

# The (In)Appropriateness of “Christian” in the First Two Centuries CE

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## Abstract

The last 30 years of scholarship in “early Christian identity,” “Christian origins,” and “early Christian history” have opened a new set of questions about when, where, and how kinds of “Christianity” emerged in the first five centuries. This essay examines how many times the word(s) “Christian(s)” occur in the first two centuries CE; and rehearses how relatively few times the word(s) occur and what this relative paucity means. Almost no occurrences are found in the first century and around 325 “Christian(s)” written uses totally for both centuries. The meanings of “Christian(s)” are diverse, occasionally hover around second century persons/groups’ encounter with (mostly state) violence, and rarely come close to what one might presume as “Christianity.” This state of affairs occasions the question of why contemporary historians of these first two centuries so thoroughly use the word(s) “Christian(s)” for those two centuries.

This essay, as much of my own work, addresses a question explicit and implicit in much of the Christianity Seminar scholarship over its last six years and one where the scholarly guild needs prodding. The question is how appropriate is the word “Christian” as name for literature and phenomena in the first two hundred years of the Common Era.

For most of scholarship, this question is puzzling, since most history of these first two hundred years assumes that it is being written about “Christian” material and “Christians.” In the same last thirty years of Professor King’s substantial influence, other scholarship has begun to raise the questions this essay pursues, doubting the “natural” label of “Christian” for writings and phenomena in these two centuries.

Through a broad study of the word "Christian" in this period, this essay challenges the predominant guild assumptions. To a certain extent this study is simply of the (quite infrequent) use of "Christian(s)", as it puzzles on why and how these two centuries have been Christianized in character. But since this word is used occasionally in the first two hundred years of the Common Era, the study examines what this word meant in its obvious infrequency.

### **The Basic Proposal: A Modest Linguistic Analysis for a Much Bigger Question**

As is analyzed in subsequent sections of this essay, a very diverse collage of literature in the first two centuries CE is falsely characterized as early Christian by almost all historians and Christian scholars. This modest analytical and rather plodding project only examines one (and a half) word(s), Christian(s), in the texts of these two centuries.<sup>1</sup> The Greek, Latin, and Coptic words are straightforward. Koine Greek is *christianos* for Christian. Latin is *christianus*. Coptic is either *christianos* or *chrestianos*. The results—at least on a linguistic level—are fairly easy. They fit also quite comfortably into the larger topsy-turvy discoveries and proposals of the last thirty years of examination of these two early Mediterranean centuries. But the results here to the modest and fairly obvious examinations of "Christian(s)" are also mostly new and outrageous to most of the tenets of historians and scholars of early "Christianity."

What is argued in some detail in the rest of the essay produces three major results: 1) the word(s) "Christian(s)" is almost entirely missing from the first century, even though the ensuing 1900 years assume the first century literature is key to all the rest of "Christian" literature; 2) these one (and a half) words are relatively rare in the second century; 3) the meanings of these words in these two centuries are far from obvious; indeed, there are significant and puzzlingly different meanings, even though—in contrast to conventional presumptions—not particularly contested. It turns out that in these two centuries the varied meanings of these words focus not on what has been imagined as contestations within an imagined "Christianity," but on various

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<sup>1</sup> I have not included the word "Christianity" in this study, since it is used even more rarely than "Christian(s) and with almost no direct connection between the words "Christian" and "Christianity." That is, the texts themselves do not propose any definitions to the quite rare references to "Christianity" in the first two centuries" nor do they directly assert that "Christianity" (whatever that may be) consists of "Christians." In the first two centuries. However, there are enough uses of the "one and a half" words "Christian(s) to allow a study of their meanings and what these word(s) might represent numerically. I am not suggesting that a further study of the word "Christianity" does not have merit. I just suggest that progress on such a study would need to include texts beyond the second century in order to make sense of it, whereas although, as this present study finds, there are more or less enough occurrences of "Christian(s) to make some headway on its meaning(s) in the first two centuries.

contestations with Rome's domination and violence. Whatever these one and a half words meant in these centuries was not primarily about religious identities or institutions, but on various self-understandings in relationship to living in a larger and often violent world.

These three results join then in larger re-thinking within the last three decades of a significantly larger question about what meaning-making was going on in these first two centuries. This smaller linguistic study about a word and a half points back to ongoing major re-thinking of what the first two centuries of texts do and don't show. For instance, it is no longer clear that the first two centuries displayed a contest between orthodoxy and heresy; how much or little women leadership in Jesus-related communities was encouraged or forbidden; when and what Jesus-related movements saw themselves as a part of spiritual Israel; how straightforwardly Jesus-related people followed certain texts like Romans, 1 Peter, or Clement of Alexandria's *The Instructor* in their commending their readers to honor and obey the Roman imperial rules; whether there was such a movement as "Gnosticism;" how many groups acknowledged or followed bishops; whether many or relatively few Jesus-related people were killed by Roman authorities for their association with Jesus/Christ; how popular Paul's writings were; whether, when, and where notions of canonical literature were observed and what texts were so observed by whom; and who the historical and mythic Jesuses were. So this modest examination of the notions and "Christian(s)" in the first and second centuries and its main conclusions point less to determination of what this word (and a half) meant and more to twenty-first century interest in re-configuring what the literature and phenomena of the first two centuries mean and indicate.

This analysis of "Christian(s)" examines two major dimensions of word study. First, it looks at how often each word is used in these two centuries. Secondly, since these words do exist, if only relatively infrequently, in at least the second century and perhaps the first, it observes the range of meanings for these words in that time period.

### **The Numbers and One (and a half) Word(s)**

In a relatively arbitrary categorization,<sup>2</sup> so that this essay stays focused on its subject matter, I am dividing an evaluation of when and how many times the words "Christian(s)" appear(s) in either the first and second centuries. The objective in this

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<sup>2</sup> Categorization of the first two hundred years of literature related to the figure(s) of Jesus or Christ by the subcategories of the first and second centuries is clumsy, inaccurate, and arbitrary; since the character of historical developments does not happen in this way. I do so here in order to keep focus on the topic at hand rather than how one might produce/imagine a better categorization. Of course, the same applies to the relatively arbitrary designation of the first two hundred years.

section is simply to identify wherever this word is mentioned in the first two centuries CE. Here, partly because of the surprising paucity of existing texts that use either of these words, I have included all of the works of Clement of Alexandria, although it is likely that some of them were written in the early third century. Similarly, although it is unlikely that Tertullian wrote much at all in the second century, I have included much of his writings in my examination. On a related topic I have not been firm in whether a text was written in the first or second century, but listed mention of the word for both/either century(ies).

### The Word and a Half in the First Century

In terms of the use of either word in the first century, there is little to count. The Acts of the Apostles and The First Letter of Peter wrote in passing about "Christians," with two mentions in Acts and one in 1 Peter. Although until recently conventional scholarship has generally put both of these texts in first century, in the past fifteen years for Acts and twenty-five years for 1 Peter, scholars have increasingly seen them as second century documents, dating Acts to the first quarter and 1 Peter as late at 175 CE. Curiously enough, there is a similar situation for the three different references to "Christians" in Roman documents, in which they refer to something happening in the first century; but the three (Pliny the Younger, Tacitus, and Suetonius) were most likely written in the early second century.<sup>3</sup> That gives a result then of six uses of "Christian" in the entire 60+ years of Jesus-related literature of the first century, most, if not all of which may very well have been written in the second century. Another way of tallying this would be to say that there were no mentions of these one and half words in all the other Jesus-related texts of the first century.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Stephen Benko, "Pagan Criticism of Christianity During the First Two Centuries A.D. in ANRW II.23.2 ed. By Hildegard Temporonini et al, (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1989), 1055-1118. Also Ralph Martin Novak, *Christianity and the Roman Empire: Background Texts* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International), 13 and 20.

<sup>4</sup> Of course, it is not easy to say really how many such documents were written in the first century. But there were many and this makes a difference in how one thinks about an alleged "Christian" character to the first century at all. My best estimates would be: at least 19 such texts; likely 27 such texts; and possibly as many as 44 such texts. For the reader to take note, first of all, of all the 'first century' texts that do not use the word "Christian" and secondly to assess my judgements on what the lists of at least 19 such texts and as many as 44 such texts.

At least 19 such first century texts with no mention of the word "Christian": 1 Thessalonians, Philippians, Galatians, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Romans, Philemon, Hebrews, Didache, Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Mark, Letter of James, Gospel of Matthew, Letter of Barnabas, 1 Clement, Revelation, Gospel of John, 1 John, Letter of Jude. As many as 41 such first century texts with no mention of the word "Christian": 1 Thessalonians, Philippians, Galatians, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Romans, Philemon, Colossians, Hebrews, Didache,

It is important to look closely at the six possible first century uses of these one and half words. Primary here is an examination of how these words may have been used in these six possible first century texts. In this regard, it bears asking whether there is any indication of whether their various usages have some things in common with one another.

First there are the three mentions from first/second century texts written within a context of person(s) attached in some ways to the literary character of a Jesus. There are two texts from the Acts of the Apostles:

Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for an entire year they met with the church and taught a great many people, and it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called "Christians." (11:25-26)

"King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe." Agrippa said to Paul, "Are you so quickly persuading me to become a Christian?" Paul replied, "Whether quickly or not, I pray to God that not only you but also all who are listening to me today might become such as I am—except for these chains... (26:27-29)

This mention of "Christians" in chapter 11 seems to be an historical/hagiographical aside, since it is never followed up; but one that does allude to an eventual importance of the nomenclature, although again without any pursuit of meaning. The chapter 26 mention is more curious and more embedded in a story. It belongs to an interrogation of Paul by King Agrippa that turns into a bit of a conversation, and results in Agrippa's leaning toward letting Paul go, except that Paul has already appealed to Caesar. The curiosity—at least for later "Christian" readers—is the ambivalence by Paul about making Agrippa a "Christian." As treated later in this essay, the lack of a clear embrace of the term "Christian" by Paul (Paul seems to change the subject in favor of inviting Agrippa to be like Paul, who is not called a "Christian" in the entire book of Acts) has strong similarities to a number of second century texts in which the term is rejected or at least questioned by the Jesus-engaged author. The paucity of real interest in the term

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Gospel of Thomas, Oxyrhynchus 1224 Gospel, Gospel of Mark, Apocalypse of Adam, Letter of James, Gospel of Matthew, Letter of Barnabas, Eugnostos the Blessed, 1 Clement, Revelation, Gospel of John, 1 John, Sophia of Jesus Christ, Egerton Gospel, Gospel of Peter, Letter of Jude, Secret Mark, Fayyum Fragment, 2 John, Ephesians, 3 John, Testament of the Twelve Fragments, Gospel of Luke, 1 Timothy, Mara Bar Serapion, 2 Thessalonians, 2 Timothy, Titus, Gospel of the Hebrews, Gospel of the Hebrews, and Christian Sybillines.

"Christian(s)" by Acts does not help much in understanding what meaning the term might have.

The final text using the word "Christian" also links to later uses of the word, but similarly to the two Acts texts, does not provide a standard meaning for the word.

If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you. But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, a criminal, or even as a mischief maker. Yet if any of you suffers as a Christian, do not consider it a disgrace, but glorify God because you bear this name. (1 Peter 4:14-16)

Here, as is seen clearly in later treatments in this essay, "Christian" is closely related to experiences of "being reviled," most likely, if the somewhat broader set of second century texts show, experiences of governmental persecution.

There are three other texts on one or another of these one and half words from outside of the movements interested in Jesus. Two characteristics of these possibly first century non-movement texts are shared with the ones that come from within movements documents: 1) a specific connection between "Christian(s)" and violence by Roman rulers; and 2) more rootedness in the second rather than the first century.

Both Tacitus and Suetonius indicated in their writings brief interest in these one and a half words and first century imperial events/violence.

But all human efforts, all the lavish gifts of the emperor, and the propitiations of the gods, did not banish the sinister belief that the conflagration was the result of an order. Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called "Chrestians" by the populace.

Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilate and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their center and become popular.

Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses,

or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired. (Annals 15:44, Translation: Church and Brodribb)

This antagonistic treatment fits very closely with some other uses of "Christian(s)" in a relatively small bundle of second century texts. This Tacitus label and story has strong ties both to 1 Peter 4 and some other texts that explicitly attach the moniker "Christian" to those killed or tortured by Roman rule.<sup>5</sup>

Suetonius also did write once about "Christians."

During his [Nero's] reign many abuses were severely punished and put down, and no fewer new laws were made: a limit was set to expenditures; the public banquets were confined to a distribution of food; the sale of any kind of cooked viands in the taverns was forbidden, with the exception of pulse and vegetables, whereas before every sort of dainty was exposed for sale. Punishment was inflicted on the Christians, a class of men given to a new and mischievous superstition. He put an end to the diversions of the chariot drivers, who from immunity of long standing claimed the right of ranging at large and amusing themselves by cheating and robbing the people. The pantomimic actors and their partisans were banished from the city. (*Nero* 16:46,47, Translation: Rolfe)

Not unlike Tacitus, Suetonius critiqued the "Christians" severely and explained the justification of Nero's punishments. Here "Christians" were associated with a wide range of "cheating and robbing," and there seems to be a fairly strong hint that "Christians" meant a wide assortment of robbers and cheats. This forms another part of this essay's later examination of texts interest in the relationship between violent punishment and "Christians."

Pliny the Younger approached this same "Christian" topic in a conversation between himself and the then emperor Trajan for whom Pliny administered.

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<sup>5</sup> Although beyond the scope of this essay, more work on "Chrestus" is needed in indirect, but important relationship to "Christian." In the *Life of Claudius* Suetonius's use of "Chrestus" where scholars have generally assumed a clumsy misspelling of "Christus/Chrestus" and several other texts outside of Suetonius using "Chrestus" point to a possible additional set of meanings for the figure of "Christus/Chrestus" in the first two centuries. This further troubles many 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century assumptions about a prevalent meaning for the figure of "Christ," but is beyond the word limit for this already ambitious essay. It is my hope in another essay to return to this further ambivalence in the use of "Christian" in the first two centuries.

It is my practice, my lord, to refer to you all matters concerning which I am in doubt....I have never participated in trials of Christians. I therefore do not know what offenses it is the practice to punish.... And I have been not a little hesitant as to whether there should be any distinction on account of age or no difference between the very young and the more mature....

Meanwhile, in the case of those who were denounced to me as Christians, I have observed the following procedure: I interrogated these as to whether they were Christians; those who confessed I interrogated a second and a third time, threatening them with punishment; those who persisted I ordered executed....There were others possessed of the same folly; but because they were Roman citizens, I signed an order for them to be transferred to Rome.

...Those who denied that they were or had been Christians, when they invoked the gods in words dictated by me, offered prayer with incense and wine to your image, which I had ordered to be brought for this purpose together with statues of the gods, and moreover cursed Christ--none of which those who are really Christians, it is said, can be forced to do--these I thought should be discharged. .... They all worshipped your image and the statues of the gods, and cursed Christ.

They asserted, however, that...their fault or error had been that they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god, and to bind themselves...not to commit fraud, theft, or adultery, not falsify their trust, nor to refuse to return a trust when called upon to do so. When this was over, it was their custom to depart and to assemble again to partake of food....I judged it...necessary to find out what the truth was by torturing two female slaves....But I discovered nothing else but depraved, excessive superstition.

...For the contagion of this superstition has spread not only to the cities but also to the villages and farms. But it seems possible to check and cure it....

[Trajan to Pliny:]

You observed proper procedure, my dear Pliny, in sifting the cases of those who had been denounced to you as Christians. For it is not possible to lay down any general rule to serve as a kind of fixed standard. They

are not to be sought out; if they are denounced and proved guilty, they are to be punished.... (Letters 10:96-97, Translation: W. Harris).

This juicy correspondence has served scholarship well as a picture of early second century governmental interaction with people accused of being "Christians." Here it is clear that—not unlike 1 Peter, Suetonius, Tacitus, and at least Acts 26—that "Christian(s)" had terminologically to do with accusations about some people perceived to be outside Roman law and the process of judging and/or punishing them. Although both Pliny and Trajan had little appreciation of those accused, they seemed quite interested in being fair to them. And here, in some contrast to Tacitus and Suetonius, there is some more information about who the accused were and some of what they might have done. This loose and sparse circle of texts around the turn of the first century deserves to join a bit later some (but not many) similar texts throughout the second century.

Although the scholarly study of first and second century references to these one and a half words is still in relatively early stages of development, this initial examination of these six potentially first century texts actually are more connected to later second century use (and more or less certain in the Pliny/Trajan text). It could, of course, be that these five texts are important exceptional first century precursors of what "Christian" means more broadly. I tend, however, to suspect this is more an indication—following recent new datings of them—that Acts, 1 Peter, Tacitus, Suetonius, and Pliny the Younger belong to second century writings. In any case, the larger point about the paucity of consciousness of "Christian" is the same. There are few to no texts who mention these words in the first century or these texts belong to the somewhat larger group of second century texts.

### **"Christian(s)" in the Second Century**

If the five times "Christian(s)" (optimistically) occur are among a total of at least 200,504 Jesus-related words in the texts written in the first century;<sup>6</sup> the number of times "Christian(s)" occur in the second century turns out to be substantially more. This word occurs perhaps as many as 325 times in the second century. But this number ends up being relatively small compared to what is approximately 625,000 words written in the Jesus/Christ-sphere of literature. The results of all the occurrences of this word and a half are surprisingly sparse. In addition, the meanings of "Christian(s)" in the second century are multiple and without anything like unanimity of meaning.

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<sup>6</sup> This is my count of the number of words in the nineteen Jesus-related texts written in the first century. Please note that this was the minimal number suggested written in the first century in comparison to up-to-44 texts.

On the other hand, a careful examination here of the multiple and diverse uses in the second century does allow some substantive observations about particular different meanings of these words in that century and perhaps even how some uses distinguished themselves from one another, morphed from one emphasis to another, and occasionally clustered into temporary commonalities. Examination of the body of first and second century literature's use of "Christian(s)" and "Christianity" follows in sections about particular meanings found for these one and a half words.

### **Christian(s) Understood Negatively by Texts Positively Associated with Jesus/Christ**

Both the Acts 26:27 and the Pliny-Trajan correspondence seem to indicate an ambivalence or even negative impression of the term/identification of "Christian." There are a number of other texts from second century writers, who themselves have an ambivalent or negative understanding of the label "Christian," or who describe their subjects as ambivalent or negative about being a "Christian."

Athenagoras of Athens wrote to Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Aurelius about "those of us called Christians" ambivalently.<sup>7</sup> Although the rest of the long plea is a philosophical defense of his people and their allegiances, thoughts, and deeds; only the following two chapters used the word "Christian(s);" and these chapters two and three were pointedly aimed at countering accusations against Athenagoras's people. The other thirty-four chapters made the case for Athenagoras and the people who had been "called Christians" by using the word "we," and "God," but never "Christian(s)" in the rest of the writing. Again, not unlike Paul (and almost all other writers in what later became the New Testament, the word "Christian(s)" does not play a role except as a part of the first three chapters case against allegations about "Christians."<sup>8</sup> More to the point, however, is that in the text the word "Christian(s)" has negative and ambivalent connotations.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Chapter 1, "A Plea for the Christians, B.P. Pratten, translation: 1867.

Pratten's Chapter 1 of Athenagoras – was most likely added by B.P. Pratten, Athenagoras: Legatio and De Resurrectione. Cf. also challenge to Pratten in Athenagoras: Legatio and De Resurrectione, Edited and translated by William R. Schoedel. Athenagoras: Legatio and De Resurrectione (Oxford Early Christian Texts, Oxford: Clarendon Press), 1972.

<sup>9</sup> As is often the case with scholars who create chapters for ancient literature and give them names, the word "Christian" is found in seventeen of the 37 chapters, including the title of the work itself, which – not from ancient manuscripts, but from the modern scholars themselves. In this case of Athenagoras of Athens' so-called "A Plea for the Christians," the names of the chapters appear to be the work of B. P. Pratten, the translator and author of the Introduction. As is elaborated later in this essay, the extent to which "Christian" has been inserted into manufactured consciousness of the 19<sup>th</sup> through 21<sup>st</sup> centuries by these kinds of "scholarly" inserts and commentary is breath-taking.

Theophilus's writing to Autolytus brought a kind of self-consciousness to this dynamic of "Christian" containing both negative and ambivalent aspects, as he wrote: "You call me a Christian, as if it were a damning name to be."<sup>10</sup> Here the inner voice of Theophilus identified an emerging meaning of the word "Christian" that connoted condemnation. This take on "Christian" gave voice to the objectification at play in Athenagoras having known that the word came to these writers from power outside of them, imposing on the hearer a kind of damnation.<sup>11</sup> As these texts line up with the position of Tacitus, Suetonius, and the Pliny-Trajan correspondence, it is hard not to think that the moniker of "Christian" may have indeed initially been an insult, accusation, or condemnation from those in authority,<sup>12</sup> rather than a self-designation of a group. Such a way of thinking about the emergence of a population's self-naming in response to the combination of insult, accusation, and or condemnation certainly resembles the 20<sup>th</sup>/21<sup>st</sup> century gendered self-naming of "queer" and the complex pride in some African-American communities claiming the N-word as term of belonging, endearment, and straight talk. This (post) modern similarity with the possible way the term "Christian" emerged in perhaps the first, and more certainly, in the second century underlines a cleverness, irony, dark humor, and double entendre to the process of "Christian" consciousness, identity, and self-understanding. The straight hyper-seriousness of the modern scholarship that misses the clever humor and multiple levels of the ancient process of accepting ironically the insult "Christian" may be one of the most egregious missteps in understanding these early peoples and movements.

There are not enough ancient texts to confirm this read of one of the ways "Christian" monikers emerged. But the next category of this plodding project focused on

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<sup>10</sup> Theophilus, *To Autolytus*, 1.1 (Roberts-Donaldson).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. similar responses in both Testimony of Truth 31.25 and Justin Martyr's *First Apology* 4 and 7. Testimony of Truth's had a more haunted perspective in which the writer actively named the danger of this moniker from above and beyond: "If they confess we are Christians, they really hasten toward (into the clutches of) the principalities and authorities." Justin's response in *1 Apol.* 4 had the tone of a worried assessment: "We are accused of being Christians;" whereas in 7 an ominous comparison struck home: "Barbarians and Christians are lumped together in accusations."

<sup>12</sup> The late second, but mostly third, century writer, Hippolytus of Rome, seems to have picked up the earlier second century ambivalences and/or negativities of the term "Christian." Especially in his *Refutation of All Heresies*, he worried about many in leadership who were not really "Christian," but "Cynic," "Pythagorean," and/or "Platonist." This, of course did seem to miss, or at least revalue, more authoritatively a more straightforward emerging "Christian" authority of the third century. Reading Hippolytus of Rome, however, makes a similar argument about the obvious similarities and ambiguities of the second century identities. Cf. *Refutation of All Heresies* 4.45; 5.4; 6.24; 8.13, and most of 9.

one and a half words does complement this possibility in ways that undergird and complicate this theory.

### **"Christian" as Characterization of Experience of Roman Violence and Governance**

Not at all unrelated to the ironic uses of "Christian" as insult, but much more prominent, overt and specific in its meaning-making, are the ways second century writings use "Christian" as a way to characterize people's experience of Roman violence and governance.<sup>13</sup> In some ways this literature depends on the possibility that "Christian" was a label constructed by the violent rulers above the people that eventually claimed the label ironically, martyrologically, religiously, and theologically. It is important to make precise what I am suggesting in the violence-specific dimension of the second-century emergence of the "Christian" word. I prefer to see it from the perspective of experience of violence. In this regard, it matters less how to parse what can be verified historically about who was killed, exiled, tortured, and harassed and even how various Roman and emerging "Christian" discursive writings do and do not fit together. (I suspect that some of this can be done, some may be done in future scholarship, and some remain amorphous for some time.) I am more interested in a larger, diverse, social experience in which killing, exile, torture, threat, harassment, neurosis, psychosis, and non-written hidden transcripts<sup>14</sup> wind around each other in almost endless variety.

### **Framing the Experience of Violence, Loss, and Pain in relationship to Naming and Being Named "Christian"**

There are a number of second century stories which combined Roman-related violence and the word "Christian." Two of them help see the different kinds of violence

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<sup>13</sup> Judith Lieu was one of the first scholars to underline clearly the possibility that "Christian" was used not so much as a fully-formed identity, but as an acknowledgement of people's experience of Roman governance and violence. Judith Lieu, *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Greco-Roman World*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) and *Neither Jew Nor Greek: Constructing Christian Identity*. (New York: T and T Clark, 2015). Extremely important for my work is Maia Kotrosits, *Rethinking Christian Identity: Affect, Violence, and Belonging* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015). Cf. for my own work, a key moment in understanding the use of "Christian" relative to Roman violence and the discursive back-and-forth between Roman rulers and this kind of "Christian" discourse was the paper Carly Daniel-Hughes presented at the Westar Institute Christianity Seminar in the Spring meeting of 2016.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University, 1992). My perspective relative to first and second century Christ people social experience and the analysis of Scott can be found throughout *In the Beginning Was the Meal: Social Experimentation and Early Christian Identity*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008).

were accompanied by an articulation of what was meant by "Christian." The first is from a fragment from Irenaeus, the second from the Justin Martyr's *Second Apology*.

The Irenaeus fragment helps understand how a story implicated a complicated mix of experience.

For when the Greeks, having arrested the slaves of Christian catechumens, then used force against them, in order to learn from them some secret thing [practised] among Christians, these slaves, having nothing to say that would meet the wishes of their tormentors, except that they had heard from their masters that the divine communion was the body and blood of Christ, and imagining that it was actually flesh and blood, gave their inquisitors answer to that effect. Then these latter, assuming such to be the case with regard to the practices of Christians, gave information regarding it to other Greeks, and sought to compel the martyrs Sanctus and Blandina to confess, under the influence of torture, [that the allegation was correct]. To these men Blandina replied very admirably in these words: "How should those persons endure such [accusations], who, for the sake of the practice [of piety], did not avail themselves even of the flesh that was permitted [them to eat]?" (Irenaeus, *Fragment 13*, Translation: Roberts-Donaldson).<sup>15</sup>

This fragment blended the torture of the slaves of "Christians" who were targets of investigation, arrest, or worse with a separate story of Lyons "martyrs" Sanctus and Blandina. It is not Romans who lead this violence, but explicitly, "Greeks" who complicated the consciousness of loss and pain. "Christian" hovered at the ragged edges of this cobbled together story, not so much to name what these events meant, but to explore an uncertain and fluid accompaniment to the residue of violence.

The Justin Martyr overview seems also to have framed "Christian" in terms of suffering.

(T)hose who lived like Christ shall dwell with God in a state that free from suffering, that is those who have become Christian. (*Second Apology* 1, Translation: Roberts-Donaldson)

Justin Martyr put suffering at the middle of this statement about those who have "become Christian." In this case it seems to have been about a becoming "Christian" after one has become "free from suffering." So "Christian" seems to have been a release

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<sup>15</sup> Fragments from Lost Writings, Philip Schaf and Alexander Roberts, *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Apostolic Fathers with Justin and Irenaeus*, Volume 1, Third Edition. (Sunrise, FL: Eternal Sun Books, 2017) Saying 13, 312.

from the permeating violence. Here there were intimations of becoming this kind of "Christian" free from suffering in a special category of followers who had died and were now free.<sup>16</sup>

In the relatively infrequent second century writings about "Christians," they seem to have been often those who had a role of suffering under violence. This is not at all to say that all consideration of suffering and violence in second century writings talked about "Christians." Indeed, the contrary is probably the rule. But inversely when "Christian(s)" are the topic in these writings, violence and pain very often are the main focus.

### Storying I am a Christian

Perhaps the most direct uses of the term "Christian" in the second century are multiple stories about individuals faced with torture or death. In this relatively standardized story, often, although not always, the accusation against the person in danger turns around whether the individual was a "Christian." Sometimes this storied person was accused of being a "Christian" by Roman officials, members of the public, rivals of the accused, or vigilantes of one kind or another. From time to time the story compared being a "Christian" to not honoring the emperor, and/or not offering sacrifices (to the emperor or divine surrogates of the emperor). Other times the accusations' focus were violent, deviant sexual, illegal ritual acts. And in a significant number of cases, the drama turned on whether the aggrieved individual would confess that s/he was a "Christian." Sometimes this was pictured as part of a deviant "Christian" group, but perhaps more often simply a pointed discussion about whether the individual would admit to being a "Christian," not unlike the early story related to Trajan by Pliny the Younger.

One can notice that the earlier complaint of Athenagoras did not necessarily have the full drama described by Pliny. It has been noted earlier that there is some ambivalence in Athenagoras about whether his people agreed that they were "Christians." But another text cited earlier, *To Autolytus*, did have Theophilus responding that "I avow that I am a Christian" (1.1), although it was not within a larger story, rather within a literary case being made for Theophilus's adherence to his larger community. The drama of this affirmation is also clear in a short observance in the Gospel of Philip:

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<sup>16</sup> My thanks to this volume's co-editor Taylor Petrey for his help in noting that my reading of Justyn Martyr relative to "Christian(s)" does not take into account Justyn's attention to "Christians" and the "Hebrew" Trypho. Professor Petrey's point here is that the word "Christian(s)" does seem to have meaning as a word in relationship to who Trypho is as a "Hebrew." I find his opinion important, and look forward to further study on this point.

If you say, "I am a Jew," no one will be moved. If you say, "I am a Roman," no one will be disturbed. If you say, "I am a Greek, a barbarian, a slave, [a] free man," no one will be troubled. [If] you [say], "I am a Christian," the ... will tremble.... (62,30-31) (Translation: Isenberg)

So the drama of responding to violence with the affirmation of "I am a Christian," was clear in the literature, even when there was no story.

One of the earlier full stories of the threat and response to whether one is a "Christian," occurred in the Martyrdom of Polycarp. Arrested, cajoled, and threatened by governmental authorities, the old man Polycarp said publicly, "I am a Christian." The response from the crowd in the story accused him as "father of the Christians, the destroyer of our gods, who teaches not to sacrifice nor to worship" (Mart. Pol. 12.2). This story ends with Polycarp's execution.

The Letter of the Churches of Lyons and Vienne, found in the later fourth century collections of Eusebius but generally accepted as a second century document, told the full story about the standard elements of five different characters under pressure to say that they are "Christian," each giving a positive answer to be a "Christian," and then becoming victims of state murder. The Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs, although also debated as to whether it was written in the second century or later, tells similar stories of Speratus, Nartzalus, Cittinus, Donata, Vestia, and Secunda answering, "I am a Christian," and then "sentenced to death by the sword." The shorter form of these stories tends to be closer to the longer and more elaborate of the martyrological collections of the third through fifth centuries. The Acts of Paul and Thecla told part of their story in which Hermogenes, Demas, and Thamyris tell city authorities that "Paul is a Christian...in order to destroy him." (Translation: Lillie)

Surprisingly it is the case even Tertullian, who used the term "Christian" relatively broadly (and by and large in the third century), drew on the word Christian most regularly in situations of pain, violence, and conflicts with legal and governmental (Roman) authority.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Tertullian returns throughout his writing to the use of the term "Christian" in direct connection with violent encounters with state violence or violence against his people in relationship to complicated pressures on third parties not directly a part of Roman rule. One can detect in Tertullian's multi-faceted writings a delicate dance between stating the violence and fears of his people and his closely held and deftly formulated obedience to Roman rule. It is also the case that the term "Christian" — although more broadly used than generally in the second century, since his writing was generally somewhat later than the second century — is not used a great deal. Tertullian texts that used "Christian" forcefully in direct relationship to violence toward his people are:

*Apology 1*: "charge made against the Christians;" and "those who hated Christianity."

This section's address has shown that at least 25% of specific meanings of the word "Christian" in the second century had to do with state or vigilante violence or enforcement of government authority over certain populations. Although much of these populations had to do with people in some way related to Jesus as a figure, random state violence and unclear boundaries between groups and vulnerable population sectors makes it unlikely that the second century literature examined in this section of the essay was always or only people related to the figure of Jesus.

But the high correlation between the word "Christian" and experiences of state or vigilante violence or government enforcement suggests that "Christian" as a term was not mainly a category of identity, belonging, or religion. Rather it was more often a category of people who experienced violence and/or oppressive government control. In this case, for instance, the discursive interest in individuals—not groups or organizations—saying "I am a Christian" did not necessarily<sup>18</sup> indicate an organized identity or belonging. Rather "I am a Christian" was a certain affirmation that one had encountered state or vigilante violence or threat thereof and had nevertheless claimed what might be characterized as something between unbowedness to this violence and/or a belonging to a divine presence. In many, but probably not all such responses to this kind of threat or experience of violence, the figure of Jesus/Christ was experienced as a story or companion.

Related texts using "Christian" are examined in the next section to see whether and how much this next category of texts belong to this section's texts. Content-wise the question to be examined is whether and how much these other texts that use "Christian" in describing the innocence and righteousness of those described as "Christian" in

*To the Heathen 2: "Christians before torture."*

*Apology 3: "Hatred of the Christian name;" "before they take the name;" 4: "Christians free from crimes;" "crimes imputed to Christians;" 30: "Christians prayer for persecutors;" 31: "Christians and Roman power;" 36,37*

*"Cruelties against Christians;" 39, 40: "Christians falsely accused;" Throughout the Apology: "Christians condemned," 43 separate mentions.*

*Against Marcion: 3.10: "Intimidation of Christians."*

*Antidote for the Scorpion's Sting 10: "Christians stoned."*

<sup>18</sup> It was my sense that this clause would read "saying 'I am a Christian' did not primarily indicate an organized identity or belonging"; but I have taken the volume's editorial suggestion to change "primarily" to "necessarily." I'm grateful for the ability to keep the suggested meaning-making proposal in the final clause that "I am a Christian" in this particular subset of texts might refer to experience of "what might be characterized as something between unbowedness to this violence and/or a belonging to a divine presence."

relationship to state and vigilante accusations are connected to their experience of threat and violence.

### Second Century Innocence of State and Vigilante Accusations

The texts treated here involved primarily accusations of subversive, illegal, and/or illicit acts against society in the opinion of the state or specific populations. These texts were somewhat different in that the primary accusation was not that the accused were "Christian" per se, but rather that their behavior was offensive and dangerous. This new group of texts about accusations of people's behavior being wrong described the falsely accused people as "Christians." In other words, this section presents this new group of "Christian"-related texts and explores what kind of relationship they have to texts in the previous section where the accusation was that people were "Christians."

First, an overview of this new group of texts.

The previously examined *Plea for Christians* by Athenagoras made a strong case to Emperor Marcus Aurelius for the innocence of people accused of illicit, illegal, and/or subversive behavior. Here is an abridged version of its defense:

If, indeed, anyone can convict us of a crime, be it small or great, we do not ask            be excused from punishment, but are prepared to undergo the sharpest and most merciless inflictions. But if the accusation relates merely to our name--and it is undeniable, that up to the present time the stories told about us rest on nothing better than the common indiscriminating popular talk, nor has any Christian been convicted of crime--it will devolve on you, illustrious and benevolent and most learned sovereigns, to remove by law this despiteful treatment, so that, as throughout the world both individuals and cities partake of your beneficence, we also may feel grateful to you, exulting that we are no longer the victims of false accusation....But no name in and by itself is reckoned either good or bad; names appear bad or good according as the actions underlying them are bad or good....What, therefore, is conceded as the common right of all, we claim for ourselves, that we shall not be hated and punished because we are called Christians (for what has the name to do with our being bad men?), but be tried on any charges which may be brought against us, and either be released on our disproving them, or punished if convicted of crime--not for the name (for no Christian is a bad man unless he falsely profess our doctrines), but for the wrong which has been done. It is thus that we see the philosophers judged. None of them before trial is deemed by the judge either good or

bad on account of his science or art, but if found guilty of wickedness he is punished, without thereby affixing any stigma on philosophy..., while if he refutes the false charges he is acquitted....Three things are alleged against us: atheism, Thyestean feasts, Oedipodean intercourse. But if these charges are true, spare no class: proceed at once against our crimes; destroy us root and branch, with our wives and children, if any Christian is found to live like the brutes. And yet even the brutes do not touch the flesh of their own kind; and they pair by a law of nature, and only at the regular season, not from simple wantonness; they also recognise those from whom they receive benefits. If any one, therefore, is more savage than the brutes, what punishment that he can endure shall be deemed adequate to such offences? But, if these things are only idle tales and empty slanders,.... it remains for you to make inquiry concerning our life, our opinions, our loyalty and obedience to you and your house and government.... (*Plea*, 2-3, Translation: Pratten).

This defense of Athenagoras is quite typical of this kind of use of the term "Christian." It does not represent all the kinds of defense or all the accusations against which were defended in other texts to be cited below. This text is adequate to show some differences and similarities between the accusation of people being "Christians" in the last section. It is important to examine these similarities and differences closely in order not to jump quickly to conventional martyrdom-based interpretations.

One sees quite easily one significant difference from the earlier observations in the initial section of "Christian" texts in this defense against illicit, illegal, and/or subversive behavior. Whereas in the earlier section of texts (including portions of this text) the accusation of individuals being a "Christian" seemed to be more a governmental charge than the innocent "name" of some kind of association, as was clearly stated in chapters 2 and 3 of the *Plea for Christians*. So this is an indication of a change in the meaning of "Christian" from state charge to loose association in the first, second, and third centuries (and probably varying on which century such a change happened, depending on region and forms of associations). On the other hand, it would be a mistake to see these quite widely diverse defenses against illicit, illegal, and/or subversive behavior as describing a whole Mediterranean-wide movement.

This elicits notice of another similarity between the earlier groups of "Christian" texts and this group. There is still a fairly narrow range of connective tissue in these loose associations defending the behavior of certain individuals as well as striking differences in how both individuals and associations describe themselves and the

character of their associational belonging.<sup>19</sup> So the similarity between this group of defending texts with the ambivalent, negative, and violence-based texts of in the second century is the diversity and loose configurations of the various texts' meanings for the word "Christian."

A way then of connecting and distinguishing meanings of "Christian" in these texts has to do with the way the texts serve to nurture, analyze, contextualize, and rationalize the similarities and differences among individuals' and associations' experience of state and vigilante violence and verbal attacks. Rather than trying to hold the great variety of this relatively small amount of texts that use the word "Christian" together in some large religion or set of movements, one can better see these texts similarities and differences by virtue of their attractiveness and abilities to serve processing individuals' experience of state violence and harassment. This new set of texts in this section<sup>20</sup> expands and modulates the last section's proposal that "Christian" meanings in the second century provided means of processing and coping with experiences of state or vigilante violence or threat thereof, in which they also had nevertheless claimed what might be characterized as something between unbowedness to this violence and/or a belonging to a divine presence. The modulation and expansion provided in this section's group of texts allows one to see both individuals' and associations' possibilities of resistance against state and vigilante attacks and stronger bonds with one another.

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<sup>19</sup> In this respect, this essay assumes knowledge of the recent three decades of study of the dependence of degrees of belonging within various Christ-related and other associations. Cf. recent and crucial studies by John Kloppenborg, Richard Ascough, Jin Lee, and Philip Harland on the latest, major portraits of Mediterranean associations, the massive roles they played in the first two centuries CE, and the important modeling they provided for early Jesus and Christ groups. Cf., for example, Richard S., Ascough, Philip A. Harland, and John S. Kloppenborg. 2012. *Associations in the Greco-Roman World: A Sourcebook*. Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, as well as the most recent volume for general scholars, Jin Hwan Lee: *The Lord's Supper in Corinth in the Context of Greco-Roman Private Associations*. (London: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2018).

<sup>20</sup> Here is a summary of these texts where the word "Christian" is used that defend against state and vigilante critiques and attacks:

In relationship to naming those who are attacked or maligned, cf. Tertullian, *Apology* 4, 30.

In relationship to naming those whose conduct is under critique or exemplary, Ignatius, *To the Ephesians*, 14.

In relationship to whether people worship idols or are kind, *Diognetus* 2. 5 and 6.

In relationship to those who use reason, Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 46.

In relationship to those who have a rational soul, Clement of Alexandria, *The Instructor* 13.

## Conclusions

In my expectedly less than complete success in identifying a definitive list of all the places literature of the first and second centuries use the word "Christian,"<sup>21</sup> some perspective has been gained. More delicious for me is to reflect on the ways almost all scholarship of the last two hundred years imposes the word "Christian" on the first two hundred years at a rate and density immensely greater than the first two hundred years did. I'm less interested in accounting for how this has happened, and more interested in what it has done to us all. I conclude with, as if I am some kind of math whiz, a somewhat statistical assessment of how many times the word may have been used in each of the centuries with the results of the four sections of textual analysis of the meanings of the words that comprise at least 80 percent of the essay.

First the somewhat higher math and the meanings of the word "Christian" in the first two centuries: throughout the second century with occasional inclusions of some possible early third century material and one or two possible first century writing (e.g. Acts 26), the use of the term "Christian" was used most likely no more than 325 times. An approximate word count in Jesus/Christ related literature of the second century varies between 555,000 and 670,000, depending what is included.<sup>22</sup> Of course, the count of the first century is much easier and more shocking. Based on my earlier calculations, I compromise on the three times that "Christian(s)" was used in the first century, and am somewhat confident in a count (although not in the more thorny designation lurking behind the numbers) of about 185,000 words written around the themes of Jesus and Christ in the first century. This would indicate that although there are astonishingly few uses of the word "Christian(s)" in the writings of the first century (perhaps none), there are approximately 325 more uses of the word "Christian" in the second century than in the first. In my bumbling calculations, from the first century this would give a "modern" picture of one use of the word "Christian" in every 246 pages of 250 words on each page. As noted earlier, for twenty-first century sensibilities, it seems quite odd that "Christian" as a word hardly occurs in the first century, since the first century seems to have great authority in the minds of contemporary Americans. Going beyond

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<sup>21</sup> My counting and categorizing the word(s) Christian(s) has produced more that can be analyzed in this essay. I especially regret lack of space for examination of the Greek word "Chrestes" for understandings at work in the ancient understandings of the English word "Christ." Similarly, inclusion of Clement of Alexandria has been very productive, but the space limitations of this essay have prevented me from including this material.

<sup>22</sup> So I have somewhat arbitrarily—after counting the number of words in what I have designated as "all" the Jesus/Christ related documents of the second century for the better part of a morning—set 620,000 words.

the first impressions, it seems clear that whatever was written about and around the figure of Jesus in the first five or six generations could not have been "Christian" in the meaning of the word in the twenty-first century.

On the other hand, it would give one use of "Christian" in every eight modern pages in the second century. The rate of one "Christian" word for every eight pages in the second century does not seem so surprising. But it still seems less than one would have expected. And, it raises the similar question of whether the second century was itself "Christian" in a way that either the fifth or twenty-first century people would (have) expected it. My thought—without much real criteria—is that one "Christian" word every eight pages seems somewhat unfertile for what I had thought would have been a seminal period for matters "Christian," since there was nothing really at all in the first century. I probably should not be surprised about this lack of growing "Christian-ness." On one level, as a Bible scholar, I sort of knew that the Bible was not really "Christian," and that the third through fifth centuries was where organized "Christian" stuff really got going.

This approach to finding out how (in)frequent "Christian(s)" was used in the second century skews the result somewhat in that about 40 % of the usage of the word 'Christian(s)' in the "second century" occur in two authors, Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian.<sup>23</sup> This in itself is a stunning perspective in that it shows that nearly half the uses of the word "Christian(s)" represented only two authors, indicating that a use of "Christian(s)" was not general. More specifically, once this became clear, I reviewed my count and discovered that far less than half of the second century documents use the word(s) at all. If one reshuffles the distribution of the word(s) across all the rest of the documents other than Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian, "Christian(s)" occur only every twelve pages. Even this distribution does not provide a clear picture of the marginal character of "Christian(s)" in the second century literature related to the figures of Jesus or Christ. For instance, of the some ten gospels written in the first two centuries only the Gospel of Philip has the word "Christian(s)," and its seven uses have wildly different meanings.

Upon looking in this essay at how the word "Christian" was used in the second century, it seems clear that quite a bit changed throughout this period. Not only did people use the word significantly more, but things were moving in terms of the amount

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<sup>23</sup> Perhaps at least as interesting is how different the meanings of "Christian(s)" are in Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria. So even though their earlier writings (per the remarks at the beginning of this essay, I have erred on the side of including more of these two writers in order to allow possibly third century material that do not support the essay's direction a strong presence) do contain strong mention of "Christian(s);" together their use of the word(s) do not testify to a common meaning of the words.

of people interacting around the figure(s) of Jesus/Christ, the intensity with which experiences and thoughts appeared in the Mediterranean societies, and the various institutions that had emerged by end of the century.

But here's where the relative paucity of the word "Christian" in the second century has meshed in this essay with the pluralities of social, communitarian, and intellectual enterprises in relationship to what one might call the Jesus/Christ material. So even when one allows that a bunch of things were going on around this material in the second century, the social, communitarian, and intellectual all seem to be stronger as centrifugal force than centripetal. That is, things were still going energetically in different directions more than coalescing. Even though I do not any longer agree that the second century was about the orthodox and the so-called heretics fighting, on another plane it seems that the second century energies were evocative because they were going in many directions.

Without repeating what has been said earlier about the ways some social energy was being generated in terms of what meanings were being made in relationship to the word "Christian," the work here on the meanings for the word "Christian" have pointed to relatively exact, yet ongoingly improvised, different meanings surfacing for the word itself. A clear meaning of accusation and violence from the state emerged around "Christian came into view in some places. Another meaning of how not to be unhinged in the middle of violence also emerged at least occasionally. And ways of resisting attacks and violence came into view sometimes relative to the word(s) "Christian(s)." All of this generated powerfully on different kinds and levels of experience. Even as these energies appeared with some significant differences, it also seemed fairly clear that "Christian" was primarily focused on processing violence and attack. Although some work in the second half of the century had ambitions for "Christian" becoming an integrative social and intellectual category; it did not happen in coalescing ways.

This brings me to reflection on the contradiction between the lack of interest the first century had in the term "Christian" at all, the modest and diffuse interest the second century had, and the ways scholarship of the last two hundred years has poured the word "Christian" all over the first and second century material. There does not seem to be any reason to apply the word "Christian" thoroughly to these two centuries. But "Christian" is the governing category for these two centuries in the scholarly guild. This seems to me a failure of academic conscience and rigor. And, I fear that scholarship of these last two centuries continue to retroject Christian categories onto these centuries. Pursuing a quest for why this has happened seems equally embarrassing and depressing.

On the other hand, looking briefly at what this Christianization of the first two centuries has done to scholarship and society could call us to account for more rigor,

creativity, and responsibility. What would happen, if scholarship and society would invest in clearer thinking about these two centuries and what they can mean.

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