

Clayton Crockett, Professor and Director of the Religious Studies Program at the University of Central Arkansas and the second interlocutor in the afternoon session, pointed out that the treatment of nature as a resource to be exploited allows for the dominant collective to treat minorities in the same way. He referred to the concept of “animality” in Derrida (rooted in Heidegger): “all sovereignty shatters against death.” Jay responded that what was at stake in the French colonial imperial project was to cut people into a pattern ... it is the same thing taking place today in the settler movement. It is the wild that has to be enclosed—the power of landscaping the mind. That is the only way for sovereignty to maintain control. But, he asked, what if nature is not an integral unity but entangled? Then we are not living in a closed society but in an open system. That changes everything.

Ken Bray offered the metaphor of WonderBread: to make it digestible, it has to be refined to the point where all blackness is removed. The attraction is the expulsion of color. Thus, the only redemption in our relentless use of resources is compost, which is the only way for waste to become generative. Jay responded that the white sovereign collective would do well to draw on some of these generative metaphors, because many now realize that a “feeding frenzy” is self-defeating when resources are finite. It is also the only way for blackness to become an integral part of the new future. We might have a new opportunity ahead of us for a creative new future, but only if we banish the concept of sovereignty from our theological vocabulary.

The afternoon began to wind down with Joe Bessler’s pointing out that the political aspects of these discussions can’t be overlooked, implying that these themes must be retained in future discussions. Others commented that in spite of our several books and publications, the work of the God Seminar remains unintelligible to the general public, even to the seminaries. The challenge remains for us to define a comprehensible “public post-theology,” even when

truth has become an elusive concept in the national political discourse.

Art Dewey pointed out that few people in the national debate even take data seriously, so when the “absolute” is banished from discourse, it is hard to make any lasting impact on the public consciousness. What we cannot succumb to is the tendency to make claims that don’t offend anyone. Jeffery Robbins, who is assuming the role of Chair of the God Seminar, concluded with remarks that drew on the earlier discussion. He said that in light of the discussion from Carter and Day, Westar may embrace its status as a “para-institution.” Further, he insisted, in an age of false equivalency, the makeup of the people involved in critical discussions about religion matter as much as what is being discussed or whatever conclusions reached. In his words, “Who is here, who comes, matters.” Our challenges will continue.

Here is my final footnote. When we accept the task to redefine the human (in any age), we must redefine the concept of God. Otherwise we are staking our life on propositions from the past. This challenge is exactly what the ancient Hebrews faced when they came out of exile: based on what they discovered about the cosmos while captive in Babylon, they reconceptualized God. As a result we have Genesis 1, etc. But theirs was still a three-tiered universe. That cosmology no longer holds true in the twenty-first century, and we, like them and others through history, must develop our theology to be consistent with our cosmology. To do this, we draw on the best options available in philosophy and science, and we must do it with language that fits our age. This is not an easy task, and making our concepts understandable to the churches (and the public) is even more difficult. But we must not shrink from the task. This doesn’t happen all at once, and it seldom depends on one individual. But it is our responsibility nevertheless, those responsible enough to come to the table. As Robbins reminded us at San Antonio, “Who’s here matters.”

## The Christianity Seminar

A Report on the 2016 Fall Meeting

### Hal Taussig

At its November meeting in San Antonio, the Christianity Seminar took two more major steps in writing a new history of early Christianity. In many ways this meeting was even more surprising than the previous four. In those meetings assumed truths fell apart and new images of what those

early movements did and thought came together. The idea that Christianity came into being through the triumph of orthodoxy over gnostic heresy fell apart. The notion that thousands of Christ followers were martyred turned into savvy stories with few deaths. The heroic Jesus became the paradigmatic immigrant. And the early families in these Christ movements ended up more works-in-progress than idyllic mommies, daddies, or celibate loners.

### Not Judaism, Not Christianity

In San Antonio the Seminar took on the huge issue that has haunted the Seminar’s first three years: when and how did Judaism and Christianity become separate religions?

## Christianity Seminar Fall 2016 Ballot Items

Judaism and Christianity arose in relationship to one another, using the same tools and cultural resources to construct themselves against one another.

Fellows: **Pink**/Associates: **Pink**

There is no essential distinctness between Judaism and Christianity before 150 CE.

Fellows: **Gray**/Associates: **Pink**

The nations (*ethnoi*) as well as the loss and erasure of national belonging are integral in the stories of the appearance of Christianity.

Fellows: **Red**/Associates: **Red**

The loss of the nation in our stories of the appearance of Christianity is strongly related to the way in which Roman imperial belonging erased local ties and affiliations over time.

Fellows: **Red**/Associates: **Red**

Paul, in Galatians, strategically reforms the Judaism of his day so that everyone, Jew and gentile alike, can adhere to the God of Israel through faith.

Fellows: **Black**/Associates: **Black**

Paul, in Galatians, strategically attempts to convince his gentile audience to reject the demands of his opponents and not adopt Torah regulations, especially that of circumcision.

Fellows: **Red**/Associates: **Red**

Justin, in his *Dialogue with Trypho*, is in the business of determining who is a Christian and who is not.

Fellows: **Black**/Associates: **Black**

Justin, in his *Dialogue with Trypho*, uses various strategies to convince Trypho, representative of certain Jews, of the superiority of his reading of scripture to that of Trypho and his teachers. As such, the Dialogue makes apparent how Justin's readings differ from Trypho's.

Fellows: **Red**/Associates: **Red**

A vocabulary of "rabbinic Judaism and Christian Judaism" makes much sense of relationships of the many movements and communities in the second century.

Fellows: **Gray**/Associates: **Pink**

The second century is generally too early to use the term "Judaism" as definitive for what is happening.

Fellows: **Red**/Associates: **Pink**

The second century is generally too early to use the term "Christianity" as definitive for what is happening.

Fellows: **Red**/Associates: **Red**

Terms allied with the word "Israel," used not just as a geographical term but as a metaphor of belonging, work well for the complications of second century identities and relationships.

Fellows: **Pink**/Associates: **Red**

The artful hiddenness of powerful textual portraits of loss, trauma, and violence allowed many early Christ-related texts to think and feel deeply about their circumstances without putting their writers and readers in trouble with the Roman rulers.

Fellows: **Pink**/Associates: **Red**

Making sense of the violence the first and second centuries experienced was more important than dogmatic concerns to the ancient writers and readers associated with Israel and Jesus.

Fellows: **Gray**/Associates: **Pink**

"The ways modernity has ... covered over the deep social and interior ancient work on how to live with heartache and torture" caricatures central meanings of second-century traditions of Israel and Jesus.

Fellows: **Pink**/Associates: **Pink**

The second century range of Jesus-related texts do not reflect a consensus or common message about violence, but share a strong interest in addressing violence and its effects.

Fellows: **Red**/Associates: **Red**

Focusing on the work of Daniel Boyarin, a rabbi and renowned scholar of Judaism, the Seminar rejected the idea of a parting of the ways of Christianity and Judaism before 300 CE. Rather, mostly in agreement with Boyarin, the Seminar's votes showed a consensus that there were no such separate entities as Judaism or Christianity in the first two hundred years.

In mostly red and pink votes, the Seminar saw many complicated combinations of practices and beliefs in the first two centuries, none of which lined up with the mythic notions of Judaism or Christianity. The ballot proposal, "The second century is generally too early to use the term

'Christianity' as definitive for what is happening," was overwhelmingly affirmed by the Seminar members, seventeen of whom voted red, eight of whom voted pink, and none of whom voted gray or black. Similarly—and again in agreement with Boyarin—the ballot proposal, "The second century is generally too early to use the term 'Judaism' as definitive for what is happening," the Seminar members voted thirteen red and twelve pink, with no gray or black votes.

In contrast to the lore of some Westar Seminars, the Christianity Seminar continued to provide not just deconstructive positions that undo assumed truths, but

constructive descriptions that might creatively replace the inaccurate conventional pictures of the first two centuries. A strong example of this was the ballot item that read “Terms allied with the word ‘Israel,’ used not just as a geographical term, but as a metaphor of belonging, work well for the complications of second century identities and relationships.” Eight Seminar members voted red, fifteen voted pink, two voted gray, and none voted black.

Other ballot items that developed new ways of historically picturing the second century were strongly affirmed at the San Antonio Seminar meeting as well. Two ballots in response to Seminar co-chair Maia Kotrosits’ characterization of various second-century movements were given an average red vote by the Seminar. Another—“The loss of the nations in our stories of the appearance of Christianity strongly related to the way in which Roman imperial belonging erased local ties and affiliations over time”—helps show that, as Rome broke many communities’ connection to their destroyed nation, early stories about Jesus were not so much about religious beliefs as about remaking group identities.

## Portraits for the American Public

A new stage of the work of the Christianity Seminar’s larger project of rewriting a history of early Christianity began at the San Antonio meeting. Seminar plans for a major book on the first two hundred years took shape as two members of the Seminar Steering Committee produced chapter-length draft portraits of specific aspects of the first and second century. Professors Phil Harland and Hal Taussig wrote graphic descriptions meant to be comprehensible to a general public with a high school education.

Harland’s portrait, “Climbing the Ethnic Ladder: A Portrait of Interactions Between Judeans and Other Peoples” laid out a larger picture of how first- and second-century Mediterranean societies experienced tumultuous ethnic competition and melting pots. According to Harland, that time period brought separate peoples into interaction in unprecedented ways, resulting in many multi-ethnic mixes and clashes. This portrait places some early Christ groups’ enthusiasm for the experience of “neither Jew, nor Greek ... but all are one in Christ” (Gal 3:28) in a much clearer context.

Harland’s treatment of the ways the early Christ movement referred to ethnic groups was, however, not at all romantic. In his survey of different ways that various ethnic groups put other peoples down, he analyzed many such prejudices in the writings of Paul. According to Harland, when Paul characterizes “his own ethnic group in relation to all others ... he uses the phrase ‘we ourselves, who are Judeans by birth and not failures from among the peoples.’” On the other hand, Harland acknowledges,

Paul is also concerned to posit that there is in some other sense “no difference between a Judean and a Greek” in terms of potential adoption or inclusion in God’s people if people “call” on the Lord or are “baptized into Christ” (Rom 10:12; see Rom 3:1–18, 22; Gal 3:28). The lack of distinction also relates to Paul’s notion that both Judean and Greek are equally condemnable and equally saveable.

Hal Taussig’s portrait, “Hidden Transcripts of Violence and Partial Recovery in the First Two Centuries” (forthcoming in *The Fourth R*) started with an actual picture on a massive plate from an even more huge display of the glories of Rome in the city of Aphrodisias in Asia Minor. This plate called to mind a haunting classical story of how the glorious military heroine Penthesileia was killed by Achilles, who fell in love with her as she died. The depiction of Achilles tenderly holding the dying Penthesileia understatedly calls the violence of the victor into question.

The essay then proceeded to examine two stories, a song, and a poem from the second-century Christ literature that resisted, made fun of, and reflected upon violence, mostly by Roman forces. One of the stories was from the Gospel of Luke, while the other was composed out of whole cloth by Taussig but “recounted” a second-century story of loss, violence, and joy. The song, from the Book of Revelation, was a triumphant mocking of Rome’s vulnerability, and the poem came from a recently discovered second-century text.

These portraits of real people amid Roman violence unfurled the way much early Christ literature functioned—what sociologist James C. Scott calls “hidden transcripts” of the ways common people pushed back against violence with humor, joy, resolve, and anger. Taussig suggested that the “artful hiddenness of these powerful textual portraits of loss, trauma, and violence did allow” ancient readers “to think and feel deeply about their circumstances.” Instead of seeing “the scripture” of these early centuries as primarily religious documents, “these bundles and threads of such literature about violence have surprising twists, humor, and melancholy along with a certain disinterest in tragedy.”

In the four texts that make up the overall portrait,

it seems clear that making sense of the violence the first and second centuries saw and experienced was very important to the ancient writers and readers of these writings. These people needed to come to grips with seeing neighbors, strangers, or their own family humiliated, tortured, robbed, enslaved, maimed, impoverished, and killed. The clever, if indirect, ways that the texts addressed a wide variety of violence testifies to how much it mattered to them to think, feel, and come to terms with it.

Harland’s and Taussig’s portraits are either early drafts or preliminary suggestions for chapters in the eventual

very public-oriented, collaborative book the Christianity Seminar aims to produce.

## A New Tradition

Finally, in San Antonio the Christianity Seminar started a new tradition of honoring a winning essay in a year-long contest of writings by graduate students in the study of

early Christ movement and Christian literature. This initial winner of this new tradition was “Decapolis Death Worlds: Necropolitics, Specters, and Gerasene Ethnicity among the Tombs” by Peter McClellan of the Drew University School of Theology. The paper was presented as a part of the Christianity Seminar. **4R**

---

## The Hiddenness Argument *Continued from page 14*

love you. Again, it wouldn't even occur to them to cease being open to relationship with you in this minimal sense. Everything we associate with love (as opposed to simply a benevolent disposition, which is no more than a part of love) *presupposes* such openness, even if it does not presuppose constantly being present to those whom one loves.

**Q.** As that response to the first question concedes, openness to relationship is what we would expect from a loving God “under normal conditions.” But what if God's relevant choices are not made under normal conditions? What if there are good things God wants for us that require nonresistant nonbelief to be permitted? More specifically, what if nonresistant nonbelief is permitted in order to protect some people's moral freedom, which would be compromised if God were made known to them? Or perhaps nonresistant nonbelief is permitted for some of us to prevent a negative response to God, which God knows would be forthcoming; or perhaps it is permitted so that we can show a sincere desire for God, or to promote cooperative religious investigation, or for some similar reason. In short, how can we rule out there being some such *theological explanation* of why God permits nonresistant nonbelief despite being perfectly loving?

**A.** A complex question! But anyone who thinks this question represents a serious problem for the hiddenness argument needs to think more deeply. Any loving person will maintain openness to relationship with the one she loves whenever she has the resources to accommodate the consequences of such openness, bringing them into harmony with the flourishing of the beloved and of any relationship that may come to exist between her and the one she loves. This is a very basic principle, with strong intuitive support. In the case of God and such ‘greater goods’ as our question refers to, what the principle implies is that God would maintain openness to relationship if the goods in question (assuming them to be sufficiently great goods) are compatible with such openness. And through appropriate reflection on the nature of God, we will see a very good reason to suppose that this must always be the case. For the idea of an unending personal relationship with *God*, who is after all described as an unsurpassably great personal real-

ity, is more than sufficient to accommodate, *precisely within such relationship*, the very goods that the above question assumes God can achieve only by postponing or interrupting the relationship.

For example, if the idea is that God must permit nonresistant nonbelief and postpone relationship to enable our desire for God to grow through the search for God, it is necessary to point out that there would be no end of moving, within a Divine-creature relationship, from one level to another, with each spiritual discovery calling forth desires for yet deeper acquaintance with the infinite richness of God and presenting more opportunities for its pursuit. Or what about the fear that one who is aware of God might unavoidably do what is right out of prudence—that is, out of a desire either to gain divine approval or avoid divine displeasure—and so be bereft of the freedom to choose to do what is right while able to (and seriously desiring to) do wrong instead? Isn't this a situation in which awareness of God can inhibit one's moral growth? Surely in this case God would have a very good reason to remain hidden until that person had freely achieved a higher level of moral maturity. My reply is that in such a situation there would still be plenty of room for moral development through the exercise of moral freedom, since one could still make the choice to *work on one's motives*, over time coming to do what is morally right for its own sake and not because of a desire for divine approval. This is a different way for God to cultivate moral freedom but it is still moral freedom. Of course here one should remember that awareness of God doesn't have to come from some blinding display of divine power. Subtly modulated religious experience is also possible. And so it does not seem to me that an overwhelming desire to do the good generated purely by prudence need be forthcoming *in the first place* for anyone if nonresistant nonbelief is prevented. As for the argument that fears a profoundly consequential rejection of God: should we expect God, any more than a loving parent, to disappear from the scene in order to avoid rejection rather than seeking over time to improve the relationship? And could anyone have more resources than God to bring about such a result? (It is worth observing here that although the God of the Bible might