant did not think that his analysis of scientific knowledge undermined its intellectual authority. On the contrary, he saw himself as providing a solid foundation for that authority that would replace what he regarded as the uncritical dogmatism of thinkers like Descartes and Spinoza. For Kant believed, and claimed to have shown, that the basic principles we bring to experience are universally and necessarily true. Thus, Kant redefined scientific objectivity as intersubjective agreement reached through the application of universally valid rules of thought. In doing so, however, he explicitly limited the scope of scientific knowledge to the public world of objects existing in space and time.

Kant’s idea that scientific knowledge is based on universally and necessarily true principles was attacked by a great many subsequent thinkers on the grounds that while we do bring organizing principles to experience, such principles
are contingent, and have varied over time. Work in the history of science, notably Thomas Kuhn’s groundbreaking study, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (1962), has lent support to this line of criticism, and raised troubling questions for the Enlightenment conception of scientific objectivity and rationality.

**Kuhn on Science**

According to Kuhn, science is what the members of a scientific community do. This seeming tautology captures the fact that a specific scientific discipline, or sub-discipline, such as physics or evolutionary biology, is a community practice whose members are guided by shared beliefs about the nature of the domain under investigation, the questions that may be legitimately asked about items within that domain, and the appropriate methods for answering those questions. This shared body of beliefs, many of which are tacit, guides research within a scientific discipline, and determines what counts as a good scientific explanation. Kuhn referred to the shared body of beliefs and practices that constitute a scientific discipline, or sub-discipline, as a “disciplinary matrix,” and it is one of the things he means by the word “paradigm.”

He also used the word “paradigm” to refer to particular scientific achievements, such as Newton’s *Principia*, in which Newton presented and defended his three laws of motion and the law of gravity, which have become models or exemplars for future scientific research. The two uses of “paradigm” are related, in that a paradigm, in the sense of a disciplinary matrix, is formed on the basis of one or more paradigms in the sense of models or exemplars. Thus, Newton’s laws played a central role in the development of classical physics by serving as the model for future discoveries, such as Maxwell’s laws of electromagnetism.

Kuhn’s conception of a paradigm, in both senses, is a way of focusing attention on the fact that no scientist approaches research with a mind that is a blank slate. In this respect, Kuhn agrees with Kant. A scientist cannot ask and successfully answer a question about an area under investigation unless she knows both what she is looking for and what would count as a good answer to that question. And the results of her research can only become a part of the knowledge of some discipline if it can be fit into the shared matrix that constitutes that discipline.

Following the development of the telescope in the early seventeenth century, which made accurate and detailed observation of planetary motion possible for the first time, astronomers were unable to fit those observations into the framework of the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic geocentric paradigm without recourse to ad hoc, and seemingly arbitrary, modifications of that conceptual framework. This provoked what Kuhn described as a crisis that eventually led to the adoption of the heliocentric cosmology commonly identified with Copernicus. Something similar happened in the early years of the twentieth century when physicists found that the behavior of subatomic particles could not be described and predicted within the framework of Newtonian mechanics. Thus, unlike Kant, Kuhn recognized that the framework of beliefs and practices that scientists bring to phenomena sometimes must be abandoned in favor of a new framework in order to make sense of that phenomena.

Kuhn’s most controversial idea has to do with what might be called the logic, or lack of it, of paradigm change. Kuhn describes the shift by a scientific community from one paradigm, in the sense of a model for representing phenomena, to another as a change in worldview, and likened it to those shifts in perception described in Gestalt psychology, where, to take the much discussed example of the duck-rabbit, a drawing can be seen now as a duck and then as a rabbit, but not as both things at once. Thus, coming to accept the idea that the earth is in orbit around the sun, as opposed to being a stationary body at the center of the universe, is, according to Kuhn, like coming to see the rabbit in the figure of the duck-rabbit where previously one had seen only the duck. In this case, the question, “Is the figure really a duck or a rabbit?” admits of no determinate answer outside of some particular framework that fixes the applications of the terms “duck” and “rabbit.”

According to Kuhn there were no universal criteria shared by the community of seventeenth-century astronomers to which they could appeal to settle the question of whether to adopt the new Copernican paradigm or to retain the older Aristotelian cosmology. This does not imply that the decision by the scientific community to adopt Copernicanism was irrational or arbitrary, but, as Kuhn notes, that collective decision, which was not finalized until well into the eighteenth century, turned on a number of pragmatic factors, including such notions as simplicity and elegance for which there are no universally accepted criteria. In fact, some of the best reasons for adopting the Copernican paradigm, such as the way in which it opened up new areas of research, only became apparent after that paradigm was firmly entrenched within the scientific community.

It must be emphasized that Kuhn had no intention of debunking science. His aim was to provide a sound understanding of scientific inquiry by focusing on the actual practices of scientists. Nonetheless, this focus on practice led to his discrediting a particular ideal, or ideology, of science: the notion that scientific inquiry can yield an account of nature that is free from preconceptions about how nature operates, and what does and does not constitute a good scientific explanation.

Continued on page 26
Lloyd Geering: A Tribute
James Veitch

Born in New Zealand in 1918, Lloyd Geering was educated at the University of Otago and at the Theological Hall, Knox College, in Dunedin. He was unable to continue his studies because of the War and, on graduating in 1942, took up a parish deputising for its minister, who had become a military chaplain.

While in a parish work he completed a Bachelor’s degree in Divinity with distinction in Old Testament Studies from the Melbourne College of Divinity. Following ministry in two further parishes, he was appointed in 1956 Professor of Old Testament Studies at Emmanuel College Brisbane, Australia. Three years later he was elected Professor of Old Testament at the Theological Hall Knox College in Dunedin. He took up the appointment in 1960 along with a lectureship in Hebrew at the University of Otago. In 1963 he became Principal of the Theological Hall.

Between 1965 and 1970 he was involved in debate over theological matters and at one stage, in 1967, was charged with doctrinal error—a charge that was dismissed after a trial and vote at the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church. But the debates had thrust him into the spotlight, and ‘Geering’ became a household name from that time onwards. The debate itself lingered on and, after appearing on a TV program in Brisbane in 1970 in which he repeated views on which he had been earlier cleared, the General Assembly disassociated itself from his views.

Lloyd became Professor of Religious Studies at Victoria University Wellington in 1971, until his retirement in 1984. From 1983 he became lecturer for the St Andrews Trust for the Study of Religion and Society and was for a time honorary minister of St Andrews-on-the-Terrace. The controversy of 1966 and 1967 established him as a public figure.

For many years, he wrote a weekly column for an Auckland newspaper and for a weekly magazine and this kept him in the public eye. He was a regular lecturer for the Trust where his lectures were published. He lectured regularly in New Zealand and Australia, appeared on TV and often spoke on radio. After meeting with Robert Funk in 1995, he soon became a Fellow of the Westar Institute and a holder of its D. F. Strauss Medal. He lectured in the United States with Westar and his main books were published by Polebridge Press.

The controversy which made him a public figure centred around two phrases. First, a quotation from Ronald Gregor Smith, then at Glasgow University, who had written, “So far as historicity is concerned . . . we may freely say that the bones of Jesus lie somewhere in Palestine.” This phrase, quoted approvingly in an Easter article on Resurrection the same year, sparked widespread debate and reaction in and outside the church, which was by no means diminished by the publication of further articles to explain the background to his thinking. This was followed the next year by a second quotation—five words that made front page newspaper headlines from a sermon (based on a verse in Ecclesiastes)—man has no immortal soul (the remainder of the sentence reads, and we are forced to agree that man is an animal).

The row these words sparked was unprecedented in New Zealand history then as of now. But he survived to develop his thinking in ways that have made him New Zealand’s premier progressive Christian religious thinker.

At the age of 93 he is delivering two lecture series, one on Carl Jung and the second, Ethics for the Sexually Perplexed. He is without a peer.

Notes
1. R. G. Smith, Secular Christianity.

Further Reading
Selected titles by L. Geering:
God in the New World (1968)
A Faith Odyssey (2001)
Coming Back to Earth: From Gods, to God, to Gaia (2009)
Such is Life: My Encounter with Ecclesiastes (2010).

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Lloyd Geering: Still Not Guilty
Jarmo Tarkki

The 2007 documentary “The Last Western Heretic” tells the story of Lloyd Geering’s heresy trial in New Zealand in 1967. He was charged with serious “doctrinal errors” and “disturbing the peace and unity of the church.” At the end of the widely publicized trial, the charges were dismissed, no doctrinal error was established, and the case was closed. Geering was eventually knighted and became “Sir Lloyd Geering.”

Traditions must always be questioned and challenged. That is the only way they can develop, grow, and mature. If left unchallenged they will surely die. Heresy trials, as difficult as they are for those involved, are as necessary for religious traditions as recessions are for successful economies. They force traditions to redefine themselves, to side with the times and acknowledge progress, or they can choose to regress and face slow extinction. The fact that there are no more heresy trials is an indication of the increasing irrelevance of the church.

During a recent visit to New Zealand, I had the opportunity to visit Jesus Seminar Fellows Lloyd Geering and his former student Jim Veitch. I noticed that traditional organized churches have failed to evolve with the times as spectacularly there as elsewhere. Churches have become, to use Geering’s words, “societies for the preservation of ancient monuments.”

That sorry situation is not due to a lack of seminars on how to organize a church, or governance problems, or too few young people attending services, or because there are no successful youth programs or childcare. These are all auxiliary condiments. Churches are often fully accessorized with every conceivable gimmick, and new ones are introduced with liturgical regularity and zeal whenever people become disillusioned with the previous ones. In reality, the biggest challenge to churches is that they have neglected to talk about a credible Jesus and have been preoccupied with the incredible Christ. In other words, the problem is with the message itself. In the so-called developed world, people simply do not believe anymore, at least not in the numbers they used to.

Lloyd Geering is among those scholars who have dedicated themselves to explaining a better way to see the old tradition. The roots even in the truly reformed church must be deep within the tradition so that it is securely anchored and can withstand the inevitable storms. Geering has remained in the church, is actively participating even now, at the age of 95. So what is the vision that Geering is offering us?

God
In his book Christianity Without God, Geering asked the most important question: “Could Christianity continue to exist without belief in God?” His answer is affirmative, at least as far as traditional theism is concerned. This means the rejection of God understood as a person, a self-conscious being. Traditional theism makes God an image of humans, not the other way around. For some, medieval philosophers and in recent times theologians such as Paul Tillich, God is not a being among many other beings, but being-itself. For Geering, God is neither a being nor being-itself; God is beyond being. God is undefinable just as “x” is in mathematics until we give it some meaning. Therefore, it makes no sense to ask if “x” exists, nor to ask if God exists—unless we define the undefinable, the ineffable.

Geering liberates the term “God” from personhood and defines it as a symbolic term that refers to all that is greatest and highest in the values that motivate us. Those values are truth, justice, love, and compassion, which are all attributes of God; for Geering, they are God. This is not a descriptive definition (for example, God is a superhuman person that has power over nature and human fortunes), but a functional definition. In other words, Geering argues that we should define the term “God,” not by analyzing what God is like (as if we could somehow understand an infinite divine nature), but by analyzing how the term actually functions in our speech. Geering’s God is thus non-theistic, not a person or being, but beyond being, a name for our highest values. In philosophical terms, then, Geering is a non-realist.

Geering has come to this conclusion partly because he cannot identify a rational purpose to the universe, and therefore cannot believe that it was created by a rational mind. However, I see two problems in this reasoning. First,
could a rational mind not have chosen to create an irrational world without any particular purpose? There is no necessary reason why a rational mind with a sense of humor could not have created this, at times astronomically insane, world that also contains equally astonishing beauty and goodness mixed in with spectacular mediocrity. Secondly, the fact that Geering cannot find rational purpose in the world—and I am still looking for it as well—does not mean that there is none. This seems to me to be a weak argument. Perhaps a more plausible way to express Geering’s skepticism would be to challenge the assumptions of traditional theism by using Occam’s razor (that is, by deleting all unnecessary assumptions). There is no necessary logical reason why we should deduce from the fact that there is something rather than nothing (the creation, if you like) that we need to imagine a maker of that something (a creator of any kind). Why is there a world at all? Geering maintains that things do seem to happen arbitrarily and by accident, so why not the entire universe as a whole?

“The Geering Affair”
The events that led to the famous “Geering Affair,” the public heresy trial in 1967, began seemingly innocently. In the fall of 1965, the editor of Outlook, the Presbyterian weekly of New Zealand, asked Geering to write an article for Reformation Sunday. Inspired by John A.T. Robinson’s The New Reformation, Geering asked, “Is the Christian faith inextricably bound up with the worldview of ancient mankind, which has now been superseded, or can the substance of it be translated into the worldview of twentieth-century mankind?” For people in the twentieth century, the ancient distinction between the natural and supernatural world had become a thing of the past. If the church continued to ignore this it would inevitably diminish its influence and relevance in the modern world.

Geering’s article also explicitly rejected fundamentalism, whose proponents Geering considers to suffer from stunted intellectual growth. The article did not go unnoticed. While some hailed it as a “word of God for our age,” others condemned it with equal passion. Reverend Bob Blaikie, one of the main accusers in the heresy trial, stated in a written response that Geering’s reformation is “the religious road to atheism” and would lead to a debate “between the church of God and the church of the antichrist.”

In January of 1966 the editor of Outlook invited Geering to write an article for the Easter edition. Geering had just read Ronald Gregor Smith’s book Secular Christianity, from which he took the focal point for his article:

... we may freely say that the bones of Jesus lie somewhere in Palestine. Christian faith is not destroyed by this admission. On the contrary only now, when this has been said, are we in a position to ask about the meaning of the resurrection as an integral part of the message concerning Jesus.

The editor of Outlook was hesitant to publish such a radical article for fear of disharmony and controversy. Nonetheless, the article was published. The reaction was not entirely unexpected, as had been the case with the earlier Reformation article, but the intensity of the reaction was surprising. Whereas scholars had by then, in the 1960s, discussed this topic and taught it in the seminars for at least a century if not longer, the message had not reached the back pews in churches (those are the crowded ones, at least in the Lutheran church). Pastors were and still are afraid to disturb the peace and harmony of the church and simply choose to resort to therapeutic truth-telling at the expense of telling about the latest results in theological and biblical scholarship. This is unfortunate and scandalous: in any other discipline not updating your views would be considered professional incompetence, but for parish pastors updating your views is a liability and can even get you fired.

In the article Geering pointed out that the issue is not about Jesus’ resurrection, whether or not it really happened, but what meaning belief in the resurrection might have for us today. It was not a resuscitation of a body, nor was it regarded as a historical event in the same way as the crucifixion. The story of the empty tomb, he said, is a pious legend. These stories implied the continued influence of Jesus after his death, not physical resurrection. The central issue in the ensuing controversy was what exactly we mean by “resurrection from the dead.”

While these views were not new to literate pastors and laypersons, many regarded them as beyond the bounds of Christianity. The moderator of the Presbyterian Maori Synod stated that, if the Assembly did not accept the bodily resurrection of Christ, he wanted to become a savage again. Many others said if Geering’s views were not repudiated that they would leave the church. Bob Wardlaw, a layman and one of Geering’s main accusers, did leave and founded his own church. Geering received hundreds of letters, both for and against, as well as some death threats, presumably from Bible believing church members.

While Geering was cleared of heresy during the trial, the controversy brought into bold relief the difference between what Geering calls “fixed beliefs Christianity” and what I would describe as dynamic Christianity:

I saw Christianity as a living and ever-changing path of faith being trodden by successive generations of Christians who, while drawing inspiration from their predecessors, took up the challenge to express that faith in terms relevant to the culture and age in which they lived.

Lloyd Geering has been greatly influenced by the writings of Paul Tillich and particularly Pierre Teilhard de
Chardin. Like Teilhard, Geering sees the world as an ever-changing place, in which evolutionary processes operate not only in nature but in cultures and religion as well. The working title of his upcoming new book reflects this: *From Big Bang to God.*

**Happy 70th ordination anniversary to Sir Lloyd.**

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**Why the First Quest for the Historical Jesus?**

human friendships to be engendered by mutual needs and resources, lest individuals deeming themselves entirely sufficient unto themselves should for that very reason be rendered unsociable.7

It is from this “decree of divine justice,” inferable from nature, that Grotius argues his case that Spain and Portugal cannot deprive the Netherlands of its natural right to trade with the peoples of the East Indies.

While contemporary readers may find it odd that an argument about a trade dispute would begin with a discussion of God and the laws of nature, Grotius’ text helps us realize at least three things about the cultural world of seventeenth-century Europe: (1) that there was no established international forum for bringing such disputes, (2) that religious language was still very much a language of diplomacy and political power, and (3) that God, as the ground of Truth and fount of all human reason, was the most basic common assumption from which to build an argument about the relations between peoples and states.

Yet more interesting is that while Grotius implicitly affirms the reality of “Christendom,” his God is not particularly Christian. He avoids speaking in Trinitarian terms, and he avoids speaking of the Christ. He does not deny these formulations; indeed, Grotius was a well-respected Christian theologian. But with respect to public discourse, Grotius realized that particular Christian claims were no longer effective in achieving persuasion across competing religious groups. Instead, Grotius affirms a God who is the father of all mankind, and whose rules, accessible to reason, must be followed by Christian and non-Christian alike.

Grotius insists that the divine natural law, accessible to all persons by virtue of reason, applies to nations as well as persons. Moreover, from that divine natural law one can discern the most fundamental moral responsibilities of nations toward one another. Thus, the realm of international relations, while obligated to attend to natural law, is not obligated to one particular faith. Within this broader logic, Grotius affirmed that nations should insist upon belief in God, but tolerate all other differences, including Jews and Muslims.

While the institution of official, or established churches was clearly a political development, one needs to recognize that established churches also justified their existence as official churches *theologically.* While Lutherans and Calvinists...
Garry Wills opens this book with the question: “Why did the priesthood come into a religion that began without it?” (1). The only church “offices” named in the New Testament are servants, elders, and overseers (or, to use their traditional Greek-derived names: deacons, presbyters, and bishops). No followers of Jesus in the New Testament, including the apostles, are called “priests.” Catholicism cheats on this inconvenient truth by (mis)using “presbyter” as a synonym for “priest,” but there is no biblical evidence that presbyters/elders led worship, much less offered sacrifice, which was the only meaning of “priest” in Antiquity.

Though there were many charisms of service in the early Jesus movement—many functions, some inchoate offices—there were no priests and no priestly services; no male presiders at the agape meal, no re-enactment of Jesus’ Last Supper, no “sacrifice of the Mass,” no consecrations of bread and wine; nothing that resembled what priests now claim to do. (17)

Wills describes the figure of the priest—later in history when the office had fully developed—as a man whose holiness derived, not from his conspicuous virtue or wisdom, but from his power to change bread into the body of Christ, and his consequent monopoly on touching the consecrated Host. Wills reminds us of the reverence bordering on awe with which priests were (supposed to be) regarded by laypeople. He also describes the Host worship at the heart of Catholic ritual expressing the belief that the Host is the literal physical presence of Christ.

Wills devotes fifty pages to a careful study of the Letter to Hebrews, the only New Testament writing to call Jesus a priest. This anonymous text (falsely attributed to Paul) presents a complicated argument, dense with difficult interpretations of Old Testament passages. Wills deftly walks the reader through the outline of this daunting text, analyzes its argument that Jesus is a new high priest (offering himself in human sacrifice), and—what is most interesting—exposes numerous fallacies in the Letter’s reasoning about Melchizedek, the mysterious priest (of a Canaanite god, as it turns out) in Genesis whose priesthood Jesus allegedly inherits.

Wills argues that it was the Letter to Hebrews that introduced the concept of a Christian priesthood into a religion that was ridiculed by its detractors precisely because it had no priests. There are two ironies here. The first is that Jesus was a layman, not a priest, and his teachings presuppose that humans have direct access to God’s grace and mercy without priestly mediation. The second irony is that in the Letter’s extensive argument that Jesus is the new high priest it nowhere makes provision for a continuing institution for Christian men to be priests. “In fact, it says the opposite. Jesus is the last priest, whose one time offering makes all the other priesthoods obsolete” (142).
Since the belief that Jesus was the high priest offering blood sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins became the template for the orthodox Christian doctrines about redemption, the Mass, and the priesthood, Wills gives us insightful chapters on human sacrifice (“Given the revulsion which human sacrifice generally inspired, one has to wonder why the Letter to Hebrews praises it so” [163]), atonement theories, and the various explanations of why Christ had to die.

In Catholicism only the clergy can administer the seven sacraments (though in emergencies a layperson may baptize). Wills dissects each of them in “Monopoly on the Sacred.” Although Catholic doctrine defines a sacrament as a ritual “instituted by Christ,” Wills demonstrates that only baptism is clearly in the New Testament, and that the Lord’s suppers in the Bible were nothing at all like the later sacrament of the Eucharist (nor were the early eucharistic meals described by the first-century Didache). For the other five sacraments (confirmation, penance, matrimony, ordination, and extreme unction), Wills easily shows that the attempts to tie them to New Testament passages are thoroughly unpersuasive. Contradicting Catholic tradition—or, more precisely, Catholic mythology—Wills argues that the Last Supper stories show Jesus neither instituting the Eucharist nor ordaining the apostles to the priesthood.

Wills’ book is basically historical and, like all good historians, Wills speaks to the concerns of his contemporaries. “Some think that the dwindling number of priests can be remedied by the addition of women priests, or married priests, or openly gay priests. In fact, the real solution is: no priests” (2). Given Wills’ thorough demolition of the ecclesial need for and theological legitimacy of the Catholic priesthood, some readers might assume that Wills writes with anger or resentment. However, the book is dispassionate and free of rancor. Wills remains a practicing Catholic who professes to feel at home in his church, and tells us why in his closing chapter. The very first words in the book are: “I have nothing against priests.” In his conclusion he explains that he wrote to assure my fellow Catholics that, as priests shrink in numbers . . . congregations do not have to feel they have lost all connection with the sacred just because the role of priests in their lives is contracting. If Peter and Paul had no need of priests to love and serve God, neither do we. (256)

This book is not an easy read. It is erudite and packed with information and concise argumentation. The book’s outline is hard to discern; it seems more like a collection of essays on subjects variously related to the main topic. A major disappointment is the lack of a historical treatment of the origin and development of the Christian priesthood. Remember the opening question: “Why did the priesthood come into a religion that began without it?” (1). It’s too bad that Wills doesn’t answer that question that forms the book’s title. Still, the abundance that the book offers is well worth the effort it takes to read it.

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Awkward Openings Continued from page 2

both in the present and in the past, also perpetrated such “breaking and entering,” Jesus of Nazareth, for example, very much embodies this in his parabolic dyslexia. In fact, if we continue to make frequent and disquieting crossings, we shall find ourselves in a most interesting predicament. We shall become “maladjusted,” as Martin Luther King, Jr. in an early speech on non-violence challenged his listeners to become:

I call upon you to be as maladjusted as Amos who in the midst of the injustices of his day cried out in words that echo across the generation, “Let judgment run down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.” As maladjusted as Abraham Lincoln who had the vision to see that this nation could not exist half slave and half free. As maladjusted as Jefferson, who in the midst of an age amazingly adjusted to slavery could cry out, “All men are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights and that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” As maladjusted as Jesus of Nazareth who dreamed a dream of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. God grant that we will be so maladjusted that we will be able to go out and change our world and our civilization.1

Note

Members Alert!

Do you read religion blogs?
Do have favorites?
If so, email links to your favorite blogs to fourthr@westarinstitute.org and tell us (in just a few words) why you would recommend them. Thanks!
Looking for a good beach read for the summer? You cannot do better than this classic Roman novel of the second century CE. And, if anyone asks if that is a prurient novel you are reading, you can take on a highbrow tone and tell them you are doing research on the world of the New Testament. The irony is, you really are! And having a rollicking good read at the same time.

Have you ever wondered what kind of adventures you might have, if, through a mistaken use of a powerful magic potion, you were turned into an ass and had to roam the ancient Roman countryside with the body of an ass and the mind of an overly curious and impetuous young man? Of course you have! Well, wonder no longer, for that is the story Apuleius tells here, and in so doing, he wrote not only the first Latin novel to survive in its entirety but also a classic that still reads well—that is, it reads well if it is translated well.

The occasion for this review is the publication of a new translation that is the first to catch the tone of the original in an appropriate English style. The translator explains her method in the preface by pointing out how, in searching for an English style to match the butchered Latin of a Roman soldier in the story, she found what she was looking for in the writings of Damon Runyon. She has us with the opening of the novel: “Who the heck am I, you’d like to know?” From that point on, we are seeing the world through the eyes of an ancient Roman youth/ass whose adventures and point-of-view can remind modern readers of an ancient Huckleberry Finn, with a bit more sauciness and sex.

But now to the serious part—you cannot read this novel without learning more about the ancient people from whom early Christian groups took their members (no pun intended). Let me give you a hint—they were not Christians—not in the way we think of Christians today. Such “Christians” had not yet been invented. Here you will also learn interesting details about the day-to-day life and attitudes of regular people of the time. Finally, to keep your serious side fully engaged, keep in mind the big payoff at the end of the novel, where our author resolves the plot (spoiler alert) when the youth/ass has a religious encounter with the goddess Isis. This section of the story is told with such convincing detail that we still consider it to be the most authentic first-person account of a religious experience to emerge from the ancient world.

It is not often that one can recommend a “serious” read that is both entertaining and titillating at the same time, but this is such a book. I don’t know about you, but I can hardly wait to get to the beach.
The New Atheism and the Enlightenment

Conclusions and Prospects

Let me step back and summarize the discussion thus far. The atheism of the Radical Enlightenment was the product of an ideology that saw science as uniquely authoritative because it provided an accurate account of nature untainted by human subjectivity. This ideology was seemingly vindicated by the successes of Newtonian physics, which was commonly interpreted as showing that the physical universe is a machine whose actions are governed by deterministic laws of cause and effect. The supporters of the Radical Enlightenment pushed this view to its logical conclusion by arguing that the entire universe is subject to the same causal laws as are physical bodies, and that nothing exists apart from this universe. Thus, they left no logical space for a transcendent God and an associated morality.

The ideology of the Radical Enlightenment was itself the product of philosophical theorizing that has in large measure been discredited by what has happened in both the sciences and in the discipline of philosophy. For example, the equations of Quantum Mechanics yield very precise predictions that have been confirmed repeatedly. However, exactly what these successes tell us about the underlying nature of reality is still a matter of considerable controversy among theoretical physicists. And in philosophy the whole notion of discovering “the underlying nature of reality” has itself become suspect for a variety of very good reasons.

However, it would be a mistake to conclude that the case for atheism collapses with the demise of the ideology of the Radical Enlightenment. Let me illustrate this with an analogy. One of the major legacies of the Enlightenment as a whole is the idea of universal human rights. This idea has become constitutive of modern liberal democracies, but few contemporary political theorists have attempted to justify it solely in terms of Enlightenment-era philosophy. Similarly, the Radical Enlightenment idea that modern science undermines belief in God still makes a great deal of sense even when the original philosophical foundations of that idea have been abandoned. In the second part of this two-part series I will discuss some of the arguments of the New Atheists that illustrate this point.

Notes

3. Bernard Williams has described this project as the attempt to achieve an “absolute conception of the world” (1978).
4. This is the thesis of Peter Dear’s *The Intelligibility of Nature* (2007).
5. A contemporary example of science as natural philosophy can be found in Stephen Hawking’s *A Brief History of Time* (1990), and in Brian Greene’s books whose titles—*The Elegant Universe* (2000), *The Fabric of the

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A loyal supporter has announced a dollar-for-dollar match for all gifts received between the 2013 and 2014 Spring Meetings up to a total of $80,000 resulting in $160,000 for Westar.

This match celebrates the merger of Westar and Polebridge, and pays tribute to scholars lost in recent years who made important contributions to Westar, including Dick Arthur, Ed Beutner, Marvin Meyer, Daryl Schmidt, and Walter Wink.

When successfully completed, this match will retire debt and propel Westar and Polebridge forward in continued dedication to the cause of religious literacy and the dreams of founder Bob Funk.
**Westar mourns loss of Richard Arthur**
The Rev. Dr. Richard Laurence Arthur of Merrimack, NH, died on February 27 following heart surgery at Massachusetts General Hospital. He was 83.

An ordained minister in the United Church of Christ with a Th.D. from Graduate Theological Union and an S.T.B. from Harvard, Arthur joined the faculty of the Unification Theological Seminary in New York in 1988. He remained there as Associate Professor of New Testament Studies until his retirement in 2011. Though he had a wide range of interests, one that especially engaged his heart and mind was the Jesus Seminar. He enjoyed the rich theological discussions with Westar colleagues and did all that he could to encourage the Seminar to convene an annual meeting in the New York area. He thought it was important that UTS students have the opportunity to attend a Jesus Seminar program as part of their theological education. According to the UTS website, no one was prouder than Dick Arthur when, in 2004, he walked into the opening session of the Westar meeting at the Marriott on Times Square followed by his UTS students.

Dick is survived by Rose Arthur, his wife of 42 years who also has a Doctorate of Theology. Together they served as missionaries and teachers for the UCC in the United States and American Samoa early in their careers.

He will be greatly missed.

**Challenge gift sparks Spring banquet**
Westar’s Spring meeting concluded with a bang. As Art Dewey was striking the final conference notes, longtime Westar supporters sent a message to the podium offering an $80,000 dollar-for-dollar challenge to pay Westar’s debts. This consists largely of debts that came with the recently-concluded acquisition of Polebridge Press that were subsequently consolidated into one loan by Glenn Downing of the Board of Directors. The donors’ $80,000 challenge will retire the debt, and the $80,000 to be raised in matching gifts will be used primarily to fund new research and publication projects. The donors, who choose to remain anonymous, also intend the gift to pay tribute to scholars who played an integral role in Westar’s groundbreaking work and have died in the last seven years—Dick Arthur, Ed Beutner, Marvin Meyer, Daryl Schmidt and Walter Wink. The matching period began with the Spring meeting and will end with the 2014 Spring meeting.

**Westar to return to Santa Rosa in Fall 2013**
A many of you may recall, in *The Fourth R* 25-5 we reported that, in the hopes of attracting more scholars to future seminars, the Westar Board of Directors had voted to experiment with linking Westar’s Fall meeting to the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature. In Fall 2012, Westar met jointly with the SBL in Chicago. Because of logistical problems, that did not work well for us. So planners at the SBL and Westar began exploring different ways of collaborating in Baltimore in 2013. In the end, we ran out of time to work out all of the difficulties. As a consequence, the Westar Board voted to meet separately: In Fall 2013, Westar will return to the Flamingo Hotel in Santa Rosa. The dates are October 23–26, 2013. Mark your calendars!

In Fall 2014, the SBL meeting moves to San Diego. The leadership of both the SBL and Westar hope to find a workable model for cooperation by then. The challenges are great because the meetings are very differently conceived, but we are cautiously optimistic. We’ll keep you posted.

**Report from the 2013 Spring Meeting**
More than 330 members and friends convened at the Flamingo Conference Resort in Santa Rosa for the 2013 Westar Spring Meeting, March 13–16. On the agenda: the inaugural sessions of the Christianity Seminar, and workshops on Magdalene Christianity, on the Underground Church, the need for a Christianity Seminar, as well as a celebration with Elaine Pagels of her recent book, *Revelations: Visions, Prophecy, and Politics in the Book of Revelation*.

Well-attended workshops on Wednesday and Thursday featured: Melanie Johnson-DeBaufre (Drew Theological School), author of *Jesus among Her Children* and *Mary Magdalene Understood* (with Jane Schaberg), whose presentation on Magdalene Christianity in the workshop and in Saturday’s seminar session, sparked lively discussion; Robin Meyers (Oklahoma City University), professor of philosophy, columnist, NPR commentator, and Senior Minister of the Congregational UCC Church of Oklahoma City, who asked, what if churches today became, once again, an underground movement, taking on the power structures of our times; and Brandon Scott (Phillips Theological Seminary), who introduced an absorbed audience to the central questions of the Christianity Seminar.

On Wednesday and Thursday afternoons Polebridge Press publisher Larry Alexander offered attendees the opportunity to meet the with authors and contributors to new Polebridge books: on Wednesday, Nigel Leaves, the author of several popular Polebridge Press books and contributor to two recent titles, *Why Weren’t We Told* and *The Once and Future Scriptures*, questioned the future of the Church. Leaves, the Canon of St. John’s Anglican Cathedral in Brisbane, Australia, teaches at St Francis Theological College and Charles Sturt University.
At Thursday's session, longtime Westar Fellow Joseph Bessler, the Robert Travis Peake Associate Professor of Theology at the Phillips Theological Seminary, spoke about his new book, *A Scandalous Jesus: How Three Historic Quests Changed Theology for the Better*, which is sure to shake up some thinking. David Galston, author of *Embracing the Human Jesus: A Wisdom Path for Contemporary Christianity*, envisioned a place for the historical Jesus in contemporary culture.

On Friday, Westar was delighted to welcome back an old friend and Fellow, Elaine Pagels, the Harrington Spear Paine Foundation Professor of Religion at Princeton University. Pagels' new book, *Revelations*, was the subject of a daylong study, beginning with a keynote lecture (hosted by L. Michael White of the University of Texas) and followed by a panel discussion (with Art Dewey, Xavier University, Glenna Jackson, Otterbein College, and Chris Shea, Ball State University). Both sessions were enriched by the audience’s well-informed and engaging observations.

In the evening, following a new Westar tradition, Fellow Stephen Patterson (the George H. Atkinson Professor of Religious and Ethical Studies at Willamette University) interviewed Pagels. Patterson skillfully elicited from Pagels her history with the Grateful Dead, the Martha Graham School, Haight-Ashbury, and the MacArthur “Genius” Fellowship, as well as the remarkable saga of her scholarly questing. Another spirited interaction with the audience rounded out the evening.

The big news of the Meeting was the inauguration of a new five-year project, the Christianity Seminar. In collaboration with Westar’s Interim Director Lane McGaughy (Willamette University), the seminar’s Co-Chairs Nina Livesey (University of Oklahoma) and Brandon Scott, drafted an inspiring mission and goals proposition (see Livesey’s article in *The Fourth R*, 26-1). They identified some of the questions to be undertaken by the seminar:

- How did Christianity end up as the official religion of the Roman Empire?
- How did the historical Jesus become the second person of the Trinity?
- How did the earliest followers of Jesus self-identify?
- How did a movement birthed in Judaism come to be anti-Jewish?
- Was the canon the necessary outcome of Christianity?

But others quickly added to the original list. In a key email discussion, for example, Elli Elliott and Melanie Johnson-DeBaufre reminded us that terminology, periodization, categories, and framing of the issues were to be kept to the fore.

For a report on the results of the Christianity Seminar, see p. 13 of this issue.

At the Saturday evening banquet, emceed by Art Dewey, diners were treated to several musical numbers sung by Suzanne Hollrah, an Associate from Solvang, California. She was accompanied—with very little time for rehearsal!—by Harold Julander, an Associate who doubles as a master church organist. A chorus of fine voices among the banqueters chimed in on “(There’ll be Bluebirds over) The White Cliffs of Dover.”

Lane McGaughy and Bronson Davis (Westar Board Chair) spoke eloquently about Westar and its mission. Banquet goers greeted with excited enthusiasm the announcement that, during the course of the meal, anonymous donors in the crowd had pledged a dollar-for-dollar matching gift of $80,000 (see story). The evening ended with another chapter of the biography of Westar founder Robert W. Funk, currently in the works. Author Andrew Scrimgeour (Drew University) read movingly of Bob’s Hoosier boyhood.

Westar website update
The new site makes it easier than ever to:

- Shop Polebridge Press
- Register for an event
- Renew your membership
- Make a donation
- Browse 25+ years of Westar scholarship

Westar Associates and Fellows can get a 20% discount on Polebridge Press materials in the online Store by entering Funky20 in the coupon code box during checkout.

We have plans to expand and improve the site, so we’ll keep you informed of new features and functionality as they become available.

Westar discontinues toll-free number
Westar has discontinued its toll-free telephone number. It was rarely used, and we decided that resource would be better used for digital communications, including our new website and enhanced email capabilities. You can, however, still reach us by phone at (503) 375-5323, Monday through Friday between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. PT.
Chris Shea fell in love with the Classics when she walked into Latin class on her first day of high school at Lyons Township in the western suburbs of Chicago. Her senior picture in the yearbook bears the caption, “Wants to be a classics professor.”

In the fourth grade Chris determined teaching was her destiny. The level she would teach progressed as she moved towards high school where she made the leap to wanting to be that classics professor. Teaching was in her blood. The oldest of nine children, she comes from a large family and has eighty first cousins. Many are teachers, principals, and professors.

She both began and completed her studies at the University of Illinois, gaining her bachelor’s, master’s and Ph.D. there. Chris might have considered varying her course, but her mother died when her youngest sister was nine and, with her father, she became the guardian of her younger brothers and sisters. He subsequently moved the family to Kankakee, just an hour up the road from Urbana and the University of Illinois.

The path to a professorship involved nine years as a teaching assistant at the University of Illinois, combined with four years teaching Latin at University High School in Urbana. Because it was so difficult to get jobs in the Classics, she and her fellow grad students would joke that someone would have to die or kill his wife (most tenured professors were men) for one of them to get a tenure-track job. Chris’ opportunity came at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana when her predecessor did, in fact, kill his wife!

The year was 1984, which was anything but unlucky. Nearly thirty years later she is a full honors professor, who has served as department chair and Chair of the University Senate. She is an expert in the culture of the Roman Empire in the first century and has published widely on Homer, the Arthurian saga, Latin love poetry, and American popular religion.

American popular religion? As an undergraduate Chris was desperately trying to find an upper-level Greek or Latin class to complete her requirements. Noted New Testament scholar and Westar Fellow Vernon Robbins had a joint appointment in Classics, and his course on Mark counted toward the requirement. “I took the class and thought Religious Studies had quite a lot to say to Classics, and that Classics had quite a lot to say to Religious Studies.”

At a conference where she was hiring Classics faculty for Ball State, she ran into Vernon Robbins who was also recruiting Classics faculty, but, in his case, for Emory University. “We had coffee, and I started talking about a class I was teaching called The Great American Myth. He thought that was right up Bob Funk’s alley and he proposed me as a Fellow. My first meeting was in 1985 so I was there almost at the beginning.”

Chris has been involved in nearly every Westar meeting since then, and she served a four-year term on the Board of Directors. In the initial meeting of the Christianity Seminar at the Spring meeting in Santa Rosa, she presented a paper speculating on the ordinary Roman’s view of the Book of Revelation. She plans to propose as her next project a study of the dating of p52 (the scrap of papyrus containing bits of the Fourth Gospel), which has been important to the dating of the early Christian documents.

“Since my doctoral work particularly involved the later years of the Roman Republic and early years of the Empire, the discussions at Westar have always been of special interest to me. As a Humanities professor I could have hung out by myself in libraries, mining for nuggets of scholarly gold and communing only with the minds of the long dead—all the Westar Fellows do that kind of scholarship during some part of the year. But, in the modern world, the big picture of the religious/philosophical life of the Roman Empire is an impossibly large subject, more than any one person can really control. Therefore, our pooling of information twice a year—and my Westar colleagues are amazingly generous with their information—lets us work with some confidence on big topics—at last.

“I truly believe—and I think Bob Funk did as well—that our ‘hive brain’ makes possible a turn of the kaleidoscope; it rattles our thinking and lets us look at research problems in creatively skewed ways. I also believe—with Bob Funk—that the results of our research have to be released from the ivory tower. And, to be sure, it’s also remarkably stimulating to watch our work percolate through a well-informed and patient ‘lay’ audience. Associates have given me many insights—thank you!

“On the emotional level, I’ll also say that I—well—love our wonderful group. If the Westar Fellows wanted to study the Philadelphia phone book, I’d be in.”
Jesus Seminar on the Road Spring 2013
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