

CHRISTIANITY: A RELIGION BETWEEN TWO CULTURES

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Introduction

It is a tense time in the Middle East. A new but rapidly expanding Western power has moved aggressively into the region of the Eastern Mediterranean. First to come were its merchants, who in many places have come to dominate local commerce. Then its burgeoning military might has followed to protect their economic position. Almost without intending to, it has become an imperial power. Indeed, despite conflicts at home as well as resistance abroad, it has become a superpower. The domestic politics of this superpower infect the tensions that already exist in the region and transform them into more dangerous forms.

In the previous centuries, the local cultures of the region had already absorbed the results of an earlier military and cultural imperialism, leaving an overlay of a world language imposed on a complex mosaic of local tongues and customs, and a self-conscious artistic and literary culture that threatens to submerge ancient local traditions. New power structures impose themselves on ancient clans, tribes, and cities.

For many people, the changes bring frightening disorientation, impoverishment, loss of freedom. For others, however, new possibilities are emerging, of wealth, power, and liberty. Local communities develop varied and conflicting responses to the twin challenge of the new world culture and the new imperial superpower: assimilation, accommodation, resistance. Each group has its modernizers, its traditionalists, its revisionists. In several places, resistance reaches the point of armed uprisings against the occupying forces or against local exploiters of the new situation. The new powers respond with brutal suppression of the nativizing movements. Over all these changes hangs a curious irony: Both the imperial powers, the older and the newer, pride themselves on their democratic institutions as well as their humane culture. Yet, as they have

settled into the management of empire, both have resorted more and more to brute force, even committing unspeakable atrocities in order to maintain what they call «peace».

The time is two thousand years ago. The young power is Rome, the older, those Successors of Alexander the Great who brought «Hellenization» to the lands of the eastern Mediterranean. It is out of that clash of forces and mixing of cultures, out of that chaos of fears and hopes in what we conveniently call «the Graeco-Roman world», that the new religious movement emerged which came to be «Christianity». How did that happen? What were the connections between that new movement and the cultural forces that preceded and surrounded it at its birth? These are questions that have fascinated inquirers for two millenia, and they still intrigue us. Was Christianity a combination of things old, or was it a new thing? Oddly, its own literary representatives from the beginning said it was both, both ancient and familiar and at the same time radically new. What did they mean? And, knowing what we do about the political and social currents of their time, how should we understand and evaluate those claims?

These are some of the questions that preoccupy the *Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas*, the international Society of New Testament Studies, which is meeting here this week and which is sponsoring this evening's symposium. The New Testament remains our primary set of documents for pursuing such questions. But the way we read the New Testament, if we are historians, depends in large part on the ways we understand that cultural environment and the clashes of forces within it. Our knowledge of that environment has been vastly enriched in recent decades by archaeological investigations, by chance discoveries of important manuscripts, by technical advances, and by the development of new ways of analyzing evidence. Nevertheless, much about the origins of Christianity remains mysterious. Moreover, when we are honest with ourselves, we have to admit that the stories we tell about the past are always shaped in part by our own experience and beliefs, our desires and expectations, our self-interest, and the prejudices and limited vision of our own culture.

Our conversation tonight has the title, «Christianity: a Religion Between Two Cultures». The two cultures are «Judaism» and «Hellenism». This framework follows a convention suggested by some of the writers of the New Testament itself. The apostle Paul, for example, could say: «The gospel is the power of God for salvation to all who believe, first to the Jew, and also to the Greek» (Rom. 1:16). The world seems to comprise just these two, Jews and Greeks. And we hear also about a conflict within the very early Christian community, between «Hebrews» and «Hellenists» (Acts 6:1). It seems quite natural, then, to speak of Christianity as a «new religion» emerging out of the encounter between two great cultures, that of the Hellenistic world and that of ancient Israel. For some purposes that is a convenient shorthand, and this theme, of the

meeting of Judaism and Hellenism, has had a powerful influence on the way modern scholars have understood Christianity's beginnings.

However, we have to be careful. The reality was much more complicated, as our two speakers will indicate. Moreover, this picture of the clash of two cultures is itself part of one of the master narratives that shape our sense of who we are, a narrative constructed over centuries by people trying to understand themselves within other kinds of cultural changes and conflicts. This narrative is based on a special way of reading the whole Christian Bible—which of course did not yet exist when the New Testament writers lived—a story transformed by a triumphant great church in the age of Constantine and later. This master story imposes upon the complexity and ambiguities of life in the early and later Roman Empire a vastly simplified plot of confrontation and synthesis, both between «Judaism» and «Hellenism», often framed as «Judaism vs. paganism», or «Judaism vs. idolatry», and between «Jews» and «Christians». I do not have to remind you that the simplified story has sometimes had terrible consequences in the attitudes and actions of Christians toward other groups, not least in the emergence of modern anti-semitism.

If we are careful not to be blinded by our own theoretical abstractions, it is nevertheless useful to think about Christianity as a movement emerging out of the pluriform experiences of ancient Judaism, which was itself deeply embedded in the varied and rapidly changing culture of the Greek and Roman worlds. First of all, we have always to remember that what we call Christianity was in the beginning a sect among the several sects and movements of ancient Judaism. Even after its membership became predominantly gentile, it retained that Jewish identity—indeed, it eventually coopted Jewish scriptures and many parts of Jewish tradition and custom. If we are going to understand anything at all about the origins of Christianity, we have to understand Judaism as it was lived in the Roman Empire.

On the other hand, we have to divest ourselves of the late medieval and early modern picture of Jews living in a ghetto, cut off from the larger society and culture around them. The Jews were one of many ethnic groups trying to cope with the sea-change brought to the Mediterranean world by «Hellenization» and «Romanization». It was a time of great mobility, by ancient standards. People in large numbers migrated from their homelands to live in the new and renewed cities that were expanding all over the Graeco-Roman region. All of them had to find ways to retain their own identities, somehow keeping alive the ancient traditions and practices that made them who they were, while participating effectively and safely in that new, diverse civilization. Assimilation, accommodation, and resistance were all possibilities—in every combination. So, too, we find a vast range of different responses to that new situation on the part of the Jewish communities, both those at home, now under direct Roman rule, and in the Diaspora.

We have been greatly helped in our recognition and understanding of the variety of Jewish response in the Roman period by the discovery in the 1940s of a quite remarkable group of manuscripts in the desert of Judea, which we call «the Dead Sea Scrolls». Not only did they reveal the peculiarities of the small group that used and then hid those scrolls in the first century of our era, they also forced us to rethink what we thought we knew about other patterns of Jewish life at the time. And they have given us new insights as well into the origins of that younger sect of Judaism, Christianity. We are fortunate to have with us tonight one of the world's leading experts on those manuscripts, Professor Florentino García Martínez. Professor García Martínez will help us to understand something of Christianity's debt to the Jewish world at its beginnings.

One of the great mistakes made by some modern scholars was to set «Hellenism» and «Judaism» against each other as opposite poles, as if they represented two forms of life that were always at war with each other. As if when Christianity was being «Jewish», it must be anti-Hellenist; when it was «Hellenistic», it must be anti-Jewish. There were even early Christians who talked that way, but the reality was always much more complex. Just as Jews had discovered many ways of living in the multicultural situation of the Graeco-Roman world, so also did the new movement that emerged from Judaism to embrace many gentiles. The broad currents of life and thought in the larger Graeco-Roman culture shaped the practices, attitudes, thought, and language of the early Christian communities in ways that were infinitely varied and pervasive. Few scholars know more about those interactions than our first speaker, whose numerous writings discuss the cults, rhetoric, and mores of the Hellenistic tradition and their appropriation or resistance by the Christian groups. He is Professor Hans-Josef Klauck, and he will speak first on «Emerging Christianity and Graeco-Roman Culture». He will be followed by Professor García Martínez.

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