A Parallax View of the First Two Centuries of Early Christ Movements
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As an interested and invested outsider to—but decidedly not an expert in—the historical studies of Christian origins, the criterion of authenticity that considers the explanatory power of a theory, a narrative, a framing, or a reframing has always held considerable sway over me. While I realize that explanations are not always forthcoming, I am still taken by the questions of how and why the story of a crucified messianic figure eventually gave rise to a full-fledged Easter faith. The preferred answer, of course, by many of those who tend to give disproportionate weight to the criterion of explanation in their respective portraits of the historical Jesus is that without recourse to the supernatural event of the resurrection, Jesus would have remained dead and forgotten, his followers left disheartened and scattered, and thus there would be no such thing as Christianity with which we would have to reckon with and explain in the first place.

Again, responding and writing as an outsider, this single appeal to the supernatural in order to provide an otherwise rigorous historical portrait with explanatory power is reminiscent of the “refusal of the supernatural” within the world of Islam. As the Prophet Muhammad was purported to say, "God has not sent me to work wonders; He has sent me to preach to you. My Lord; be praised! Am I more than a man sent to you as an apostle?" Muhammad was no miracle worker; instead, as the “ummi” or “unlettered” prophet, the Qur’an is the one and only miracle in Islam such that it is regarded as the “standing miracle.” It completes and corrects the revelations of the one true God that came before it. And as the tradition teaches it, since God’s word has been fully revealed, there is no reason for anyone to expect anything more in addition. God has provided all that is necessary in order for God’s people to live a righteous and faithful life if only they would submit.

In both cases, there is one miracle than ends all miracles—or, at least, one miracle that puts an end to the need for any subsequent miracles. But, in what should be obvious, to the committed naturalist, the one founding supernatural miracle is still one too many, still a leap of faith too far, still beyond the bounds of a properly rigorous historical methodology. To me, this is precisely what is so very exciting and important about the work of the Christianity Seminar on the first two centuries of the early Christ movements. By dispensing with the master narrative of the divinely ordained succession from Jesus, to the apostles, to the bishops, and to the creeds, we are left with an honest-to-goodness gap in the historical record. There is no recourse to miracles. No providential history. By all we have come to know and appreciate about the enormous
diversity of the early Christ movements and the slow and always contested consolidation of the orthodox tradition, the traditional account provided by the master narrative strains credulity to the breaking point. It means there is no choice but to rewrite and reframe the first two centuries. The promised breakthrough is intoxicating, even while—or perhaps, precisely because—admitting to the extent of what still remains unknown, maybe even forever unknowable.

My one reservation is that the fifteen documented shifts, while each was clearly expressed and compelling and significant, might lose the forest for the trees. I cannot help but wonder whether less might be more, that for the breakthrough to really occur in terms of the paradigm shift wanted in the study and understanding of Christian origins, the proliferation of anomalies must somehow fit into some new pattern so that we are not left with complexity alone, or difference as such, but instead with a shift in orientation that makes everything different. Or, perhaps the better concept to employ to that of the paradigm shift is that of the “parallax view” offered by Slavoj Zizek. The parallax is defined by the displacement of an object of study caused by the change in one’s observational position. It is a dialectic in which no final synthesis or mediation is possible. It not only maintains the gap—in this case, the gap in the historical record separated the known from the unknown, the knowable from the unknowable—but actually accomplishes a short circuiting of the existing explanations. In other words, the work of the Christianity seminar is not simply rewriting or reframing the first two centuries of early Christ movements, but effectively short circuiting the master narrative that has held sway as the bedrock to Christian orthodoxy’s claims to authority and legitimation.

It is towards this end that I offer up a way of pairing down the fifteen shifts to a more manageable, if not more impactful, grouping of four: 1) What early Christ movements share with other movements at the time; 2) What distinguishes early Christ movements from other movements at the time; 3) What unites the early Christ movements in the first two centuries; and 4) What makes the early Christ movements of the first two centuries still relevant today?

1) What early Christ movements share with other movements at the time: What the research of the Christianity Seminar makes abundantly clear is not only that the early Christ movements were a “motley set of groups” characterized by a “great diversity of meanings, values, and practices . . . among people who had different levels and kinds of relationship to Christ,” but by their frequent employment of the family model and the widespread practices of the supper clubs, they were not all that unique. As one option among many—or better, as many different options among the manifold—the myth of Christian exceptionalism and the exclusionary
logic that would become endemic to orthodox Christianity are replaced by a hotbed of religious dynamism, improvisation, and creativity.

2) What **distinguishes** early Christ movements from other movements at the time: In the midst of this diverse religious milieu, if early Christ movements provided the bonds of family and friendship, it was by its unorthodox means of resistance that early Christ literature distinguished itself. Its heroes were those who suffered at the hands Roman imperial violence. The promise of salvation was not that of military triumph or a spiritual otherworldliness, but instead was a transvaluation of values by identifying with the victims, the poor, and the suffering. This is not just a theology of the cross reveled in by Martin Luther and others whereby God’s ultimate triumph or glory or greatness is revealed precisely in the moment of death, defeat, or weakness, but an acknowledgement of shame and powerlessness. It is in this way that we can hear from early Christ literature a theme hammered home by both John Dominic Crossan and the Black liberationist theologian James Cone—that Jesus crucifixion reveals the violent normalcy of human civilization. And so the irony is that what distinguishes the early Christ movement is its realization that Jesus’ crucifixion was not unique—or put otherwise, it was not a historical anomaly—rather, it resounds through history in the unjust suffering and death of a multitude of innocent victims.

3) What **unites** the early Christ movements in the first two centuries: In a word, Israel. This builds on the paradigm shifting, parallax viewing, scholarly breakthroughs that have already occurred in the studies of the historical Jesus and Paul. That Jesus and Paul were both Jewish is so obvious to us now that one cannot help but wonder at the sleight of hand, the misconstrual of identity, the strong misreading, the perversion, the antipathy (the list could go on) that blinded us to this fact for well over 1500 years. But if once Paul was thought the culprit in the invention of Christianity as its own separate and distinct religion, we now know that such a distinction is premature by nearly 200 years. Further, if Israel is what unites the early Christ movements, then whatever it is we might mean by religion in this period has much more to do with “belonging” than “believing.”

4) What makes the early Christ movements of the first two centuries still **relevant** today: I might even go so far as to say that it is with this final grouping of insights from the Christianity seminar that we learn not only of the continuing relevance of the first two centuries of early Christ movements, but also the urgent importance of Westar as a collective of scholars who have done more than any other in making the case that it was Rome and not “the Jews” who was the real point of opposition to the early Christ people. In this way, what distinguished the early Christ movements then is what still makes them relevant today—namely, as witnesses to a counter-
imperial way of resistance, if not a fully articulated theology, let alone a systematized, codified, and authorized set of beliefs. In a world predicated on peace by way of conquest and submission characterized by state-sponsored brutality, poverty, and social dislocation, we might learn anew that “the early Christ-related stories and images were aiming less at a Christ-based religiosity than a way of providing [for] migrants and refugees to reclaim a belonging they were on the point of losing.” I believe this goes beyond the either-or logic of inclusion or exclusion that tends to be associated with the understanding of Christianity as a set of beliefs and instead recovers the radical demand of the way of faithfulness. As such, the question posed, “What have you done for the least of these?” is not simply a call to service, but fighting words that pits the way of God against the way of the world, and thus calls upon us to take a side.