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DIVERSITY OF TEACHING AND EARLY CHRISTIANITY

I've spent some time this evening thinking about the claim that "early Christianity was diverse". I have had some difficulty finding anything like a definitive statement or attempt at proof for the claim. Rather it is simply assumed. For instance there is this:

The wide diversity of early Christianity may be seen above all in the theological beliefs embraced by people who understood themselves to be followers of Jesus. In the second and third centuries there were, of course, Christians who believed in one God. But there were others who insisted that there were two. Some said there were thirty. Others claimed there were 365.

In the second and third centuries there were Christians who believed that God had created the world. But others believed that this world had been created by a subordinate, ignorant divinity. (Why else would the world be filled with such misery and hardship?) Yet other Christians thought it was worse than that, that this world was a cosmic mistake created by a malevolent divinity as a place of imprisonment, to trap humans and subject them to pain and suffering.^[1]

But of course such a statement involves quite a number of presuppositions.

Loudest of these presuppositions is the assumption that there is no such thing as Christianity, objectively. It is assumed that it has no distinct identity, or boundaries. Instead the author simply assumes that a "Christian", in the passage above, is anybody who claims to be somehow a "follower of Jesus".

Few politicians in modern society would fail this terribly undemanding "test", however irreligious. No muslim would fail. But a criterion that can't distinguish between Christians and Muslims is simply silly.

Also implicit in this passage is the idea that Christ did not teach anything in particular, and so any teaching attributed to him – however contradictory – is equally "Christian", and equally based upon his teaching. Yet Christ was known as a rabbi, a teacher! His teaching and personality inspired a movement. That movement claimed to preserve his teachings. Whether it did so or not, there is no doubt that they tried.

In fact if we look at early Christian literature, we find everywhere a concern for right teaching. It runs throughout the New Testament, the apostolic fathers, and indeed all the ante-Nicene literature.

This is entirely comprehensible, once we take into account the claim that in Christ there is neither slave nor free, neither Jew nor Gentile ([Gal. 3:28](#)). Every movement must define itself somehow. If the early church did not define itself by these categories, then what was the unifying principle? They tell us themselves: it was Christ and his teaching. In Judaism you had to be a Jew by race. That was the boundary of membership. If you were a Jew then you were in. If you were not a Jew, you were out.

Social groups often coalesce around race, or class, or some other shared social characteristic. Ancient religions did the same sometimes. Julius Caesar did not believe in the gods, but he was High Priest. It didn't matter what he believed: he was "in", whether he believed or not.

This can be taken very far. An ancient sun temple was more like a nuclear power station than a church. It existed, and the priests existed, to ensure that the sun came up in the morning. Do the rituals. Who cares what the priest thinks: what matters is to get the result. This sort of thinking is why ancient temples were often very small inside their enclosures.

These sorts of religions may be called "communal". The boundary is the community.

But Christianity didn't use community as a boundary. It used belief. If you shared the beliefs, you were "in"; if you did not, you were "out". The same is true of other "creedal" religions. This process is why creeds – formal statements of belief, often designed to combat some local threat – appear in the apostolic age and later. Indeed they are still issued even today: the [Nashville Statement](#) is one such.

The nature of Christianity means that orthodoxy is part of the very basis on which a church exists. Equally, the appearance of a group teaching something else is a threat to the very existence of the church.

This is a pattern, repeated again and again throughout church history. It is quite extraordinary to find that it is routinely denied, therefore.

The work in which this denial was first set forth seems to be the work of Walter Bauer, *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum*, issued in 1934. It was translated into English by Robert Kraft in the 1971 as *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*.

Some years ago I attempted to read Bauer's book, and I wrote [five articles](#) about what I found. I didn't get past chapter one. I quickly became very suspicious of his methods. But then I discovered evidence of deliberate falsification of the evidence. I lost interest after that.

Yet Bauer's book has enjoyed a vogue ever since. I find James D. G. Dunn has written *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, based on Bauer's ideas. This contains statements like:

Bauer has shown that second-century Christianity was a very mixed bag. There was no 'pure' form of Christianity that existed in the beginning which can properly be called 'orthodoxy'. In fact there was no uniform concept of orthodoxy at all – only different forms of Christianity competing for the loyalty of believers. (p.3)

Yet in fact even a layman like myself, examining the primary sources and examining Bauer's book, can see that it is a fraud. Even a layman like myself can see that such a statement as Dunn's involves the same old assumptions that won't bear examination. It comes out in stuff like this:

The concept of orthodoxy only began to emerge in the struggle between different viewpoints – the party that won claimed the title 'orthodox' for itself!

This would be news to St Paul.

It also involves assumptions about the gnostic heretics. It assumes that, like the Christians, these were interested in transmitting an unchanged body of teaching.

But the gnostics did not do this. Every gnostic believed something different. The pupils of Valentinus started their own cults. They did so, precisely because the teaching of Christ was *not* important to them. Tertullian has pointed out how each of them is connected to philosophical schools in vogue at the time.

Let us remember how ancient philosophy worked. If you were a philosopher, you earned your living by making a name for yourself, and then attracting paying pupils. You taught your distinctive teaching to them. That was how you made money. Indeed in late antiquity visitors to Athens could find themselves kidnapped on landing in order to force them to study with a particular philosopher. Big money could be involved.

There were schools (*haereses*) such as the Stoics, etc; but even these varied among themselves.

This restless need for innovation was the motor for the continual speculation and intellectual exploration characteristic of Greek philosophy. It arose from the burning need to teach something new in order to live. At the top end it resulted in scientific advances. At the bottom end it meant that every sophist, soothsayer or magician would eagerly pounce on something new.

The Greek magical papyri preserve spells in which various “power words” are incorporated; anything that would give it zing! Some even use the name of Christ in this way. We read in Acts of one bunch who tried doing just this, and got into trouble! ([Acts 19:11-17](#))

It is natural therefore that the arrival of Christianity would attract the interest of such people. This is why the early Christians refer to them as heretics, followers of the philosophical schools and their practices. This is why the gnostics are interested in *gnosis*, knowledge, rather than faith. It's a whole different world.

There is not a shred of evidence that any of these people had any connection with Christ or his apostles. Indeed they themselves acknowledge that the apostles did not teach their doctrines openly in the church. These are “the secret teachings”, as they refer to them. But if so, why need we believe that they have any connection whatever with the apostles? Where is the evidence?

Bauer himself was not very bothered about the little matter of evidence. He wrote:

When we ask how and when Christianity gained influence in this region, it is unnecessary to begin with a survey of the sources.

A systematic review of evidence was the last thing that he needed.

The ancient data says what it says. It says that the gnostics were late-comers, outsiders, peddling stuff ripped off from Greek philosophy. This appears to describe them all exactly. Indeed we find such people even today, eager to acquire the churches, their money and their people in order to use them for their own purposes. Such a process has happened in every age. Unless, that is, we believe the Bauer theory, when it did not happen until after 325.

It all seems rather rubbish to me.

1. ^[1]Bart Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, Oxford University Press, 2003, p.2. [↩](#)
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