GUY G. STROUMSA

Barbarian Philosophy

The Religious Revolution of Early Christianity

Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
112

Mohr Siebeck

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zum Neuen Testament

Herausgegeben von
Martin Hengel und Otfried Hofius

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For Shaul Shaked
and R.J. Zwi Werblowsky

and in memory
of Shlomo Pines

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Envoi

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Most chapters in this book have been written over the last few years, and reflect problems and questions that I have been tackling with the help of many friends and colleagues, both formally and informally. Invitations to speak on a given theme, in Israel, in Europe and in the United States, have often provided the impetus for presenting ideas. Versions of various chapters were presented at the Israel National Academy of Sciences and Humanities, and at the universities of Cambridge, Utrecht, Bologna, Pisa, Turin, Frankfurt, Tübingen, Heidelberg, Princeton, Chicago, Virginia, and the Free University in Berlin, at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes (Paris), and at various conferences and workshops.

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Thirty years ago, I was privileged to meet three impressive scholars and remarkable persons, who encouraged a highly underqualified and underprepared student to swim in high and turbulent waters. I have neither learned to crawl in style, nor ever reached shore, but I still enjoy the effort. The dedication of this book acknowledges my thanks for their trust and friendship. It does not repay my debt.

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Guy G. Stroumsa Jerusalem, November 1998

List of Abbreviations

An Bol	*Analecta Bollandiana*
ANRW	Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt
ARW	*Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*
BZNW	Beihefte der Zeitschrift für Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
CG	Cairoensis Gnosticus
CMC	*Cologne Mani Codex*
CR	*Classical Review*
CRINT	Compendium Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum
DACL	*Dictionnaire d'Archéologie Chrétienne et de Liturgie*
DOP	*Dumbarton Oaks Papers*
DS	*Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*
EDNT	*Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*
EEC	*Encyclopedia of the Early Church*
EI	*Encyclopedia of Islam (2nd ed.)*
EJ	*Encyclopedia Judaica*
ER	*Encyclopedia of Religion*
HLB	*Harvard Library Bulletin*
HrwG	*Handbuch religionswissentschaftlicher Grundbegriffe*
HSCP	*Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*
HTR	*Harvard Theological Review*
HUCA	*Hebrew Union College Annual*
IEJ	*Israel Exploration Journal*
JAC	*Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum*
JAOS	*Journal of the American Oriental Society*
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JEH	*Journal of Ecclesiastical History*
JES	*Journal of Ecumenical Studies*
JHS	*Journal of Hellenic Studies*
JJS	*Journal of Jewish Studies*
JNES	*Journal of Near Eastern Studies*
JR	*Journal of Religion*
JRS	*Journal of Roman Studies*
JSAI	*Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*
JSSR	*Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*
JTS	*Journal of Theological Studies*
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
NHC	Nag Hammadi Codex
NHS	Nag Hammadi Studies
NT	*Novum Testamentum*
NTS	*New Testament Studies*
PG	Patrologia Graeca
PGM	Papyri Graecae Magicae

PL	Patrologia Latina
PO	Patrologia Orientalis
PS	Patrologia Syriaca
PW	*Pauly-Wissowa Realenzyklopädie der klassischen Wissenschaften*
RAC	*Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*
RB	*Revue Biblique*
REA	*Revue des Etudes Augustiniennes*
REJ	*Revue des Etudes Juives*
REL	*Revue des Etudes Latines*
RGG	*Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*
RHR	*Revue de l'Histoire des Religions*
RMM	*Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*
ROC	*Revue de l'Orient Chrétien*
RSPT	*Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques*
RSR	*Recherches de Sciences Religieuses*
SHR	Studies in the History of Religions
TDNT	*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*
TDOT	*Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*
TRE	*Theologische Realenzyklopädie*
TUGAL	Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der Altchristlichen Literatur
VG	*Vigiliae Christianae*
VT	*Vetus Testamentum*
YCS	*Yale Classical Studies*
ZDMG	*Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*
ZfR	*Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft*
ZPE	*Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*

Introduction

Early Christianity as Religious Revolution

> ... one should say that which appears to be plausible, looking upon the readiness to do so as evidence of modesty rather than of temerity, provided that one rests content with but a little success in matters that cause us great perplexity.
>
> Aristotle, *De Caelo* II.12.291b 24ff.

For a number of years, I have sought to tackle from various angles the complex transformation of religion in the Roman Empire, from approximately the first to the fourth centuries, or, if one wishes, from the revolution of Paul to that of Constantine. To be sure, these two revolutions are quite different, but both deal with the nature and status of religion, and both define, or redefine, a new religion, of a new kind: Christianity. For the historian of religious phenomena, it makes sense to study them together. Quite consciously, then, this volume opts for the *longue durée*. What this approach loses in detailed analysis of the specific differences between the different stages, situations, texts, and tendencies, I hope it will gain in contextual vision of the major transformations that I seek to detect.

From the first to at least the fifth century, Early Christianity represents an extremely complex set of religious phenomena. In recent years, it has become common practice to speak, in the plural, of early Christianities, as a convenient way to emphasize this complexity. The sources are written in many different languages, and stem from various cultural and religious backgrounds. Their baffling richness, combined with various theoretical difficulties, concur in complicating the scholar's task. Rather than attempting a grand synthesis, I have preferred to tackle different but related problems, aspects of what I call the religious revolution of early Christianity. In so doing, however, I have constantly kept in mind my overall goal of understanding better a major transformation in the religious history of humankind and its mechanism. The student of ancient cultures and societies must attempt to decipher their internal logic, or grammar, to crack their code, as it were. If this can be done at all, it is through a process of trial and error. I have sought to approach early Christianity from as many different angles as

possible. In a sense, this process may be compared to a kaleidoscope, where a different but somewhat similar structure obtains from the same materials, each time one turns the lenses.

In a world which valued most ancestral traditions, *patrioi nomoi*, the basic intuitions and assumptions of Christianity were novel to Jews and gentiles alike. The religious revolution that it launched was not limited to the birth of new theological concepts, such as the (single) Incarnation or Trinitarianism, previously unknown to both Jews and gentiles. Powerful as these religious ideas may be, their greatest impact lies in their anthropological or psychological implications. A different theology entails not only a new conception of the Divinity, but also a new anthropology, a fresh perception of the human person, of its components and of its unity. New theological ideas, moreover, also have the power to transform, sometimes in radical fashion, conceptions of society and attitudes to outsiders. My approach throughout remains that of the historian of religious ideas. Rather than focusing on their social context, this inquiry attempts to locate and emphasize the paramount power of concepts, beliefs, and theologoumena.

There are four main parts to the present volume, which seek to understand (1) the radical nature of some of the early Christian beliefs and their dialectical transformations in the first centuries, (2) attitudes to the other and the growth of intolerance in late antiquity, (3) the birth and development of new anthropological conceptions, and (4) the extreme character of dualist trends, the role of which can be compared to "a revolution within the revolution."

Part I, Radical religion, seeks to delineate the new and radical character of early Christianity, from its beginnings as *religio illicita* to the Constantinian revolution and the self-transformation of Christianity into a state religion. In the first chapters, I investigate various aspects of this radical character and of its evolution from the first to the fourth century.

As I try to show, much of the later tensions within Christianity are better understood in the light of two opposite tendencies, irenic and eristic, both found in the earliest stages of Christianity, indeed in the New Testament itself.

The dual structure of the new Scriptures of Christianity permitted the development of a series of religious equivalences and cultural translations, in ways previously unknown in Jewish or Hellenic culture, and thus permitted the dramatic hermeneutical revolution achieved by late antique Christian intellectuals. This revolution only began with the dialectical relationships between the two Testaments. A new *paideia,* perhaps the most decisive single step toward the formation of European culture, was developed in late antiquity, in which the Greek and Latin classics were studied together with the Christian Bible.

Before this new cultural synthesis was achieved, however, pagan and Christian intellectuals had been unable to understand that they held vastly different conceptions of religion. To hallowed traditions the Christians were opposing a

new and highly dynamic form of piety, which encouraged rather than feared religious change. This profound cultural misunderstanding highlights the vastly different presuppositions about the individual and society held by pagans and Christians. The latter had soon come to perceive themselves as neither Jews nor gentiles, but as a third kind of people, a *triton genos,* or *tertium genus.* They were proud to offer a new, "barbarian" wisdom, foreign to the Hellenic world.

Part II, Living with the Other, attempts to isolate some of the more salient factors which brought about that most puzzling fact of early Christian history, namely, the transformation of the religion of love into an intolerant religion, unable to accept competing visions and patterns of behavior. Indeed, before the end of the fourth century, all forms of religious expression, except for Orthodox Christianity, had become prohibited. There is no denying the painful fact that after the victory of Christianity, late antique society is strikingly less open, less pluralistic, less tolerant (although the modern concept of tolerance might be rather inadequate for ancient societies).

The first aspect to be emphasized in this context is the paradox of internalization and the new emphasis on conviction as a major factor of religious identity. The world of the cities around the Mediterranean in which the Christians lived in the second and third centuries offered what has been called "a market place of religions." The new religious pluralism forced the Christians as well as the Jews to live in close daily contact with what was for them a variety of intolerable phenomena. Idolatry, the worst of all sins, was everywhere: statues of the idols adorned the streets; meat from pagan sacrifices was sold at the butcher shop; various forms of magic and divination were practiced. Far from fostering religious tolerance, this symbiosis encouraged the erection of strong inner boundaries.

Palestine offers a particularly interesting case in point. Tensions of various kinds were mounting between Jews, Christians, Samaritans, Manichaeans, Hellenized pagans, Arabs. In their daily religious life, however, these vastly different populations often behaved in similar ways, or even shared the same beliefs, unconsciously following the same syntax of religious behavior. One can indeed speak here of a religious *koinè* of sorts.

One of the clearest examples of the radicalization of Christian attitudes toward non-Christians in late antiquity is, of course, the development of anti-Jewish attitudes on the part of the Church Fathers. While anti-Judaism is inherent in Christianity from its very beginnings, one can discern a shift for the worse in late antique Christian discourse on Jews and Judaism, in a sense, a *praeparatio antisemitica.* The history of Christian discourse reveals the progressive demonization of the Jews, together with the transformation of religiosity in the fourth century.

Part III, Shaping the Person, seeks to follow the transformations of the concept of the person, and the new anthropological perceptions developed in early

Christianity. These transformations represent a major chapter in the intellectual history of the West. In various ways, early Christian beliefs and theology propounded new conceptions of the self and attitudes to the human person quite unknown in antiquity.

A clear example of this transformation can be seen in the passage from repentance to penance. The ritualization of repentance encouraged the public expression of deeply intimate transformations of the self. Various rituals of public expiation of sins and penance developed in the first Christian centuries emphasize the passage from an ethic of shame to an ethic of guilt as Christianity grew: public humiliation is the best warrant of the Christian reversal of values.

The bodily as well as spiritual expressions of repentance and sorrow reflect the new attitudes to the body and the whole person. Augustine's *Confessions* is not only a book sui generis reflecting Augustine's great originality. It also represents the emergence of a new subject, the acme of a major process in the history of western consciousness, which would have momentous implications for the future. The work is the logical consequence of a series of beliefs and attitudes developed in the first centuries in Christian theological literature. It also reflects a new sensitivity among early Christian intellectuals, directly related to some fundamental Christian theologoumena. The idea of *homo imago Dei*, of the unity between body and soul, and of resurrection, were all quite simply unthinkable for pagan philosophers. With his great psychological sensitivity, Augustine was able to reach dramatic conclusions based on the Christian theological premises, but he was certainly not the first or only thinker to insist on a new Christian concept of the person.

In contradistinction to Hellenic thinkers, Christian intellectuals did not locate the great divide between soul and body, or between the higher firmaments and the sublunar world. Rather, they insisted on the rift between the created cosmos and the transcendent God. The passage between the divine and the created world, although it was never completely blocked, had now become much more difficult to traverse than ever before. In their successful bid to redefine the borders of the self, and to restructure religious experience, the Church Fathers limited the experience of dreaming, or rather, the experience of discussing dreams, in a drastic way. In the Christian *imaginaire*, most dreams no longer announce the future, but rather reflect the state of the soul. In a sense, then, the Freudian revolution can be said to have begun with the early Christian *Entzauberung der Welt*.

Part IV is devoted to *Radical dualism*. If Christianity effected a revolution in patterns of religiosity, Gnosticism and Manichaeism were even more radical movements. The importance of dualist trends in early Christian history can hardly be overemphasized. In a sense, Basilides, Marcion, Valentinus, and Mani were all following to their radical consequences some of the deeper intuitions

and choices of the various writings of the New Testament itself. Second-century Gnosis, however, cannot be said to have been on the margins of the Christian movement. To describe it as such is anachronistic, applying criteria of fourth-century orthodoxy. Ernst Troeltsch showed that it was precisely the revolutionary character of the dualist tendency within early Christianity, which explained how it lost the battle for ultimate self-definition of Christianity to the less radical trends. These had neutralized rather than emphasized some characteristics inherent in the earliest expressions of the new religion. The study of dualist trends (and Manichaeism is here as important as the various Gnostic schools) remains essential for any full understanding of the early Christian phenomenon. Encratism and antinomianism, for instance, are notoriously difficult to disentangle from one another. And we now know that the early monastic movement, with its demand of radical behavior, seems to have been dangerously close to various dualist theologies.

The *Envoi* deals with the tragic city in which Christianity was born two thousand years ago, and where this book was written. It offers a reflection on what the French call the *imaginaire* of Jerusalem in western Christian consciousness. Both the idea of a heavenly or mystical New Jerusalem, and the multiple *translatio* of the Anastasis, the Christian *omphalos*, reflect the radical transformation of geography and history, of memory and expectations, all effected by early Christianity: nothing less than a revolution in patterns of religious thought and behavior.

Part I

Radical Religion

Chapter 1

Early Christianity as Radical Religion

> Also in the case of evils the end or actuality must be worse than the potentiality; for that which is capable is capable alike of both contraries.
>
> Aristotle, *Metaphysics* IX. 9. 3, 1051 a 16–18

An intense interest in religious radicalism is being forced upon us by puzzling contemporary developments, including religious revolutions, which seem to threaten the very texture of our social and intellectual life.[1] Even the ancient historian cannot quite hide from today's threats behind the heavy drapes of antiquarianism. Exclusivity, violence, intolerance, fundamentalism: these are some of the key concepts used, together with radicalism, in order to describe the multiple mischiefs of religion in our world. The following pages cannot attempt to sort out the overlapping semantic fields of these various concepts. Yet, by focusing on some paradoxical aspects of Christianity in its early history, they may shed some light on the process through which a dynamic religious movement can become threatening towards outsiders. Namely, can we account for the ways in which a persecuted religion became a persecuting religion, and the believers in the religion of love were able to invent new patterns of religious violence and intolerance, until then unknown in the ancient world?

Sociologists, indeed, seem to refer to religious radicalism in a rather restrictive sense. According to a recent definition, it is "a mode of thought and action that entails, first of all, the rejection of those surrounding cultural forms and values perceived as non-indigenous (or inauthentic) to the religious tradition."[2] Such a definition may well be valid in the case of contemporary trends in traditional religions; it is obviously off the mark when we seek to analyze new religious movements, often exhibiting a character of protest against the tradition from which

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[1] A French version of this chapter, "Le radicalisme religieux du christianisme ancien: contexte et implications," appeared in *Retours aux Ecritures*, eds. A. Le Boulluec and E. Patlagean (Bibliothèque de l'Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, Section des Sciences Religieuses; Louvain 1993), 347–74.

[2] E. Sivan, in *Religious Radicalism and Politics in the Middle East*, eds. Sivan and M. Friedman (Albany, N.Y. 1990), 1, referring to C. S. Liebman, "Extremism as a Religious Norm," *JSSR* 22 (1983).

they stem. Such is the case, for instance, with early Christianity. Although the radical or revolutionary character of nascent Christianity has been recognized, it is my distinct impression that it has not been analyzed carefully enough. This is due, probably, to the fact that this character is perceived only *in bonam partem*, while deep ambiguities or tensions in the overall structure of the new religion are usually ignored. An *unpartheilich* study of Early Christianity, such as nineteenth-century scholars sought to establish, seems to remain a matter for the future. Thus, Christian radicalism, since it stems from love, can be defined in direct opposition to extremism,[3] or else, as Gerd Theissen has recently claimed, Christianity in its earliest stages represents a revolution in values *(Wertrevolution)*, essentially different from a revolution seeking power, hence entailing violence.[4]

The present investigation seeks to call attention to some theological structures of early Christianity, embedded in its foundational texts, and in their transformation during the first Christian centuries. It represents a study of intellectual, rather than social history, but is predicated upon the idea, best emphasized recently by Michel Foucault, that the discourse of a religion or culture is closely related to the practice of power. The late Foucault, as is well known, developed a deep interest in early Christianity, although his research in this area remained unfinished.[5] It should, of course, be noted from the outset that the correlation between theological conceptions (or even legislation) and practice is far from being direct and total. The social historian can show how behavior can be significantly different from proclaimed principles. Hence, a shrinking margin of theoretical toleration of outsiders in the Christianized society of late antiquity does not necessarily mean exclusion in the daily business of common life.[6] Yet, the trends are there, which explain how the new, unstable, and precarious equilibrium can degenerate, as it did indeed.

To be sure, such an investigation runs the risk of anachronism: when we speak of religious tolerance and intolerance, are we forcing modern categories upon a society in which they are rather meaningless? The greatest caution is *de rigueur*, but the fact remains that ancient societies could afford, according to their evolution, more, or less, religious freedom – both individual and collective – or freedom of religious expression. In this matter, there is no doubt that the emergence of Christianity made a major difference. A. D. Nock had shown in his seminal study of conversion how in the Hellenistic world a new possibility of religious

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[3] See A. Rich, "Was heisst christliche Radikalität?" *Reformatio* 25 (1976): 278–88.

[4] See G. Theissen, "Jesusbewegung als charismatische Wertrevolution," *NTS* 35 (1989): 343–60.

[5] For an analysis of Foucault's impact, see the perceptive remarks of Averil Cameron, "Redrawing the Map: Early Christian Territory after Foucault," *JRS* 76 (1986): 266–71. Cameron insists that "Foucault was interested in Christianity as the provider of a totalizing and therefore repressive discourse, which spread a different kind of power relation" (266).

[6] See P. Brown, *Authority and the Sacred: Aspects of the Christianisation of the Roman World* (Cambridge 1995).

expression arose, established upon the choice of the individual rather than upon the secure and recognized boundaries of ethnos and tradition, the polymorphic exclusivity of archaic religions, that of Israel included. [7] Christianity, as Nock well saw, presented the main example of the new attitude; predicated as it was upon the need to convert, the choice of faith in each individual, irrespective of ethnic identity, social class, or sex. As John North has most recently argued, the Mediterranean world in the first centuries of the common era exhibited a "supermarket" of religions.[8] In a sense, the victory of Christianity represents that of the fittest in the new world of religious pluralism. As North understood, the transformation of religious life "established a system of interactive competing religions," hence fostering, together with great religious creativity, great religious conflict. Not the least puzzling aspect of a Christian victory achieved in a world of religious pluralism, is the fact that the new ecumenical faith left so little place for difference and dissent. Late antiquity, indeed, shows the final transformation of religious exclusivity, through religious pluralism, into religious intolerance.[9] Religious violence is not necessarily more common in the emerging world, but it can draw new theological justification, or at least latent encouragement, from a religion claiming a new, total, and universal grasp on truth.

1. Ambiguities of Earliest Christianity

The coexistence, in the New Testament, of both "irenic" and "eristic," or "peaceful" and "aggressive" tendencies is well-known. The context and implications of these opposite trends, which represent, as it were, a fundamental antinomic couple, are still in need of some clarification. This deep-seated ambiguity is directly related to the radical nature of earliest Christianity, a movement born within the chiliastic context of Jewish apocalypticism.[10]

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[7] A. D. Nock, *Conversion: the Old and the New in Religion from Alexander to Constantine* (Oxford 1933).

[8] J. North, " The Development of Religious Pluralism," in *The Jews among Pagans and Christians in the Roman Empire*, eds. J. Lieu, J. North, and T. Rajak (London and New York 1992), 174–93.

[9] For a classification of the different kinds of intolerance, see A. J. Ayer, "Sources of Intolerance," in *On Toleration*, eds. Susan Mendus and David Edwards (Oxford 1987), 82–100. On tolerance and intolerance in late antiquity, see for instance A. H. Armstrong, "The Way and the Ways: Tolerance and Intolerance in the Fourth Century A.D.," *Vigiliae Christianae* 38 (1984): 1–17, and especially K.-L. Noethlichs, *Die gesetzgeberischen Massnahmen der christlichen Kaiser des vierten Jahrhunderts gegen Häretiker, Heiden und Juden* (Ph.D. diss., Köln 1971), and also Lellia Cracco Ruggini, "Pregiudici razziali, ostilita' politica e culturale, intolleranza religiosa nell'impero romano," *Athenaeum* 5 (1968): 139–52.

[10] For bibliographical references, see for instance D. E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids, Mich. 1983), 126–29.

Ancient Literature

Hebrew Bible

New Testament

Apocryphal Literature

Qumran Literature

Josephus 63, 78

Philo of Alexandria 49, 64, 68, 214, 275

Gnostic, Manichaean and Magical Literature

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